

# Women storytelling



**STORIES ABOUT THO ETHNICITY  
BY THO WOMEN IN VIETNAM**

**2021**

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# Acknowledgments

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We would like to thank artisan crafts people and ethnic villagers for sharing their rich knowledge of history, traditional customs, and religious practices of the Tho ethnicity. This knowledge constitutes the basis of all these stories told here and are deeply connect to land and place which are rooted in their religious belief systems.

Our sincere thanks go to Madame Luong Thi Truong and Mr. Hoang Duc Nguyen from the Center for Sustainable Development of Mountainous area (CSDM), who led community activities. We highly appreciate the support and facilitation from local authorities in Nghia Loi and Nghia Lac communes and related organizations in Nghia Dan district, Nghe An province.

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# Foreword

This picture book is a collection of ten stories made by Tho ethnic women in Lac Village (Nghia Lac Commune) and Lung village (Nghia Loi commune), Nghia Dan district, Nghe An province. Their lived experiences have been captured by pictures and words through the women's lens. You will find simple stories about cuisine, costumes, musical instruments, tools, and cultural practices of the Tho ethnic people in Nghe An, which exudes the storyteller's love and pride of their ethnicity, unique culture and religion of the Tho people.

The majority of the Tho ethnic group now inhabit in Nghia Dan District, Nghe An Province. Much of the traditional practices here are linked to the land and natural resources. Over time, their culture has slowly integrated with Kinh culture; therefore, this book is a valuable record of Tho culture that is still preserved and practiced to this day.

We hope that these stories will inspire ethnic minority women across Vietnam to share their stories with confidence. By encouraging them to document and preserve their ethnic identity it helps to strengthen their cultural beliefs and religion. Equally it contributes to community unity, promotes gender equality, and empower women to become active leaders in their community and their lives.

All stories are maintained with storyteller voices and have only been edited to formalise the English.



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# Authors

From grandmothers, mothers, and aunties, these twelve women, work day by day to take care of their children and families through farming. They come from two villages - Lung village and Lac village (Nghia Loi communes) of Nam Dan District, Nghe An Province. These colorful stories represent their lives.

These Tho women have shown their passion for their cultural identity and their patience to improve their storytelling narratives. Generational differences between these women are no barrier for storytelling. From grandmothers of Lung village, with rich life experiences to younger ladies from Lac village who are quick learners when it comes to technology.

These ten stories are lively pictorial stories that reflect the most prominent activities of the Tho people in the eyes of women. Besides the photographic works of these women represented in these stories, the women have created videos and maps using the Mapeo app on their phones.



**Ms. Le Thi Thiet**  
Loving Tho folk song  
and crafting



**Ms. Le Thi Nam**  
Loving Tho culture



**Ms. Le Thi Luong**  
Loving Tho cuisine  
and culture



**Ms. Le Thi Le**  
Loving Tho cuisine



**Ms. Le Thi Noi**  
Loving Tho culture



**Ms. Le Thi Xuan**  
Loving Tho folk song  
and gong culture



**Ms. Truong Thi Mau**  
Loving Tho culture



**Ms. Le Thi Truong**  
Loving Tho culture



**Ms. Le Thi Luan**  
Loving Tho culture



**Ms. Bui Thuy Sinh**  
Loving Tho culture



**Ms. Le Thi Huong**  
Loving Tho identity



**Ms. Le Thi Cuong**  
Loving Tho cuisine





# 1 Traditional costume



# Tho people's traditional costume

Tho women traditionally wear black dresses, and their top clothing is a mix of a dudou top undershirt and a white shirt, they also wrap their hair with a black cloth. Men wear a loose-fitting set of clothes in dark brown, made from silk. The costume is sewn or tailored to each person.



In women's clothing, the dress is shin-length with an A-shaped design. Two straight lines are sewn from the back to the bottom of the dress to form a square, together with moon embroidery pattern of Tho people - called "săm kẻ" or "rau pự". They use an armspan scarf as the belt, called "sỏi" scarf. The undershirt is a type of dudou top with flexible colors. When mixing it with the white, long-sleeved shirt, the color of the dudou will be highlighted through the round neck of the outer shirt. The outer shirts also have slits in both sides. Women often wrap their hair with a black scarf, about 16-18cm wide and 50-55cm long. The scarf is first wrapped along the length of the hair, then tied around the head.

Men wear dark brown silk clothes. The pants have a drawstring around the waist. The long-sleeved shirts have a round-neck and is designed with slits on both sides, with one to three pockets. Men tie red or brown scarves on their head.





Today, Tho people only wear their traditional costume in festivals, New Year's Day, and special occasions. For daily uses, they wear mainstream clothes like Kinh people.



# 2

Ramie  
hammock







# Tho people's ramie hammock

The ramie hammocks have long been a part of Tho people daily lives. Parents use hammocks to soothe their children, and grandparents use hammocks to take rest when sick. Ms. Le Thi Noi has been passionate about knitting hammocks since she was nineteen or twenty years old. She was taught by her mother-in-law and is very hard-working and knits hammocks throughout the evenings. In the past, when there was no electricity, she used oil lamp light to knit by. She continues to knit hammocks till this day and knits delicate hammocks for her parents, husband, and children. Ms. Noi's hammocks are famous for their sophistication, and she has been invited to join a team in the local cooperative to promote this traditional craft of the Tho people.



Cut down the ramie plant in home garden.



The grown plants is cut every 45 days to provide continuous material in the knitting process.



Stripping off bark.



Shave the silk cover to get the ramie ropes.



Hang the ropes for about 2 hours under the sun until dried.



Split the rope to knit.





Braid the hammock head and tie knots to knit the hammock body.



Knit the hammock body.



Ending the hammock.



The hammock is completed. If knitting intensively, about 4 hours per day, it will take more than one month to knit a hammock. If knitting only in the evenings, it will take half a year to complete a 1.8 m-long hammock.



Grandma and granddaughter play in a hammock. Hammocks should be washed in cold water without soap to avoid damage. Ramie hammocks are very durable and can be used for 15-20 years.



# 3 "Bồi" Soup







# "Bôi" soup

"Bôi" soup, or "Ới" mushroom soup (also known as shiitake mushroom) has long been a typical dish of the Tho people. The main ingredients of the soup are fresh mushrooms and glutinous rice. Mushrooms grow during the rainy and humid season and are found in dry wood trees in natural or planted forests.



Small mushrooms look like a toenail, growing thickly on tall stems. Mushrooms have white and brown color and a signature strong flavor. After being picked, mushrooms should be cleaned.



Rice and mushrooms - the two main ingredients of the soup.



How to make:

- Soak the rice for 30 minutes, then pound the rice into flour.
- Mushrooms are also pounded.
- Dissolve rice flour with cold water, cook for about 20 minutes, stirring to avoid lumps. -
- Add the pounded mushrooms and continue stirring for 15 mins until they are well cooked.
- Season and the soup is ready to eat.



This soup is delicious, either eaten alone or with rice. The soup has a rich and aromatic taste. It is a special dish of the Tho ethnic group.





4  
"So-na" trumpet





# So-na trumpet

The Sona trumpet is a unique instrument of the Tho ethnic group and differentiates itself from the trumpets of the Thai, Hmong, or Cham people by structure and tone. In ceremonies such as house-warmings, funerals or weddings, the Sona trumpet is indispensable in forming a trio with drum and gongs. The melody of Sona trumpets for festivals and New Year celebration combined with gongs resemble folk songs, evoking a feeling of joyfulness. By contrast, its melody for funerals evokes feelings of sadness and memory of hardships. Our women club had the opportunity to visit the family of a craftsman - Mr. Le Huu Chi - a Sona trumpet artist and craftsman. This is a step-by-step account of the process of making this unique trumpet.



Step 1: Prepare a piece of wood about 16 cm long, 8 cm in diameter. Wood for making trumpets can be "máp" or "mồ cua" trees.



Step 2: Use a sharp knife to carve a bell. Carve patterns on the belt for decoration.



Step 3: The trumpet's body is made of wood or bamboo with a small head and a large head on the other side. The body is 25-27cm long and is then pierced with seven holes or valves. While blowing, the pitch of the notes can vary by opening or closing these valves.



Step 4: The mouthpiece is made from a worm cocoon. Next, the trumpet must have a shield, located right after the mouthpiece to protect the trumpet player.





The gong club in Lac Village is currently teaching Sona trumpet to the younger generation and organizing activities with its members every Saturday.





# 5

## Ramie leaf cake



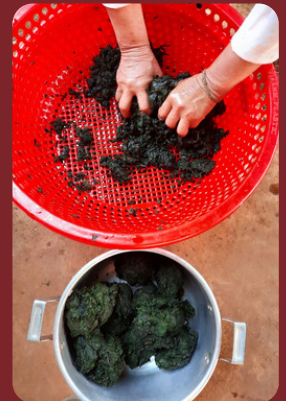
# Ramie leaf cake

Ramie cake is very delicious  
Ethnic cuisine handed down by descendants  
Now spread to all regions of Vietnam.

Indeed ramie leaf cake is a popular dish in Vietnam. The cake is made from ramie leaves, glutinous rice flour, and green beans. Using the same ingredients, Tho people in Nghia Loi Village have created distinctive taste for their ramie leaf cake, thanks to the fresh ramie leaves, hand pounding, steaming on firewood, and meticulous baking techniques. Ramie leaf cake is simple yet elegant, reflecting the beauty and quintessence of Tho people.



Pick ramie leaves from the garden, and choose beautiful green leaves to make good cakes.



Leaves are washed, boiled thoroughly, then squeezed.



Boiled ramie leaves are pounded by hand with a stone mortar until pureed. Glutinous flour is put into the dough; molasses is poured into the mix to make it sweet. The dough is filled with peanuts or beans.



Banana leaves are cleaned and cut evenly then wrapped around the cake and rolled with a twisted layer, in the size of a fist. After wrapping, the cakes are placed in an earthen jar to heat on a wood stove for an hour till cooked.



The cooked cake is taken out from the jar and left to cool. The cake has the aroma of ramie leaves, the stickiness of glutinous rice flour, the sweetness of molasses, the flesh of beans or peanuts. Ramie leaf cake is a specialty for the Lunar New Year, indispensable in every Tho family. Ramie leaf cake is a delicious snack to treat friends and relatives when they visit and best served with fresh tea.



# 6 Traditional rice pounding







# Traditional rice pounding

Pounding rice with mortar and pestle is one of the cultural features of the Tho people, handed down through generations since ancient times. Pounding rice is the task of Tho women, either for daily tasks or events. Rice pounding is done either by one person or by a group, three or four people, using the same mortar with other tasks include rice sieving and sifting. Every household must have a mortar and pestle pair to pound rice. Rice pounding was traditionally part of the women's role and girls were taught this skill at a young age. It was seen as a duty as women are the traditional caregivers in the family.

Pounding rice is labour intensive and time-consuming. Tho women often needed to wake up early in the morning (2-3 am) and in preparation for festivals, women must work for weeks in advance. Today, thanks to milling machines, women no longer need to do this task. The mortar is now only used for display or sometimes used to make traditional foods such as ramie leaf cake.



Take out the paddy (raw rice with husk).



Paddy was put in the mortar for pounding.



Paddy was pounded to remove the husk.



Rice is sieved to separate the rice from husk.



Sifting rice to filter broken rice out.



Another filtering process to classify rice and take out whole grain rice.



Clean rice is poured into a basket, ready to cook.



Each person contributes making the process of pounding rice faster and fun.





# 7 Bamboo weaving



# Bamboo weaving and crafts

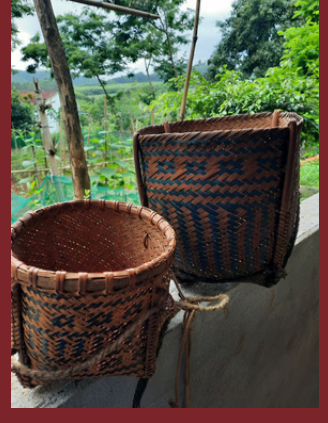
Bamboo weaving is a long-standing traditional craft of the Tho people. A resource that is an abundant materials found in the village, skillful Tho people utilise the bamboo to create multiple products such as baskets, rags and sieves in many varieties for different functions (thúng, mủng, rổ, rá, đố, đế, dón, nong, dãn, sàng). These are indispensable items in every household.



Bamboo of many varieties are the main materials.



'Thúng', 'rổ', 'nia', 'đố', 'dón', 'đế' are items people use and bring to work everyday.



'Dón' is worn on the front to drill corn and rice.



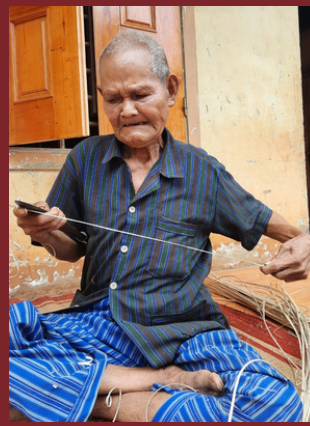
'Đế' is worn on the back and waist, to carry snacks like peanut, sweet potatoes, cassava, betel and arca to work.



'Nong' is used to dry medicinal herbs, cassava and corn.



'Dãn' is used to sieve broken rice.



Mr. Le Vo Thanh - a bamboo weaving craftsman in Nghia Loi, has been weaving for over 50 years





# 8

Stilt house of  
Tho people



# Stilt houses of Tho people



One afternoon in April 2021, our women club went to Ke Mui Village, Giai Xuan Commune, Tan Ky District (Nghe An Province) to visit a 100-year-old stilt house of Mr. Ly Tao. The house's roof is covered with "cứ" leaves, re-roofed every 15-17 years. The feet of the house's columns are supported by rocks, making it very sturdy. The house is divided into multiple areas: ancestral worshipping area, shared living room, kitchen, daughter-in-law's room. The stilt house usually has 7, 9, to 11 stairs from the ground to the main floor. There is only one door and a singular staircase to the stilt house, meaning that the astral or soul of all family members must go up the stairs to enter the house.



Overview of an ancient stilt house

In the past, Tho people lived sparsely near the natural forests; the stilt house had two floors and a high staircase to protect them from wild animals and thieves. When building a new stilt house, the house owner often asks the elderly to stand as a household header. The house's roof is usually decorated with a dove or a typical bird of Tho people, symbolizing happiness. Today, cutting down trees to build wooden stilt houses is no longer popular in Tho community. Instead, they use bricks and new materials for building houses.





The stairs leading to the stilt house usually have 7, 9 or 11 steps. 7 steps is for a low house, 9 steps is for a medium house, 11 steps is for a high house.



Family shared living room, the area near the window is used for dining.



Ancestral worship area for deceased people in the family. The worship area is usually located in the outer space near the stairs.



The kitchen is where the whole family cook meals. Family members (except for the daughter-in-law and the son) sleep near the kitchen.



The floor is paved with bamboo. The wall ('pờ nưng') is woven with a type of bamboo material.



The daughter-in-law's room is the private room of the son and daughter-in-law, separated from the family shared space by a door.



Under the house is the space for storing firewood, vehicles, and cattle





Ant egg cake



# Ant egg cake

The Tho people of Nghia Dan collect ant eggs and fig leaves in February, which is the only occasion of the year to make ant egg cakes. Ant egg cake has a unique flavor of the fatty taste of ant eggs, the stickiness of glutinous flour and the aroma of fig leaves. As ant eggs can only be collected once a year, depending on the sunny weather condition, every Tho family tries to make a batch of ant egg cakes as a special treat for their children and relatives. This cake is a type of snack, not for ancestor worship. When the sun rises big and red in the morning, it means there would be more and bigger ant eggs. This is the time to go to the forest and climb tall trees to harvest an ant nest to gather ant eggs.



Trees with ant nests with eggs in the forest.



Take down the nest. Break the nest to get eggs and clean it.



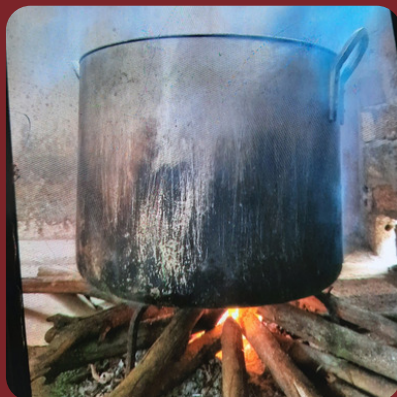
Ingredients: Sticky rice flour, ant eggs, fig leaves (young and old), cold water.



How to make: Mix sticky rice flour and ant eggs, add a little cold water and a little salt, shape into a round ball - ready for wrapping.



Cake wrapping: Inside, two layers of young fig leaves wrap the mixture of sticky rice flour and ant eggs into a square shape. Old fig leaf on the outside.



Wrapped cakes are steamed on a stove for an hour.



Cooked cakes are laid out to cool. The cooler the cake, the more delicious, fatty, and sticky.





# 10

## Gong culture





# Gong culture

Musical instruments such as drums, Sona trumpet, and gongs have been handed down through generations since ancient times. The young generations of the Tho ethnicity grow up with those sounds; they are passionate about the nation's gong culture, thereby learning from their parents, older brothers, and sisters who often play gongs on the New Year festival, weddings, and other ceremonies. The 7th day of the first lunar month every year is the opening day to pray for luckiness and good fortune; this day cannot be without the sound of gongs.

The gong team has three people: the drummer, the Sona trumpeter, and the gong player. A set of gongs has 3 to 5 gongs. The 3rd gong's beat follows the number pattern 1-2-1-3. The 4th gong's beat follows the number pattern 1-3-2-4. The 5th gong's beat follows the number pattern 1-4-2-2-4. Men and women sing along the gong beats, they may perform "challenge-and-response" singing with Tho folk songs.



A set of four gongs. The gongs are made of bronze, the raised centre knob is made of a mixture of bronze and gold to make a sound.



Drums - there are many styles of beating for each occasion such as weddings, funerals, festivals.



Sona trumpet is a unique instrument only found in the Tho community.



Drum artist  
Ms. Le Thi Nam



Sona trumpet artist  
Mr. Le Vo At



Gong artist  
Ms. Le Thi Noi



The trio of drum, sona trumpet and gong players



The gong club in Nghia Loi commune has 48 members and meet up every Saturday to organize exchanges with nearby clubs. The club often performs on holidays and weddings. The gong club is a place for members to perform and preserve Tho's culture while passing it on to the younger generation.



# Community Exhibition



This body of work by the Tho women was displayed and introduced in the Tho community on May 23, 2021, national election day.



The exhibition attracted a lot of attention from the people because it was the first time that very familiar activities of the Tho ethnicity were depicted, recorded, and introduced in a specific and detailed way.



