



RESEARCH ARTICLE

Identity and Multiple Perspectives: The Biography, Leadership and Contribution of Ukwe Ali Ibrahim to the Spread of Islam in Takum Local Government Taraba State, Nigeria.

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Abstract: The development of Islam among the Kuteb people of Takum, Taraba State, is an important part of the religious and social history of the area, but it remains poorly documented. This study examines the life, leadership, and Islamic contributions of Ukwe Ali Ibrahim Kuffang, particularly his role in spreading and strengthening Islam among the Kuteb people. The study aims to explore his religious background, leadership activities, and contributions to religious, moral, educational, and social development. A qualitative historical approach was used, supported by participatory observation and relevant historical and documentary sources. The findings show that Ali Ibrahim Kuffang played an important role in Islamic teaching, propagation, moral development, and community formation in Takum. His leadership helped strengthen Islam in a community previously influenced mainly by indigenous religious traditions and ancestral customs. The study contributes to the history of Islam in Northern Nigeria by documenting a local Islamic leader and showing the role of religious leadership in religious transformation and community development. It also provides a basis for further studies of Islam among the Kuteb people.

Keywords: Ukwe Ali Ibrahim Kuffang, Islam; Islamic leadership, religious transformation, Kuteb, Takum, Taraba State

Abstrak: Perkembangan Islam di kalangan masyarakat Kuteb di Takum, Negara Bagian Taraba, merupakan bagian penting dari sejarah keagamaan dan sosial masyarakat setempat, tetapi masih kurang terdokumentasikan. Penelitian ini mengkaji kehidupan, kepemimpinan, dan kontribusi keislaman Ukwe Ali Ibrahim Kuffang, khususnya perannya dalam menyebarkan dan memperkuat Islam di kalangan masyarakat Kuteb. Penelitian ini bertujuan untuk mengkaji latar belakang keagamaannya, aktivitas kepemimpinannya, serta kontribusinya terhadap perkembangan keagamaan, moral, pendidikan, dan sosial masyarakat Muslim. Penelitian menggunakan pendekatan sejarah kualitatif yang didukung observasi partisipatif serta sumber sejarah dan dokumen yang relevan. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan bahwa Ali Ibrahim Kuffang berperan penting dalam pengajaran Islam, dakwah, pembinaan moral, dan pembentukan komunitas Muslim di Takum. Kepemimpinannya turut memperkuat Islam dalam masyarakat yang sebelumnya banyak dipengaruhi tradisi keagamaan lokal dan adat leluhur. Penelitian ini berkontribusi pada sejarah Islam di Nigeria Utara melalui dokumentasi tokoh Islam lokal dan peran kepemimpinan keagamaan dalam transformasi agama dan pembangunan masyarakat.

Kata kunci: Ukwe Ali Ibrahim Kuffang; Islam; kepemimpinan Islam; transformasi keagamaan; Kuteb; Takum; Negara Bagian Taraba

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Introduction

The history of Islam in Takum Local Government Area of Taraba State is closely connected with the region's complex interaction of indigenous religious traditions, migration, trade, political authority, Islamic scholarship, and inter-community relations. In the early twentieth century, the Kuteb people of Takum lived within a predominantly indigenous religious and cultural setting in which ancestral practices, traditional institutions, and local beliefs constituted important aspects of social life. Against this background, the gradual emergence of Islam represented not simply the introduction of another religious tradition, but a process of religious and social change in which individuals, families, scholars, rulers, and local communities played different roles. The available historical literature also indicates that the spread of Islam in non-Muslim areas of Northern Nigeria generally occurred gradually through migration, trade, settlement, preaching, political relationships, and the activities of Muslim scholars (Abdulkadir, 2011).

Within this broader historical process, the role of indigenous Muslim leaders deserves particular scholarly attention. One such figure was Ukwe Ali Ibrahim Kuffang, a member of the Acha sub-clan of the Akente clan of the Kuteb people and a descendant of the traditional ruling family of Takum. Existing local accounts portray him as a traditional ruler whose life was closely associated with the development of Islam and the transmission of Islamic values in Takum (Arambiya, 2002). His religious formation also occurred at a formative period when Islamic education was becoming increasingly established in the locality. According to the historical accounts consulted for this study, his father, Ibrahim Kuffang, deliberately encouraged his Islamic education, first under Malam Zakari in Takum and subsequently under Malam Zubairu in Ibbi. These experiences exposed him to Qur'anic learning, Islamic law, religious discipline, and the ethical dimensions of Muslim leadership.

The research problem addressed in this study therefore concerns the need to understand how an indigenous traditional leader such as Ali Ibrahim participated in the religious transformation of his community and how his personal Islamic formation interacted with the existing Kuteb sociocultural environment. His significance cannot adequately be understood solely through his position as a traditional ruler or through general accounts of the spread of Islam. Rather, his life provides an opportunity to examine the intersection between traditional authority, Islamic learning, religious propagation, moral leadership, and community development within a historically pluralistic society.

Previous scholarship on the Kuteb people has addressed several aspects of their historical and sociocultural development. Umar (1981) examined the history of the Kuteb and their neighbouring communities in Southern Gongola, providing an important background for understanding Kuteb society, migration, settlement, and interaction with neighbouring peoples. Similarly, Filibus and Gertrude (2023) revisited debates concerning the origin, migration, and settlement of the Kuteb people and demonstrated the continuing importance of oral traditions and historical reconstruction in the study of Kuteb history. Their work also highlights the methodological difficulties that arise where written records of earlier periods are limited and historical knowledge has been transmitted through oral sources.

Research on inter-group relations has also contributed to the understanding of the historical environment in which Islam developed in Takum. Abdulsalam and Ibrahim (2019), for example, examined Kuteb-Chamba relations in the former Takum District and demonstrated the significance of social, economic, political, and cultural interaction among the communities inhabiting the area. Such studies are relevant because the history of religious change cannot be separated from wider patterns of mobility, intermarriage, trade, political interaction, and cultural contact.

Other studies have focused more specifically on the development of Islam and Islamic education. Abdulkadir (2011) examined the introduction and spread of Islam in non-

Muslim areas of Northern Nigeria and identified migration, trade and commerce, Muslim settlement, political relationships, and religious activities as important channels through which Islam expanded beyond established Muslim centres. In Takum specifically, Danladi (2009) examined the development of the *Tsangaya* system of Islamic education and its problems and prospects. Sawaba (2024) further examined the development of Islamic *da'wah* in Takum between 1960 and 2020, thereby contributing to understanding the institutional and religious dimensions of Islam in the area.

The existing literature also contains an important biographical source on Ali Ibrahim Kuffang. Arambiya (2002), in *The Epitome of Peace: Life and Times of Ukwe Ali Ibrahim Kuffang Zarto II*, provides valuable information on his family background, traditional authority, personal history, and relationship with the religious development of Takum. More recent scholarship has likewise examined Ali Ibrahim's biography, leadership, religious identity, and contribution to the spread and institutional development of Islam in Takum (Sawaba et al., 2026).

Although the existing literature provides important historical materials, it remains dispersed across broader studies of Kuteb history, inter-group relations, Islamic expansion, Islamic education, and biographical accounts. The literature therefore provides useful pieces of the historical narrative without consistently bringing together Ali Ibrahim's ancestral background, Islamic formation, Qur'anic education, traditional leadership, religious orientation, and relationship with the indigenous sociocultural environment within a single historical interpretation.

Moreover, the available sources depend substantially on oral traditions, local historical writings, interviews, and community memories. This makes contextual interpretation and comparison of different sources particularly important. The present study therefore does not claim that Ali Ibrahim has never been studied. Rather, it seeks to deepen the historical understanding of his contribution by bringing together documentary materials and oral accounts and by examining his life within the wider processes of Islamic development and sociocultural transformation in Takum.

The study is particularly concerned with the question of how his Islamic education shaped his later leadership, how his traditional position facilitated or influenced the development of Islam, and how Islamic values were negotiated within a community with an established indigenous religious and cultural heritage. In this respect, the study contributes to a more contextualised account of the localisation of Islam and the agency of indigenous Muslim actors in Southern Taraba.

The general objective of this study is to examine the historical role and Islamic contributions of Ukwe Ali Ibrahim Kuffang in Takum Local Government Area of Taraba State.

Method

Research Design

This study adopts a qualitative historical research design complemented by participatory observation. The historical approach is appropriate because the study seeks to reconstruct the life, experiences, religious formation, leadership, and contributions of a historical personality within a specific sociocultural setting. The approach also permits the researcher to examine events chronologically and to interpret them within the wider historical development of Islam and the Kuteb people in Takum.

Sources of Data

The study draws on both primary and secondary sources. Primary materials consist principally of oral testimonies, community accounts, direct interactions with knowledgeable members of the Takum community, and participatory observation. The oral evidence consulted includes accounts from individuals with direct or substantial knowledge of Ali Ibrahim and the history of Islam in Takum, including members of his family, Islamic scholars, Muslim converts, community elders, and local religious actors. The manuscript records, among others, interviews with Aisha Mamman Gambo, a sister of Ukwe Ali Ibrahim; Malam Ahmadu Hassan, an Islamic scholar; Awawa Anhuwan Maje, a Kuteb Muslim convert; and Alhaji Babban Baba, a merchant resident in Takum. It also records an interaction with members of Ali Ibrahim's biological family in December 2025. Secondary sources include published books, journal articles, unpublished academic works, historical studies, and other documentary materials relating to the Kuteb people, Takum, Islamic expansion in Northern Nigeria, Islamic education, inter-group relations, and the life of Ali Ibrahim Kuffang. Important sources include Arambiya (2002), Umar (1981), Abdulkadir (2011), Danladi (2009), Abdulsalam and Ibrahim (2019), and Filibus and Gertrude (2023).

Participatory Observation and Oral History

Participatory observation was used to complement documentary and oral evidence. Through engagement with members of the Takum community, the researcher observed aspects of the religious and sociocultural environment within which memories of Ali Ibrahim and the development of Islam have been preserved. This approach is important in a study of a community whose historical traditions have been transmitted substantially through oral narratives.

Oral testimonies were treated as historically valuable but were not regarded automatically as uncontested factual records. Particular attention was given to the identity and relationship of informants to the events or personalities discussed, the consistency of accounts, and their correspondence with available documentary materials. Where accounts differed, the differences were considered as part of the historical evidence rather than being silently harmonised.

Data Analysis

The collected materials were analysed through chronological and thematic interpretation. The chronological analysis was used to reconstruct major stages in Ali Ibrahim's life, including his family background, Islamic education, intellectual development, and later leadership. The thematic analysis focused on recurrent themes such as Islamic learning, *da'wah*, moral leadership, traditional authority, religious identity, community development, and interaction between Islamic values and Kuteb sociocultural traditions.

The study also employed source comparison and triangulation to strengthen the interpretation of the evidence. Documentary materials were compared with oral testimonies where relevant, while claims that could not be adequately corroborated were treated cautiously as oral or community traditions rather than presented as established historical facts. This approach is consistent with the methodological challenges identified in scholarship on Kuteb history, where oral traditions constitute an important but necessarily critical source of historical reconstruction (Filibus & Gertrude, 2023).

Study Area

The study is situated in Takum Local Government Area of Taraba State, Nigeria, particularly within the historical and sociocultural setting of Takum town and the Kuteb

community. Takum provides an appropriate setting for the study because it represents a historically pluralistic environment in which indigenous religious traditions, Islamic communities, traditional institutions, and inter-community relations have interacted over time. The study consequently interprets Ali Ibrahim's contribution not in isolation, but within the broader religious and sociocultural transformation of Takum.

Result and Discussion

Traditional Authority as a Vehicle for Islamic Reform

The findings indicate that the emergence of Ukwe Ali Ibrahim Kuffang as the traditional ruler of Takum created an important institutional context for the development of Islam in the area. His position combined traditional political authority with Islamic learning and personal religious commitment. This combination appears to have enabled him to promote Islamic values through an established traditional institution rather than through religious preaching alone. The evidence therefore suggests that the development of Islam in Takum was influenced not only by scholars and ordinary converts, but also by indigenous actors who occupied positions of social and political authority.

This finding is consistent with broader scholarship on the expansion of Islam in regions where Muslim communities were developing within predominantly non-Muslim societies. Abdulkadir (2011) observes that the spread of Islam in Northern Nigeria involved several interacting factors, including migration, trade, Muslim settlement, political relationships, and the activities of religious teachers. The Takum case adds another dimension to this explanation: the role of an indigenous traditional ruler whose authority could provide institutional support for Islamic education and religious practice.

The evidence from the present study indicates that Ali Ibrahim understood leadership in moral rather than merely political terms. His approach appears to have linked authority with responsibility for the religious and educational welfare of the community. His support for Qur'anic schools and Islamic scholars demonstrates that the institutionalisation of Islam in Takum was associated with the development of structures through which religious knowledge could be transmitted across generations.

Islamic Education as the Foundation of Religious Transformation

One of the most significant findings concerns the centrality of education in Ali Ibrahim's reform programme. His own educational trajectory first under Malam Zakari and later under Malam Zubairu appears to have shaped his conception of leadership and community development. His subsequent support for Qur'anic and Islamic schools in Takum can therefore be interpreted as an extension of his personal experience of Islamic learning.

The study found that Ali Ibrahim supported the establishment and expansion of Islamic education and facilitated the settlement of scholars by providing them with accommodation, farmland, and land for educational activities. Oral evidence indicates that these arrangements encouraged a number of scholars to remain in Takum and contributed to the development of a more permanent Islamic educational environment (A. M. Gambo, personal communication, September 19, 2021). The establishment of the *Tarbiyatul-Adhfal* and other *Islamiyah* schools is particularly important because it suggests that Islamic reform was not limited to individual conversion but was connected to the creation of institutions for sustained religious socialisation.

This finding supports Danladi's (2009) observation concerning the historical importance of the *Tsangaya* and Islamic educational system in Takum. It also corresponds with the wider argument of Abdulkadir (2011) that Muslim scholars and religious institutions played an important role in extending Islam beyond established Muslim centres. In the

case of Takum, however, Ali Ibrahim's contribution appears distinctive because he did not merely receive Islamic education; he subsequently used his traditional position to facilitate its institutional expansion.

Reform Through Accommodation Rather Than Cultural Rejection

Another important finding is that Ali Ibrahim's approach to reform was not characterised simply by the rejection of Kuteb cultural identity. Rather, the evidence suggests an attempt to distinguish between cultural practices that could be retained and practices that he regarded as inconsistent with Islamic principles. The study therefore points to a process of selective accommodation in which elements such as communal solidarity, hospitality, and traditional identity could be maintained while practices perceived as idolatrous or morally problematic were challenged (Sawaba, 2024).

This is significant for understanding religious change in Takum. Conversion to Islam did not necessarily require an immediate abandonment of all aspects of indigenous identity. Instead, the findings suggest that Ali Ibrahim sought to negotiate the relationship between Islamic principles and existing cultural practices. His intervention in traditional festivals, including changes in dress and public presentation, illustrates how reform could take place through cultural modification rather than complete cultural displacement.

Such a pattern is consistent with historical scholarship on religious conversion in Africa, which cautions against treating conversion as an instantaneous transformation in which previous identities disappear completely (Fisher, 1973). The Takum evidence similarly suggests that religious change involved processes of negotiation, adaptation, and reinterpretation. Ali Ibrahim's significance therefore lies partly in his ability to present Islam in a manner that could operate within an existing indigenous social structure.

Faith, Tolerance, and Social Cohesion

The findings further suggest that Ali Ibrahim's Islamic leadership was associated with an emphasis on persuasion, moral example, and peaceful coexistence. Accounts consulted for the study describe a leadership style that rejected coercion and encouraged peaceful relations among Muslims, Christians, and adherents of indigenous religion. The palace is also portrayed as a space in which disputes could be addressed through dialogue and reconciliation.

This finding is important because it complicates interpretations of religious expansion as a purely confrontational process. Abdulkadir (2011) identifies *da'wah*, migration, settlement, and social interaction as important mechanisms in the spread of Islam. The Takum evidence suggests that the personal conduct of a respected indigenous leader could function as an additional mechanism of religious influence. Conversion, in this context, appears to have been associated not only with formal preaching but also with perceptions of justice, character, generosity, and responsible leadership.

At the same time, claims concerning the number of people who accepted Islam through Ali Ibrahim's influence should be interpreted cautiously. The source material contains a community estimate of more than 500 converts and identifies individuals such as Kwe Yamusa and Kwe Urum among those reported to have accepted Islam through his influence. These accounts are historically valuable, but they should be understood as oral testimony rather than independently verified population statistics (Sallau, personal communication, December 30, 2025). The significance of the evidence therefore lies less in the precise numerical estimate than in the repeated attribution of religious influence to Ali Ibrahim across community narratives.

Religious Reform and the Transformation of Cultural Practice

A particularly important finding concerns Ali Ibrahim's intervention in the *Kutchechep/Kutebchap* cultural festival. The evidence indicates that he encouraged changes in public dress and ceremonial presentation, replacing forms of public exposure with culturally appropriate regalia. The introduction and wider use of cultural clothing during the festival is remembered in local accounts as one of his enduring contributions to Kuteb cultural identity.

This finding demonstrates that his reform programme was not confined to explicitly Islamic institutions such as mosques and schools. It also extended to the symbolic and cultural practices through which community identity was publicly expressed. His approach can therefore be understood as an attempt to reshape the moral presentation of cultural practices while retaining their communal function. The distinction is important because it indicates that his reform strategy did not necessarily seek the disappearance of Kuteb identity; instead, it sought to redefine aspects of that identity within what he regarded as morally acceptable boundaries.

Williams (2015), in discussing the *Kuchicheb* festival and cultural debates within Takum Chieftdom, demonstrates the continuing importance of this festival to Kuteb communal identity. Against this background, Ali Ibrahim's intervention should be understood as a significant form of religiously informed cultural negotiation rather than simply a rejection of tradition.

Ali Ibrahim's Leadership and the Institutionalisation of Islam

Taken together, the findings demonstrate that Ali Ibrahim's contribution extended beyond personal *da'wah*. His activities involved the establishment and support of educational institutions, attraction of Islamic scholars, provision of material resources for teachers, promotion of Islamic practices, and engagement with traditional cultural institutions. These activities suggest a process of institutionalisation in which Islam became increasingly embedded in the social organisation of Takum.

This finding is consistent with Sawaba's (2024) broader examination of Islamic *da'wah* in Takum, which emphasises the historical development of Islamic propagation in the area. The present study adds a more biographical and leadership-centred perspective by showing how the authority and personal initiative of Ali Ibrahim contributed to that development.

The findings also indicate that religious influence was transmitted through interpersonal networks. Scholars were encouraged to settle in Takum, students were educated, converts became community actors, and institutions such as schools and mosques gained greater visibility. The development of Islam was consequently not dependent on a single act of conversion but on a network of institutions, teachers, households, leaders, and converts.

Post-Reform Challenges and the Problem of Institutional Continuity

The evidence further indicates that the death of Ali Ibrahim created difficulties for the continuity of the reform process. Oral and documentary accounts suggest that his leadership had provided an important unifying influence, and that the absence of a comparable central figure subsequently exposed weaknesses in Islamic institutional organisation. The reported challenges included resistance to Islamic reform, stronger ethnic identification, decline in Islamic learning, and reduced organisational cohesion. These findings should, however, be treated with caution. The available material does not provide sufficient systematic evidence to establish the extent to which religious reversal or political marginalisation occurred across the entire Takum Muslim population. Rather, the

evidence indicates that some community members and informants perceived a weakening of Islamic institutional influence following Ali Ibrahim's death.

The findings nonetheless raise an important historical issue concerning the sustainability of religious reform. A movement that depends heavily on the authority and personal legitimacy of one leader may experience difficulties when that leader dies unless institutions, educational systems, leadership structures, and community organisations have become sufficiently established. The Takum experience therefore suggests that the institutional consolidation of Islam requires more than charismatic or traditional leadership; it also requires mechanisms for intergenerational transmission of knowledge and collective organisation.

Islamic Knowledge, Identity, and Community Continuity

The reported decline in Islamic knowledge after Ali Ibrahim's death represents another important theme emerging from the evidence. The source material links community vulnerability to a perceived weakening of *'ilm*, religious education, and leadership. While such claims require further empirical investigation, they underscore the close relationship between religious knowledge and institutional continuity.

The importance attached to Islamic education during Ali Ibrahim's lifetime provides a useful contrast. His support for Qur'anic schooling and scholars indicates that he recognised knowledge as essential to religious continuity. The subsequent concern about declining knowledge therefore reinforces one of the central findings of this study: his most enduring contribution may have been not simply the number of individuals he influenced, but the educational environment and institutional structures through which Islamic knowledge could be transmitted.

Overall, the findings suggest that the history of Islam in Takum cannot be explained adequately through external missionary activity, migration, or conversion alone. The case of Ukwe Ali Ibrahim Kuffang demonstrates the importance of indigenous religious agency in the localisation and institutional development of Islam. His contribution operated through several interconnected dimensions: traditional authority, Islamic education, moral leadership, *da'wah*, cultural negotiation, social relations, and institutional support.

The study therefore contributes to the historiography of Islam in Southern Taraba by showing how Islamic reform could emerge through the interaction of inherited political authority and acquired religious knowledge. Ali Ibrahim's experience also illustrates the complex relationship between Islam and indigenous culture: rather than producing an immediate rupture between the two, religious reform involved selective retention, modification, and reinterpretation of cultural practices.

At the same time, the findings demonstrate the limitations of personality-centred religious reform. The challenges reported after Ali Ibrahim's death suggest that the long-term sustainability of religious transformation depends upon institutional structures capable of preserving knowledge, leadership, education, and communal organisation beyond the lifetime of a particular leader.

Accordingly, the historical significance of Ukwe Ali Ibrahim Kuffang should be understood not primarily through celebratory descriptions of his personality, but through the concrete processes associated with his leadership: the support of Islamic scholarship, expansion of religious education, promotion of peaceful *da'wah*, engagement with indigenous cultural institutions, and establishment of a social environment in which Islam could become more firmly rooted in Takum. His legacy, therefore, provides a useful case for understanding how Islam was locally negotiated, institutionalised, and transmitted within a culturally plural African community.

Conclusion

The life of Ukwe Ali Ibrahim Kuffang II represents a critical chapter in the socio-religious evolution of the Kuteb people in Takum and Ussa local government area of Taraba State. His father's foresight in combining faith with discipline, and his own application of that inheritance to leadership and reform, reshaped the moral topography of Takum. His story stands as a paradigm of how religious conviction, cultural refinement, and visionary leadership can coalesce to produce enduring societal transformation. Ukwe Ali Ibrahim was more than a prince or a ruler; he was a moral architect whose reforms bridged centuries of tradition with the ethical universality of Islam a legacy that continues to inspire scholars, leaders, and believers across Taraba State and beyond. However, in the reassessment of Islamic Revival Strategies of Ukwe Ibrahim Kuffang II, the challenges facing Islam in Takum after the demise of Ukwe Ali Ibrahim underscore the complexities of religious reform in multi ethnic and multi-religious societies. The interplay of tribal identity, political power, and religious knowledge has created a situation where the initial gains of Islamic propagation have been significantly eroded. For any meaningful revival to occur, several key areas must be addressed: the re-establishment of sound Islamic education, the cultivation of inclusive leadership, and the reassertion of the Qur'anic ideal of unity Instead of ethnic divisions. Moreover, efforts must be made to engage constructively with other religious communities, reducing hostility while maintaining doctrinal integrity. Ultimately, the Takum experience serves as a microcosm of broader challenges in Islamic reform movements across Africa, where the sustainability of religious transformation depends not only on charismatic leadership but also on the institutionalisation of knowledge, unity, and resilience.

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Author Contributions

The authors contributed to the conception and design of the study, development of the abstract, literature review and analysis, interpretation of the findings, and preparation of the manuscript. All authors contributed to the critical revision of the manuscript and approved the final version for publication. Each author accepts responsibility for the accuracy and integrity of the work and agrees to be accountable for all aspects of the study.

Use of AI Tools Declaration

Generative artificial intelligence (AI) tools were used in a limited and supportive capacity during the preparation of this manuscript, particularly for language refinement, proofreading, organization of ideas, and improvement of clarity and readability. AI tools were not used as a substitute for scholarly judgment, interpretation of Islamic sources, conceptual analysis, or verification of the literature. The authors critically reviewed, revised, and validated all AI-assisted content and take full responsibility for the accuracy, originality, integrity, and final version of the manuscript

Conflict of Interest

The authors declare that they have no known financial, institutional, personal, or professional conflicts of interest that could have influenced the research, analysis, interpretation, or presentation of the findings reported in this study.

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