

Women Storytelling



**STORIES ABOUT KHO MU ETHNICITY
BY KHO MU WOMEN IN VIETNAM
2022**

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Acknowledgments

This book would have not been possible without the contributions of Kho Mu ethnic minority women. These young and dynamic women utilized technology to enthusiastically and proudly tell stories about their life and ethnic identity. We would like to give special thanks to all members of the women storytelling club for their interesting stories and pictures, and for allowing us to share their work with the public.

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 Kho Mu ethnicity. This knowledge constitutes the basis of all the 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 Women union in Chieng Pan commune, Chieng Pan commune people committee, and other related organizations of Yen Chau district , Son La province.

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Foreword

This picture book is a collection of nine stories made by Kho Mu ethnic women in Than village, Chien Pan commune, Yen Chau district, Son La province. These women have encapsulated in pictures and words, their lived experiences through their lens. You will find simple stories about women's costumes, special foods, Au Eo dancing, Tom singing, and folk music instruments. Specially, the indispensable seeding ceremony and house ghosts worshipping custom are also depicted. All of these details create and define the Kho Mu' ethnicity through the unique culture and religion in Son La province.

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

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

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Authors

Thirteen Kho Mu women from Than village, Chieng Pan commune, Yen Chau district, Son La province, formed a women's club on a voluntary basis with the desire to protect and preserve Kho Mu traditional culture and religion. They have together woven the colorful stories presented here.

This is a diverse group of women in terms of age, educational background, and marital status. These inspiring women were quick learners. They adapted to technology readily and applied the skills from training to use applications on smartphones for storytelling.

The nine stories in the following section are lively pictorial stories that reflect the most prominent activities of the Kho Mu people through the eyes of the women.

In this project, besides using their original photos for storytelling, the women have created videos and maps using the Mapeo app on their phones to facilitate locating and monitoring essential places in the community.



Ms. Lu Thi Lan
Head of Than village's women union
Kho Mu food lover



Ms. Ha Thi Trang
Kho Mu ethnic costumes
embroidering lover



Ms. Me Thi Quy
Kho Mu dancing and
singing lover



Ms. Lu Anh Kim
Kho Mu food lover



Ms. Ha Thi Anh
Kho Mu culture lover



Ms. Me Thi Tham
Kho Mu ethnic music lover



Ms. Lu Thi Du
Kho Mu festivals lover



Ms. Ha Thi Na
Kho Mu culture lover



Ms. Me Thi Thuan
Kho Mu food lover



Ms. Lu Thi Thanh
Kho Mu music lover



Ms. Ha Thi Hien
Singing lover



Ms. Ha Thi Thuy Linh
Kho Mu food lover



Ms. Ha Thi Quynh Nga
Singing lover



1

Folk music instruments

Folk music instruments

Authors: Lu THi Lan, Ha Thi Na, Me Thi Tham, Me Thi Thuan, Lu Thi Du

The orchestra of the Kho Mu people is closely linked to spiritual and cultural life. It is indispensable in festivals and events such as New Year, new house celebrations, harvesting celebrations, weddings, and more. The musical instruments in the orchestra are formed from daily labor tools, including Monkey gong, Dao Dao, Tang Bu, Chong Choe, Khen, and Drum. The unique thing is that Kho Mu women can use these instruments fluently, except for the Khen, which men play.

1. Monkey gong - "Ru Bang Hoa"



In the past, the Kho Mu people worked in the deep forest fields; animals often disrupted their crops, so they invented the monkey gong to drive those animals away. The monkey gong was then transformed into an indispensable instrument in the Kho Mu's dancing.

2. Dao Dao - "Hun May"



It is a labor tool of the Kho Mu people, used for sifting/trimming grass for roofing. While resting, the Kho Mu is used Dao Dao in their singing; the Dao Dao became a musical instrument, which has been handed down to this day.

3. Tang Bu - "Ôm Đình"



Made from bamboo, Tang Bu, a water pipe, is used to get water for daily living. When the family has a happy day, they often use this water pipe as a musical instrument to dance, thereby becoming an indispensable instrument.

4. Khen (pan-pipe)



Khen made of bamboo, including 14 sticks.

5. Chong choe



This instrument is made of copper, echoing and creating beat for the orchestra.

6. Drum



The drum body is made of wood, the face is covered with cow or buffalo skin.



The entire folk orchestra of the Kho Mu.



The women performing with the instruments in harvesting celebrations.



2 Women's costumes

Women's costumes

Authors: Lu Thi Lan, Ha Thi Na, Me Thi Tham, Me Thi Thuan, Lu Thi Du

Each ethnic group has its costume, and so does the Kho Mu. Kho Mu women's costumes include shirts, skirts, sashes, belts, "pieu" scarves, braces, and other accessories. Each item requires sophistication and meticulousness in the needlepoint, embroidered by the skillful hands of Kho Mu women. The skill of making national costumes has been passed down through generations of women, from grandmothers to their children and grandchildren, to preserve the unique traditions of the Kho Mu. Over time, costumes have been changed to suit modern life.

Original costume



Modern costume



Original costume



In the past, women's shirts were delicately embroidered and decorated with real silver coins. Women always wear silver neck braces.



The "pieu" scarf is hand-embroidered in the shape of colorful water clover leaves.



The skirt is made from a brocade fabric woven by a loom.



Modern costume



The current shirt is sewn more simply, mainly black velvet decorated with silver buttons, without rows of silver coins as originally.



The scarf is embroidered more simply, but with many patterns.



Black velvet skirts become popular, either plain or sprayed, embroidered with various flowers depending on preferences.



Women in Than village today still create traditional costumes for themselves and their families.

3 Seeding ceremony



Seeding ceremony

In the village of the Kho Mu ethnic group, we live by upland and swidden fields. Therefore, when the gowk birds chirp (called Sim Quai pook quai goong in Kho Mu), it signals a new crop coming in April and May of the lunar calendar. The Kho Mu people begin to prepare tools and seeds for planting. They select seeds from the previous crop, choosing big, uniform seeds at the end of the rice branch. It is forbidden to whistle or talk to others during seed selection. The hole puncher for seeding is made of solid wood, and from the handle to the end of the tool is made of bamboo tubes so that it makes a sound. Before planting, the family chooses a good day to plant the seeds. The seed planting ceremony is meant to bring a bountiful harvest, scare away animals such as birds, mice, insects, pests, etc., and not destroy the seeds. When planting, people pray for rain so the seeds can germinate and grow; they also pray for sunshine so the weeds do not increase for crops grow well. Generations of the Kho Mu people at birth have known this ceremony and inherited it to this day.

1. Preparing the rice, good seeds for germination



2. Prepare the seeding tools



3. Tools to repel birds and animals to protect crops



4. Worshipping at home, asking for permission from the ancestors



5. Everyone goes for seeding together

When planting seeds, the men make the hole first, and the women follow to put the seeds in the hole. Depending on whether the area is broad or narrow, the number of people working corresponds. For example, with 2000m² of land, ten people will work together (5 people poke holes - 5 people drop seeds), which will take about 2 hours to complete. During the seeding, everyone is allowed to talk normally. However, they are forbidden to whistle because whistling is likened to the sound of birds and mice, which can signal to them that there are seeds and they will come to destroy.



6. Celebration

After the seeding ceremony, the family offers a jar of wine and a tray of food, reporting to the ancestors, and then invites everyone to eat and drink to wish for a bountiful harvest.



4 Bamboo weaving



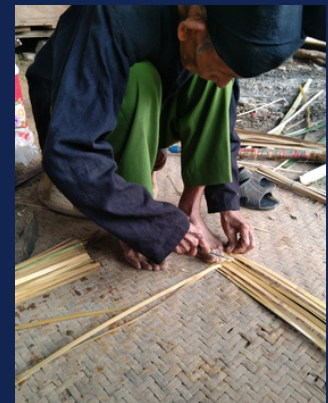
Bamboo weaving

Authors: Lu Thi Lan, Me Thi Quy, Ha Thi Hien, Ha Thi Thuy Linh

The Kho Mu ethnic village lives in a remote area surrounded by mountains, hills, and bamboo. Therefore, since ancient times, the Kho Mu people have used bamboo trees to weave and create tools such as baskets, mats, fans, tools, etc., for daily life.



People select old, long, straight bamboo to create beautiful and durable tools.



Depending on the product type, the artisan will measure, cut accordingly, then split and sharpen. These are important stages that require the artisan's skillfulness. The next step is to split the bamboo stick into thin, soft pieces and proceed to weave. The artisan needs to arrange the bamboo pieces evenly; the hand must skillfully thread the pieces together to create a beautiful and strong product.



Bamboo products in daily life: "ep khau" to store rice, "ep" to store things bringing to upland fields, sieve for drying things, ...



5 Foods



Foods

Authors: Lu Anh Kim, Lu Thi Thanh, Ha Thi Anh, Ha Thi Trang

Chicken porridge

Chicken porridge is a dish that has existed since ancient times and has a significant meaning in the spiritual life of the Kho Mu. This dish is indispensable for worshipping house ghosts, welcoming ancestors when building a new home or coming to a new home, New Year's Day, festivals such as New Rice Festival, Seeding ceremony, etc. In the process of cultural exchange and development among ethnic groups, chicken porridge is cooked more regularly, regardless of the occasion. Whenever there are guests or needs, chicken porridge will be served to introduce the unique traditional Kho Mu dishes.

1. Ingredients



Old chicken meat



Sticky rice



Spices: lemongrass powder, "mac khen" or prickly ash, chili powder



2. How to prepare



1. Grind sticky rice into powder
2. Mince chicken into bite-sized pieces, and put in a pot of boiling water for about 30 minutes. Then, add the sticky rice flour and stir until cooked.
3. Seasoning. When the pot is off the stove, add the lemongrass powder, "mac khen," and chili powder to be ready to serve.

"Oo" soup

"Oo soup" or "Đoong Unr" is an ancient dish of the Kho Mu. It came from the habit of hunting and gathering wild animals (squirrels, mountain rats, porcupines, guinea pigs, pigs, etc.). Animals, after being hunted and preliminarily processed, are then hung above the stoves for two to three days. Afterward, people pick wild vegetables to cook together with meat into a mixed soup.

1. Ingredients



Meat in big pieces hanging in the kitchen; broken rice; and vegetables.



Spices: bitter or green eggplant, onion, lemongrass, chili, "mac khen," cumin, saw leaves, lemon leaves, ginger, etc.

2. How to prepare



1. Cook meat and vegetables together for 1 hour, then get the meat out and cut it into bite-sized pieces.



2. Pound vegetables with broken rice.



3. Put vegetables and meat back into the pot to cook until the soup is thickened. Finally, add the spices.



Oo soup is ready to serve.



6

**Banana
wine**

Banana wine

Authors: Lu Thi Lan, Ha Thi Na, Me Thi Tham, Me Thi Thuan, Lu Ti Du

Yen Chau district area is famous for fragrant mangoes and sweet bananas. Bananas are used not only to make dried or steamed bananas but also to make sweet and delicious banana wine—a specialty of Yen Chau.



The old bananas are selected in the garden and cut down to bring home for ripening thoroughly by warm temperatures.



Ripe bananas are peeled, sliced, and fermented with yeast for a month.



Bananas fermented for at least a month produce yellow water and taste sweet. This yellow water can be mixed with water for a few days to a week and then cooked. The wine vapor rising from the cooking pot will be directed to the cooler and flow down to catch into the can.



Banana wine has a strong aroma, slightly acrid, with an alcohol level of 38 to 40 proof to meet the standard of good wine. Banana wine is a delicacy of the Kho Mu people and is used for parties and worship.



7

"Au Eo"
dancing

"Au Eo" dancing

"Au Eo" is a dance with a distinct identity of the Kho Mu; it is indispensable in any festival, or happy days. Au Eo dance is very popular for everyone from women to men, elderly to children; all know how to dance Au Eo. The dance is very flexible and can be combined with different musical instruments such as Dao Dao, Tang Bu, and drum. The Au Eo dance movement is unique in how dancers shake their hips flexibly, either when standing, sitting, up and down, or turning around. The Au Eo dance shows the Kho Mu people's production and daily life activities. The movements are performed in a healthy, rhythmic, and even manner.

1. Au Eo dancing with Dao Dao

Dao Dao is a labor tool made of bamboo, used to clean and smooth the grass for roofing. While working tired and resting, the people took a Dao Dao to knock and found an exceptional resonant sound, from which the Dao Dao was used to make the Au Eo far more lively.



2. Empty-handed Au Eo dancing - "Ter Vren Guong"

The Au Eo empty-handed dance expresses the people's joy and excitement when the harvest is finished. The combination of hands and hip swaying gracefully follows the footsteps, blending with the drums, gongs, and trumpet sounds to create a joyful atmosphere. The movements of standing up and sitting down represent the process of going uphill to the fields, climbing slopes and mountains. Arms raised to grasp the trees and grass along the way to make momentum to climb over the rocky slopes.



3. Au Eo dancing with Tang Bu

Tang Bu is a bamboo water pipe of the Kho Mu, about one meter long. Every time coming back from the fields, people often invite each other to collect water. In one new rice festival at a certain family, when everyone danced happily, a guest grabbed the Tang Bu and knocked on the floor, creating a beautiful and lively sound that sounded like the reverberation of the mountains. Since then, the Kho Mu people have combined Tang Bu and the Au Eo dance.



The Au Eo dance is imbued with national cultural identity. All dances show the various daily activities of the Kho Mu, from planting seeds to praying for rain and crops, etc





8
"Tom"
singing

"Tom" singing

"Tom" singing is Kho Mu's folk song singing, including three ways of singing: (i) singing in response, also known as ancient singing; (ii) direct singing means that the person will actually sing what he sees and improvise directly; and (iii) singing lullaby. The Kho Mu people perform Tom tunes in festivals, New Year's Eve, new home celebrations, harvesting, weddings, visiting each other, going to the fields, doing daily work, etc.

1. Tom singing in the crowd

Tom singing can take place in many situations, at meetings, talking, and when guests come to the house.



2. Tom love singing

Love song singing between a man and a woman is a way of singing back and forth from hill to hill, singing responsively about love between couples.



3. Tom lullaby singing

On field days, when parents go to work, grandmother stays at home to take care of the grandchildren and sings lullabies for them to sleep. "Parents have not come back from the fields, baby, you have to be good. Parents will catch shrimp and fish to feed you. Sleep well, baby, for parents feel assured to work in the fields."



3. Teaching Tom singing

To pass on to generations, in Than village, artisan Ha Thi Thuong teaches young descendants folk songs and rhythms.





9 House ghosts worshipping

House ghosts worshipping

Authors : Luc Thi Han, Luong Thi Luan, Luong Thi Lieng, Do Thi My Linh

The Kho Mu people have a custom of worshipping house ghosts. This custom is passed on from generation to generation by the son. The children and grandchildren, wherever far away, must also gather in the day of worshipping the house ghosts. Only married daughters are not allowed to participate anymore; they have to follow the husband's family customs. House ghosts are worshiped on the day the grandparents pass away, corresponding to the zodiac sign of the deceased to invite the ancestors back. Worshipping house ghosts must be carried out late at night, around 10 pm to 12 am, in a quiet space and when the neighbors sleep. The light must be turned off and done in the dark, using only the light of the fire. If a family can afford it, they could do the worshipping monthly, otherwise every 3 to 6 months. Depending on each family's surname, they select a rooster or a hen for worship; for some surnames, they have to smear the pot's ink on the chicken. The next day after the ritual, the house door should not be closed. Some surname families have to pick up vegetables to make salads and open a wine jar to finish the custom. The owner of the house or the eldest son in the house must perform the worship, and no other person can replace him. Worshipping house ghosts is Kho Mu people's distinct identity and custom.



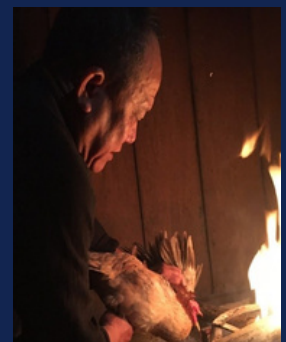
The house of the Kho Mu is connected between the main house and the kitchen. The Kho Mu's kitchen is designed with two compartments, one for the family to cook daily, the other for sticky rice coking and worshipping the house ghost. The compartment for worshipping ghosts is a very sacred place; outsiders are not allowed to enter, no one is allowed to bring tools or other utensils, and the most taboo is green leaves—only when worshipping can they be brought in. In the worshipping kitchen, next to the tripod stove, a stone is placed (about 20cm high, round shape); this stone is forbidden to move or touch unless the family builds a new house or moves to another place. Cooking utensils in the ritual of worshipping ghosts in the past used bamboo tubes; today, people use cast iron pots without handles. When the ritual is finished, all utensils are stored above, only used when making offerings. When a family member dies, praying and offerings must be performed in the kitchen.

1. Preparation



On the early morning day of worship, the landlady cooks sticky rice, and the landlord reports to the ancestors that tonight, they will worship the house ghost and invite them to come back and enjoy the offerings. After that, the landlady cleaned the kitchen area. They prepare green banana leaves to bring in the offering compartment for tonight. They require the whole family to go to bed early.

2. Night Offering preparation



At night, when the neighbors turn off the light to sleep and everyone in the family has gathered, the landlord enters the kitchen worshiping compartment, makes the fire, and reports to the ancestors that it is time to worship.

The kitchen is on fire, and the landlord catches a chicken for the ceremony. It is not allowed to cut the chicken, but to poke the chicken's mouth with the large feathers, and the blood that comes out is dipped into a stone (this stone represents the ancestors). While making, the landlord prays to ancestors to bless the whole family with good health and prosperity and for their children to study hard and well. Using boiling water to pluck chicken feathers is not allowed as usual, but dipping the chicken in cold water, heating it on fire, and plucking the feathers.



After the landlord completes the above steps, the sons and grandsons can come and support the next steps. A dedicated pot is used for cooking chicken during this ceremony, only kept in the offering compartment and not used for other purposes, and must be cooked in the offering compartment.

3. Arrange the offering tray and receive the ceremony

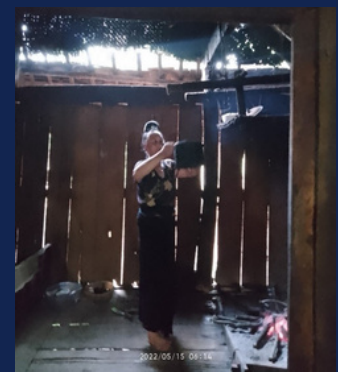


After cooking, the landlord strips the banana leaves at the place of worship, puts the offerings into the bowl, and arranges them onto the banana leaves. Then, the landlord invites the ancestors to eat; the landlord eats first, and the family members eat in turn with the ancestors. After each person eats a piece, the landlady moves the offering tray to the outside kitchen for everyone in the family to eat together. The landlord leaves the chicken parts, such as wings, thighs, head, and neck in the worshiping compartment. The next morning, they will bring out and pray again before dividing to their descendants.

4. Next morning ritual



The next morning, the landlady gets up early to make sticky rice. After that, she moves the firewood from the worshiping kitchen to the kitchen outside and then puts the whole dried chillies in a small bowl to grill charcoal by putting the coals in the chili bowl, stirring until the peppers are golden brown and then pounding it. The bowl of chili is considered their ancestors. When finished, she gives it to the landlord.



The landlord puts the sticky rice, chili bowl, and chopsticks on a fen for worshiping house ghosts, then continues to pray to the ancestors that they have finished the ceremony. The sticky rice is then rounded into small balls equal to the number of family members and placed in the family's outer kitchen. He asks the ancestors to allow for cleaning up the worship ceremony from last night, to continue the family's daily work, and prays to the holy ancestors to bless their children and grandchildren with good health, peace, prosperity, and success.

Community exhibition

The work of the women was displayed and introduced in the Thai community in Chieng Pan commune on September 16, 2022.



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



The authors expressed their pride when presenting their work for the first time, reflecting enthusiasm and love for their ethnicity. The authors were very emotional when they were praised, given encouragement and recognition from the audience for their meaningful work.



The group of authors took commemorative photos with their work.



At the end of the exhibition day, the people in the commune organized a cultural exchange night with dances and songs to celebrate the completed project.



