



The Folklore of Liangmai: An Analysis of Its Cultural Significance

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Authors' contributions

This work was carried out in collaboration between both authors. Author KD designed the study, performed the fieldwork and data analysis and wrote the first draft of the manuscript. Author ARP managed the analyses of the study and the literature searches. Both authors read and approved the final manuscript.

Article Information

Editor(s):

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- Complete Peer review History: <http://www.sdiarticle4.com/review-history/66851>

Original Research Article

Received 02 February 2021
Accepted 05 April 2021
Published 12 April 2021

ABSTRACT

The study focuses on the oral literature of Liangmai. The aim of the paper is to provide a brief analysis of the traditional values transmitted by folktale, folksong, wise saying, etc., in Liangmai Naga community. Oral literature has been a source of value education as well as entertainment in the traditional Liangmai rural society. However, the oral narratives of pre-literate Liangmai community have not been properly documented nor studied for their form and content. After colonization and the advent of Christianity and modern education in the early twentieth century, the folk literature in the form of rituals, songs, dances, legends, myths etc. were left neglected. As time passed, the rich oral tradition that had been passed down from generation to generation was left stagnant in the current generation. The focus area of the study is Tamenglong district of Manipur in the Northeastern part of India. The materials have been collected by systematic interviews,

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personal conversations and discussions with the few remaining elderly patrons. They have been recorded audio-visually. The collected data has been translated and transcribed. The results of the study will be used for the preservation of the local community and for the development of literature and school teaching materials in near future so as to educate young children about their rich cultural heritage and their language.

Keywords: Liangmai; folksong; folktale; oral literature; culture.

1. INTRODUCTION

Folklore is widely understood as tradition-based knowledge which is orally transmitted from generation to generation [1,2]. It plays a vital role as a source of cultural identity of a particular community. UNESCO provided the definition of folklore in the Recommendations on the Safeguarding of Traditional Culture and Folklore (1990: 239) as:

“The totality of tradition-based creations of a cultural community, expressed by a group of individuals and recognized as reflecting its cultural and social identity; its standards and values are transmitted orally, by limitation or by other means. Its forms are, among others, language, literature, music, dance, games, mythology, rituals, customs, handicrafts, architecture and other arts.”

The American Folklore Society considers folklore as a broad umbrella term that encompasses traditional art, literature, knowledge and practice disseminated largely through oral communication and behavioral example. Thus, folklore in traditional societies may take various forms including music, dance, and other performing arts; history and mythology; designs and symbols and traditional skills, handicrafts and artworks. There is a consensus among the folklore scholars that the term is deeply rooted in the oral tradition of indigenous communities.

Folklore is inextricably linked to indigenous peoples' identity, their traditional knowledge, their experiences with the natural environment and their belief system. Over the course of generations, indigenous peoples have developed rich sets of knowledge about the natural world, health, technologies and techniques, rites and rituals, narratives, songs and other cultural expressions. Folklore is the repository of critical knowledge, philosophy and wisdom for non-literate societies. It encapsulates traditional knowledge, beliefs and moral values about the environment and the nature of the society itself. It retains the history of the society and its

experiences to be passed on to the succeeding generations orally. Traditional knowledge and traditional resources have been managed by indigenous and local communities since time immemorial, using customary law embedded in spiritual cosmology. Nevertheless, a great deal of traditional knowledge, including customary laws and folklore has been undermined and destroyed by colonizers and post-colonial states who imposed their own systems of law and worldview on indigenous people. Indigenous people today stand at the crossroads of globalization and it has huge impact on their culture and language. Language is not only a communication tool but is also an essential component of one's collective and individual identity and therefore provides a sense of belonging and community. When language dies, that sense of community is damaged.

Liangmai folklore is an indigenous channel of communication having in-built character to entertain, to transmit moral and emotional values and to serve as a source of people's history; it is the true carrier of their culture. However, many facets of their culture are not known to the current generation due to the discontinuation of many age-old practices. Preservation of this rich folklore is the need of the hour or else many beautiful songs, legends and myths will die out along with their few old patrons. The study of each collection dealing with specific aspects of Liangmai oral literature will encourage the community people and outsiders to try to understand the traditional ways of life of the Liangmai people.

The goal of the paper is to document and briefly analyze the Liangmai folklores, with special focus on folk or oral literatures, so that the rich traditions, culture and language of the people could be preserved for generations to come. Scholars like Bronner [3], Miller [4] and others have emphasized on the need to save and care for the stories in folklore so that the originality of the stories could be preserved. Documentation of folksongs, folktales and different forms of folk narratives from the elderly patrons will help save

the fading oral legacy. Very little is written about the language and culture of Liangmai. In the course of the study the voices of the community will be collected and recorded in order to capture their actual worldview, customs, beliefs, traditions and language use in actual settings.

2. THE PEOPLE AND THE LANGUAGE

2.1 Ethnographic Setting

Liangmai inhabits a narrow region bordering the two states of Northeast India; namely, Manipur and Nagaland. In Manipur, Liangmai people primarily dwell in Tamei subdivision of Tamenglong district. In Nagaland, they populate the Peren district. Liangmais predominantly are agricultural people and rice is the main crop they cultivate. They mostly practice jhum cultivation and terrace farming. Each agricultural cycle has accompanying chants, songs and festivals for the success of the crops. They also practice cottage industries and engage in trade among themselves as well as with other neighboring tribes. But presently many young people have moved away from traditional occupations and often travel outside the region in search of education and jobs. Liangmai living outside their native place for education and employment use languages like Meiteilon, Nagamese, Hindi and English in most domains since it is the language of the majority and are more preferred. This has affected their linguistic competence of their mother tongue. Borrowed words or loanwords are used extensively in place of native terms.

2.2 Genetic Affiliation

Liangmai language falls under the Tibeto-Burman (TB) languages of the Sino-Tibetan family. Liangmai has been placed in the Naga-Kuki subgroup by Grierson-Konow (1903-1928). Benedict [5] placed Liangmai under the Kuki-Naga group. In the classification by Bradley [6], Liangmai comes under Zeliangrong group, which falls under the Southern Naga of the Kuki-Chin-Naga. Burling [7] has put Liangmai in Zeme group along with Zeme, Nruanghmei (Rongmei, Kabui), Puiron, Khoirao and Maram. In the more recent classification by Post and Burling [8], this Zeme group has been referred to as Western Naga.

2.3 Endangered Status

The language is listed in UNESCO Interactive Atlas of the World's Languages in Danger

(Moseley Ed. [9]). Though it has been given the status vulnerable yet the scenario is worse. With the coming of modern communication system, economic opportunity, and the reach of regional, national and even international media in Liangmai areas, the people are increasingly relying on more widely spoken mainstream languages like Hindi and English. Parents who can afford to send their children away to boarding schools at an early age prefer to do so since good quality government schools are rare in Liangmai inhabited areas. These schools or boarding homes often actively discourage the use of a child's native languages. Several times, cases of school authority punishing those who speak their native language with their peers are reported. As a result, children attending such boarding schools end up spending the bulk of their childhood speaking Hindi or English and other dominant languages. Naturally by the time they are young adults they have less command over their native language. Code-switching and code-mixing have already become the habit of Liangmai speakers. Today Liangmai is acquired as first language by children only in some interior villages. Thus, Liangmai has become a language that is severely endangered.

3. FOLK LITERATURE OF LIANGMAI

Folk literature, also known as oral literature, is composed of popular, orally transmitted folktales and ballads. Pre-literate societies have no written literature, but this does not mean that they lack richness of tradition. They possess varied folk or oral literatures. These oral literatures have long been the mode of communication and expression for spreading ideas, knowledge and history in societies where traditions are conveyed through speech than through writing. The term broadly includes ritual texts, curative chants, epic poems, folktales, creation stories, songs, myths, spells, legends, proverbs, riddles, tongue twisters, recitations and historical narratives. Similarly, pre-literate Liangmai community had no written system but they had many folktales, wise sayings, proverbs, incantations, fables and folksongs which were in oral form. Story-telling was a very common practice among the Liangmai people. Stories were told for entertainment purposes, and often to teach lessons and uphold morals of the people. Traditionally, oral stories were passed from generation to generation and survived solely by memory. But such practices have become less popular in the present generation. Popular entertainments like television, phone, internet,

etc. have replaced the traditional story telling. Young parents do not narrate folktales to their children anymore as their parents and their grand-parents did. Many facets of their culture are therefore not known to the current generation due to the discontinuation of these age-old practices. Preservation of this rich oral literature is the need of the hour or else many beautiful songs, legends and myths will die out along with their few old patrons. With written and recording media available these days, different forms of folk literature can be recorded and preserved for the coming generation.

3.1 Role of Folk Literature in Liangmai Society

Liangmai oral literature is an indigenous channel of communication having in-built character to entertain, to transmit moral and emotional values and to serve as a source of people's history; it is the true carrier of the culture. It also reflects the people's way of living, food habits, ethics, mannerism, attitudes, etc. It is an expression of various multi-faceted feelings and emotions about any simple or complex issue and brings meaning to life. The narratives portray how one is to live a moral life and the importance of one's relationship with divinity. It set moral standards and ethical purpose to fulfill and also set discipline and order in the society. The origins and authors of these narratives, stories or tales are generally not known. They usually have multiple versions and are not static but involve change. Viewpoints are shaped by narrator's background and experiences. The central theme of folk literature is about life and usually includes themes like the struggle of good against evil, the punishment of evil and rewarding of good, divine intervention, etc. The purpose of these narratives is to explain or teach about life as well as to entertain.

4. FORMS OF LIANGMAI FOLK LITERATURE

In order to have an objective and in-depth understanding of the Liangmai folk literature, an attempt is made here to mention some of the major and distinctive categories of the popular literature of Liangmai community.

4.1 Folktales

There are Liangmai folktales which help in educating, entertaining and in imparting moral values to the society. Some common themes in

Liangmai folktales include stories of divine justice, humor, tale of heroes, stories about animal kingdom, romance and stories about the gods [10].

The divine always give fair judgment, the good is rewarded and the bad punished. There are numerous folktales that portray this divine judgment or intervention. One such tale is the story of a boy who became a hornbill. This story is about a boy who grew up with a step-mother, who mistreated him. The wicked step-mother did not feed the boy well and made him work hard. The hand-pecked father could clearly see the ill-treatment of his son but would not tell his wife for fear of making her angry. The boy was also made to toil in the jhum in rain and sun. The boy however, had compassionate friends in the village who felt his misery and wanted to help. One day while working at the jhum, he saw hornbills flying across the clear blue sky. He told his friends how he wished he could be like the hornbills. So free and happy! Eventually, the boy's wish was granted, and he became a hornbill and flew away. After many years there was a feast of merit hosted in the village by one of the boy's friends. The villagers turned up in their best. They drank and ate, danced and reveled. While the feast was going on, a lone hornbill appeared in the clear blue sky circling above the village. Everyone was happy at the sight of a magnificent hornbill and the hornbill reciprocated by dropping one of its beautiful tail feathers to the host family. On seeing the beautiful feather, the step-mother of the boy who became a hornbill also asked the hornbill to give her one feather. Then a voice from within the hornbill asked the step-mother to close her eyes and open her mouth. When she did that, the hornbill dropped one of its feathers into her mouth splitting her throat and the wicked step-mother dropped down dead. In this way she repaid for her evil deeds.

The moral lesson from this tale is for us to be kind rather than wicked. It also encourages love for one another, and that punishment awaits all evil acts. Furthermore, it demonstrates that an innocent person always finds a rescuer when in danger. Tales of similar theme include the story of the selfish father, revenge of the seventh son and so on.

There are also tales about characters who are stupid and foolish, and tales about characters who are clever and witty, that are commonly narrated in a humorous way. A character named

Achampiu is a man not given much to thinking and is considered as the village idiot. His story includes him hiding a basket of salt under water, getting his head stuck inside a pot while stealing rice cake, believing a cane twig can raise the dead, etc. His stories are filled with funny misadventures. To this day when somebody does something stupid, that person is referred to as *Achampiu*. Another foolish character in Liangmai folktale is a man known as *Akhuangpiu*. He is easily fooled and falls prey to many pranks. *Niumaduan* is a character known for his craftiness and wittiness. He is very cunning and steals from others but was never caught red-handed. At the same time he was very clever and his reputation as a witty person preceded him. The king of that time heard about *Niumaduan* and was keen to meet him. The king actually wanted to show that he can outwit *Niumaduan* and make him submit to his authority. There are many stories about how the king tried to trap *Niumaduan* but failed in every attempt. People with presence of mind and those that can escape from difficult situation are likened to *Niumaduan* to this day.

There are tales about heroes who overcame difficult situations and environments to succeed in life. One such hero is a man called *Amang*. Shortly after he was born, his father passed away and within a year his mother became ill and she too died, leaving little *Amang* and his sister. Through the kindness of some elders in the village and the help of the divine, the brother and sister survived. After many years of hard work *Amang* became a man of standing in his village. He became rich enough to host the feast of merit. *Amang's* feast of merit is a very popular folktale among the Liangmai. The story goes that on the day of the feast, the gods and all living creatures attended the feast. The animals and birds were assigned their respective names, responsibilities, traits and powers on that fateful day. The characteristics of animals and birds were defined on that day. All creatures of the land, big and small groomed themselves for the day of the great feast. Among them, a rat and a bird (known as *kamimaliang*, a kind of bird with beautiful long tail), who were best friends decided to groom each other for the big day. The rat painstakingly groomed the bird's plumage and its long tail. When it was time for the bird to return the favor, the countdown for the celebration had already begun. Anxious to join the merriment, the bird did a sloppy job on the rat's tail with mud and rolled it like a twig and flew away. The rat was furious. It was from that day

that the two friends became sworn enemies and they are still so even to this day. Due to the sloppy job done on its tail that day a rat's tail comes off easily when we pull it even today. And to this day a rat cannot stand the presence of *kamimaliang* and even destroy the bird's feather when kept in house. There are many other stories of different animals and birds on that day which lead to the present day behavior of these creatures and their roles in maintaining ecological balance.

There are fables that often feature animal characters that act and speak like humans and such fables usually have moral lessons. The fable about choosing the king of birds, the race between a tiger and a snail, a friendship between mouse and man, etc., are some popular fables among Liangmais. These tales taught humans to be kind and considerate even to smallest of creatures. There are also legendary figures among the Liangmai. Some well-known heroes are *Hungenang*, *Kaiwiyang*, *Gairemang*, etc. Their stories and songs are quite popular among the older folks even to this day.

4.2 Folk Songs

Folksong is a rich form of cultural heritage among the Liangmai. There are different genres of folksong. The songs have moral, social and political role to play. They impart knowledge on various fields. Songs were used for different functions. When one is not happy or angry with another person, songs were used to express the feelings than by talking and using explicit words. Angry facial countenance was not used; rather a person used a song as a means to express his feelings or wishes. Then the other person would understand that the one singing the song is not happy or sad or angry. This way the songs were used instead of using verbal expression of anger. One would listen to the lyric of the song and understand the intended meaning. There is a story of a certain person named *Hulianping*. It so happened that another person called *Mathiuchunpiu* took *mbung* (a traditional basket made of cane) from *Hulianping* but did not pay for it for a long time. One day they met but instead of asking for the price of the *mbung* upfront, *Hulianping* sang a song, "*riliu zu maninglo nangti tingiu, eti zimeng lak, ata zo!*" (Thinking of a maiden's face, you are worried and I couldn't get proper sleep as well, my ward). Hearing the song *Mathiuchunpiu* understood what *Hulianping* meant and responded "yes uncle, I have been thinking of paying the price of

your *mbung*". This is how people communicated with each other using a song. The used of song prevented and avoided confrontations (physical or verbal) and the intended message was delivered in a peaceful manner. Songs were used to express sadness, happiness and other feelings. Historical events are also expressed through songs. There are many well-known singers who composed many songs. Legendary heroes mentioned in the above section composed many songs that are still sung today.

Migration stories are also preserved and passed on as songs. There are songs about life in and migration from *Makhiang* (also known as *Makhel*, a place of dispersal of Nagas, including Liangmai) to *Makuilongdi*, "*makhiang luang so kalun ri liye, katan kaho ri liye, aliu asamai to sou si, koi mai so aleng pi lo*". The song talks about life at *Makhiang* where men folks compete with each other in strength and in looks. This kind of competition was popular among the people in olden days.

There are also love songs, agricultural songs, village guarding songs, merrymaking songs, songs of praising an individual, songs sung while constructing grand ceremonial houses, songs of parting, etc. Songs played very important part in Liangmai society. For every occasion and activity, there are songs to be sung along.

Love theme dominates the folksongs of Liangmai. Songs of love and yearning, expressing mutual attraction between man and woman are particularly popular. Songs of failed love and heartbreak also form a popular genre of Liangmai folksongs. These songs express eternal human sentiments. The imagery of beauty of a lover waiting impatiently for her beloved forms one of the beautiful aspects of Liangmai love songs. These songs are often rendered through layers of meanings and metaphor is used extensively. Such imagery of luminous beauty should not be overlooked in Liangmai folksongs. Many love songs are credited to a particular author and people continue to sing the song attributing the composer's name.

Liangmai is an agrarian society. People work in their fields for most part of the year. Hence, Liangmai people have developed many songs related to agricultural work. Such songs are referred to a '*luma lui*', which can be translated as 'field weeding song'. *Luma lui* has various themes ranging from love to teasing someone of

opposite sex, to wisdom and moral lessons. These songs provide an avenue to forget the fatigue and hazards of hard work. Both men and women sing songs throughout the day while cultivating the field. The songs also give rhythm to their work. The villagers often said that singing while cultivating the field helps the work progress quickly. There are songs that are sung while going to the field, while working on the field and while returning from the field.

There are also songs that are sung while constructing a grand traditional house known as *kakiuky*. Such house is built by someone who is wealthy. The person who builds the house offers bulls and other animals to the villagers. The villagers bring all the materials needed, like, wood, bamboo, cane, thatch, rope, etc. to build the house.

Back in the days, inter-village feuds and wars were quite frequent. For this reason Liangmais live in high hills so that they can easily spot an enemy approaching. Not only this, they built walls and gates surrounding the village for protection. It is the duty of the menfolk to protect the village from danger, be it from wild animals or enemies. They set duty for men to guard the village at night. Men guarding the village sing songs while they perform their duty. Bravery and sacrificial attitude of men are reflected in these songs. One such song is

Kari khe kaleng tou kabam kum-e
Niu namai ping dulo
Akhe munso kamai sai rasai
Akuan ruam bui-e
Kamai sai ra sai
I aben dan rai bui-e

(Like an eagle guarding its nest
I am guarding the village
Do not be afraid
Children of my village
If anybody dies in my guard
You can cut my ear
If anybody dies
I will cut off my own hand first.)

Recreational activities consist mainly of singing, story-telling and drinking in Liangmai life. One common recreational event is known as *phiangoubo* which means 'gathering of peers'. It refers to gathering of adult male and female of the village to sing and drink for the whole night. They would cook, eat, drink, sing and make merry all night long. Songs that are usually sung

in this gathering is called *phiangoubo lui*, meaning song of gathering of the peers. The themes of *phiangoubo* songs are vast. They sing about love, brotherhood, village, relationship, wine and many more.

Parents and grandparents use rhymes and songs to play with children. Some of these rhymes songs are pure lullabies and others are meant for amusing and humoring a child. A mother or a babysitter adopts several methods to lull her child. These rhymes and songs are usually fanciful composition and are often meaningless. Yet some of it is found to be associated with mythical and legendary Liangmai stories.

4.3 Wise Sayings and Proverbs

There are a number of wise sayings and proverbs which serve as moral code of conduct in Liangmai society. These codes teach the people to be helpful, considerate, diligent, grateful, kind and sociable. There are instructions for parents, children, men, women and the society as a whole. These sayings usually originated on the basis of experiences of ancestors or elders and were passed on as dos and don'ts.

Some common sayings are "*Achampiu matai baibo kum*" which means "like *Achampiu* hiding salt". This saying originates from the story of *Achampiu*, a village idiot, who hid his salt under water. This saying warns against wrong investment of time or money on useless things or in other words it tells one to be careful before making any kind of investment. Another popular saying is "*paphi tin mai pamun di tin e*" which can be translated as "one who wets his feet, wets his mouth too". This saying talks about a person who is diligent and hard-working. It implies that one who works will also get something to eat. The saying "*Abeng siangsi khonbo kum*" meaning "like an owl waiting for *siangsi* (a kind of inedible fruit that has beautiful flower)" implies having false hope on something that will not happen. Another important theme in the Liangmai proverbs is the virtue of bravery. A brave person is highly regarded. An example of a proverb about a brave person is "*humai khangkhat pengasu chari ngambo-e*", which can be translated as "a war is won by one brave man or one man's bravery".

In addition to the ones mentioned above, there are hundreds of wise sayings that are frequently

used in Liangmai society. They have wide variety of themes as well, like, obedience to parents, on the virtue of solidarity and willingness to help others in the community, on the values of goodness and kindness and on subject of reward for good and punishment for evil. There are many proverbs illustrating the importance of co-operation within family and society, the importance of respect for the elders and care for the poor and needy. There are also proverbs that cover the aspect of patience and perseverance and many more. A person with a sound knowledge of proverbs and the skill to use them at the right context is highly regarded and considered as a wise person in the Liangmai society.

4.4 Riddles

Riddles constitute an important branch of Liangmai folk literature. The practice of asking riddle is called *chalad khanbo*. They have, however, received little attention from researchers. The popularity of riddles has also declined among the community members. Earlier it used to be a popular form of entertainment as well as educational exercise. Riddles make abundant use of metaphors. The interest in the riddles depends largely upon the surprise which is caused when an unexpected similarity is revealed by the answer. Some common riddles among the Liangmais are

- (1). *Nahbo wan taninah thui, kating khang sai thui ta mi.*
(Wears a *taninah* (traditional sarong) when young but sheds it when matures).
Ans: *Chapai* (bamboo).
- (2). *Nahbo wan madia, kating khang sai heng.*
(It is green when young but becomes red when it grows older).
Ans: *Thiura* (chilli).
- (3). *Pamun ra ngabam tapha ra tapha mak.*
(Its mouth is wide open but never speaks).
Ans: *Chali* (pot).
- (4). *Tiura tiubam chiudi pawan ra ting mak.*
(It keeps on eating but never gets satisfied).
Ans: *Chami* (fire).

Because of their recreational and educational features, riddles are very significant from the sociological and psychological point of view. Their great variety of contents and themes makes them an interesting and inspiring subject

of study. Depending on the creativity of a person, new riddles can be constructed. It forms an integral part of the people's culture and tradition.

5. CONCLUSIONS

Different genres of folk literature mentioned above serve as important cultural resources that retain and reinforce cultural values. However, as mentioned earlier, the role and status of folk literature in Liangmai society is gradually declining with the changing time. It is disheartening to see oral literature losing its relevance and disappearing in the present modern Liangmai society. The present younger generation is more interested in spending time with modern sophisticated gadgets and technology. The modern education system also consumes most of the time of young people these days. Therefore, oral literature is viewed as impractical, irrelevant and outdated by both parents and children of the present generation. If the prevailing trend continues for few more generations, the oral literature of the people can altogether be forgotten by the society. This calls for a serious and conscious effort to protect and preserve the existing oral literature. The primary objective of the study is to document Liangmai folk literature for digital preservation. Digital preservation is about safeguarding and maintaining a digital collection for long term i.e. into the foreseeable and distant future. During the course of the study we came across many new things which we have never heard of but are very significant in Liangmai society. Liangmai folklores have received little attention from researchers and folklorists so far. Much of the folklore has become less popular among the younger Liangmai generation and unless we document it now there are high chances of many of it being forgotten. We have made some audio and video recordings but we must confess that there are many more works to be done, which we will take up in near future. The main goal of digital preservation process is to keep digital information in readable and usable condition. Digital storage is not only the most popular method of preservation, but it is the trend for the future.

Though oral literature has withstood the ravages of time, one cannot deny the fact that it is gradually losing the battle. The society has changed and become more advanced and modern, yet folklore can still be applied. When one studies folklore, one understands its value

and also gets a clear insight into the tradition, customs and culture of the society. The question of morality is important regardless of whether one society has become advanced or not. Folktale imparts such values as one should do right, one should respect parents and elders, one should help the needy, one should think of others first instead of himself or herself. Celebration of life is well preserved in folksongs. The beauty of nature, sense of brotherhood and most importantly, expression of love and admiration to others are themes taught best by folklore. Proper knowledge of folklore will equip the younger people to adapt to modernity with the right sense of responsibility.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

We sincerely acknowledge the help and co-operation extended by the following persons: Phenlakbou Marenmai, Chamthonang Dichongta, Guamthuilu Dichongta, Kaisunping Daimai, Juguangliu Daimai, Kingamliu Daimai, Khangthumliu Daimai and Nk Lungsongbibou. The data for this research were provided by the individuals listed above.

COMPETING INTERESTS

Authors have declared that no competing interests exist.

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