

Women storytelling



**STORIES ABOUT THAI ETHNICITY
BY THAI WOMEN IN VIETNAM
2021**

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Acknowledgments

This book would have not been possible without the contribution from Thai 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 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 Thai 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 Hanh Son commune, Nghia Lo town, Yen Bai province.

Many thanks also to the Open Development Vietnam team for providing technical support and contributions to the expression of religious freedoms of ethnic minorities in Vietnam.



Foreword

This picture book is a collection of nine stories made by Black Thai ethnic women in Hanh Son commune, Nghia Lo town, Yen Bai province. These women have encapsulated by pictures and words, their lived experiences through their lens. You will find simple stories about daily meals with typical spices; the special practice of making Thai women hair bun and scarf called "khan Pieu"; traditional song, dance, and Thai script are being preserved; and traditional religious ceremonies. All of these knowledge create and define the Thais' ethnicity through unique culture and religion in Yen Bai province.

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 maintain storyteller voices and have only been edited to formalise the English.

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Authors

Twelve women, from ten villages of Hanh Son commune, Nghia Lo town, Yen Bai province, formed a women's club on a voluntary basis with the desire to protect and preserve Thai traditional culture and religion. They have together weaved the colorful stories presented here.

These young and 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 Thai 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 generate a map for locating and monitoring essential places in the community that need to be protected, such as "forbidden forests", water sources, and historical sites of the Thai people in Nghia Lo town.



Chị Lò Thị Nhiên
Chủ tịch Hội phụ nữ xã



Chị Đỗ Thị Mỹ Linh
Cán bộ Hội phụ nữ xã
Người yêu ẩm thực Thái



Chị Hà Thị Đoàn
Người yêu chữ Thái



Chị Đinh Thị Tom
Người truyền dạy những
điệu Khắp Thái



Chị Lương Thị Liêng
Người yêu những
điệu Xòe Thái



Chị Lục Thị Hân
Người yêu thích các
lễ hội Thái



Chị Lò Thị Thanh
Người yêu văn hóa Thái



Chị Hoàng Thị Thu
Người yêu phong tục Thái



Chị Lương Thị Luận
Người yêu văn hóa Thái



Chị Cẩm Thị Mai
Người thích tìm hiểu về văn hóa
tâm linh dân tộc Thái



Chị Hoàng Thị Tươi
Người yêu thích văn nghệ



Chị Lò Thị Hương
Người yêu thích ẩm thực Thái



1

Six ancient folk dances

Six ancient folk dances of Thai people

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

Six ancient dances are the foundation for many other dances of the Thai ethnic group. These dances (Xòe Thái) are performed by Thai women in crowded festival activities such as house warmings, weddings, the new year, etc. The dances require the flexibility of woman's wrist, waist, and footsteps. The background music for the dances is a combination of traditional Thai musical instruments such as "khèn bè" - mouth organ, "mác hính" - bell, "tăng bằng" - stick, drums, etc. Currently, "Xòe Thái" is taught by women's club members in Hanh Son commune's primary and secondary schools to preserve and hand down the cultural practice to the next generation. In addition, the People's Committee of Yen Bai province has submitted a document to the UNESCO to seek the title of Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity for "Xòe Thái".

1. "Khăm khăn mơi lẩu" dance

(making a toast)



To invite guests into the house - show hospitality of Thai hosts.

2. "Khăm khen" dance

(holding hands)



Showing the community's consensus. When facing difficulties or tribulation, people still dance together, and they hold hands to overcome the challenges.

3. "Đồn hôn" dance

(step up and down)



This dance embraces the meaning of faithful heart and belief regardless of ups and downs in one's life.

4. "Phá xí" dance

(four-step dance)



The dance demonstrates the community solidarity. Regardless where they are(*), each individual still heads towards the origin.

(*) Spatial and/or physical distance is normally expressed by "bon phương trời" - 4 cardinal directions (north, east, south, and west) or "muoi phương Phat" - 10 Buddhist directions (including 8 directions of the compass—north, south, east, west, northwest, northeast, southeast, and southwest—plus up and down)

5. "Nhôm khăn" dance

(dance with a scarf)



The dance expresses people's joyfulness over their labor's achievements and shows the skillfulness of Thai ethnic women's hands.

6. "Ôm lợm tộp mu" dance

(clapping hands while dancing in a circle)



Expressing joy and satisfaction at the end of the gathering or community event, where everyone exchanged sincere feelings.



Credit: Ban Duong Village folk dance team, who helped recreate the dances in this story. They have contributed actively in community activities.

2 "Xên Đông" worship ceremony



"Xên Đông" worship ceremony

"Xen Dong" ceremony of the Thai ethnic group in Hanh Son commune has existed for hundreds of years. This unique ritual defines ethnic identity and has been preserved for generations. The ceremony is meant to remember the ancestors, give thanks to heaven and earth and worship the villagers who have passed - acknowledging their contributions to community creation. It is an opportunity to pray to the supernatural to bless for people; the rice harvest, healthy children and to protect the crops. The ceremony is chaired by the Commune People's Committee, held on the 12th day of the first lunar month every year, with the participation of all community members.



The ceremony area was reclaimed by the Thai in 2004 for the Xen Dong festival. Before the ceremony, the area was cleaned up.



The ceremony house is decorated with paper cut in human shape to represent the guards.



Preparation for the ceremony is usually done by the elderly and commune officials who hold much of the knowledge about the rituals.



On the day of the ceremony offerings are given: one buffalo head, one front leg, one back leg and the tail of the buffalo; three trays of meat, heart, blood, tendon, fruit, wine, "banh chung", a bowl of rice, a bowl of salt, sticky rice and sugar cane. A shirt of the commune head, silver bracelets, and white cloths are also offered.



The shamans run the worshipping ceremony. The lead shaman wears red, the two assistants wear black and use separate vows. The main ceremony lasts for an hour in the morning. At the end of the ceremony, offerings are used to pay the shaman. After that, all ceremony participants are invited to the commune head's house to return the shirt that was used for worship and enjoy the meal. In the afternoon, there is a big festival organized with folk games to celebrate spring (i.e. throwing "Còn" balls, pushing the stick, "Xòe Thái" dancing etc.). A large number of people who live inside and outside the commune attend.



Learn and preserve
Thai script

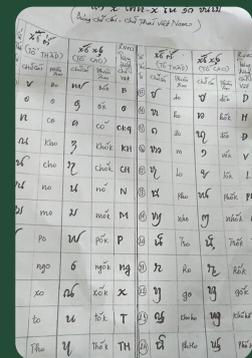
Learn and preserve Thai script

Author: Ha Thi Doan

Thai people are one of the few ethnic groups that still retain their ancient ethnic script. They continue to save and preserve their customs, beliefs, spirituality such as folk songs and worship vows, using this written script. Nowadays, Thai script is being taught to the next generation through clubs and in some schools. The Thai script has many sounds, rhymes, and combinations of letters and verses. To learn Thai script, students need to have perseverance and passion for their ethnic dialect.



Books printed in Thai ethnic language are kept at the house of artisan Lò Tuyên Dung for preservation.



Printed and handwritten Thai alphabet.



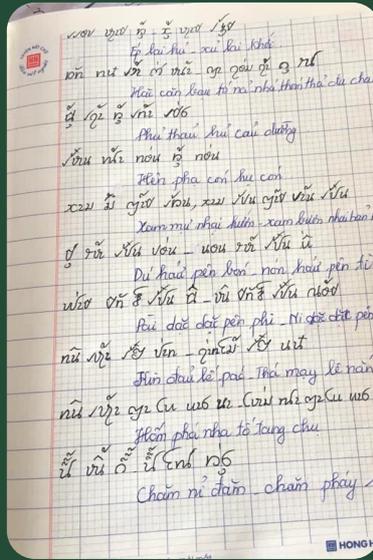
Artisans Lò Văn Biển and Lò Tuyên Dung, who are passionate about teaching Thai language and script.



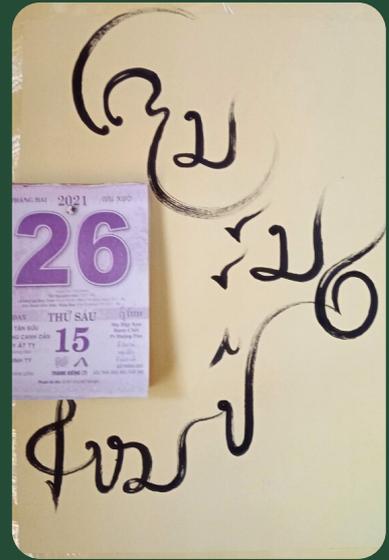
Students learning to read and write Thai; organized by Hanh Son Commune Women's Club. Students include; youths, women, men, shamans, and many others.



A student being tested at the end of the course.



Students' phonetic bilingual writing



"Happy New Year" in Thai calligraphy style for gifts and decorations.



Graduation ceremony of Thai language class after 3 months of practicing and studying.

4 Thai Cuisines



Thai Cuisines

Authors: Dinh Thi Tom, Lo Thi Nhien

Thai people have their unique dishes, using typical spices. The main spices have a spicy and bitter taste, such as "mắc khén" (a type of Indian prickly ash), onions, garlic, chili, and herbs, harmoniously blending together to form dishes with delicious, unforgettable flavors.

Pa-ping-tôp (Grilled fish)



Ingredients: fresh fish such as carp, perch. Spices include herbs such as stinky vegetables (phắc nam), green onions, basil, dill, ginger, dried onions, "mắc khén", etc.

Method:



Fish is cleaned, back cut, marinated with spices. Minced herbs marinated with just enough seasoning.



Stuff the herbs into the fish belly.



Fold the fish in half, put into the grill (in the past, people use bamboo branches to hold the fish and grill).



The fish is grilled and served.

Nhựa-phắc-phằm (Grilled minced meat)



Ingredients: minced fresh pork (bacon or shoulder). Seasonings include "xẻng" seeds, scallions, chili, fish sauce, salt, and a bit of monosodium glutamate. "Dong" leaves for wrapping the meat.

Method:



Marinate prepared spices with minced meat.



Use "Dong" leaves to wrap marinated meat.



The meat is wrapped in "Dong" leaves, then grilled with charcoal.



The meat is ready to serve.



5
"Pieu" scraf

Thai women's "Pieu" scarf

Author: Lo Thi Nhien,
Characters: Dinh Thi Tom, Luong Thi Lieng

The "Pieu" scarf represents the skillfulness, sophistication, and hard work of Thai women. There are many stages to making a Pieu scarf; including choosing a white woven cotton cloth, dyeing the fabric with indigo leaves, and embroidering typical Thai patterns. "Pieu" scarf's are a unique object given to a lover or a gift of the bride to her new husband's family to introduce herself. "Pieu" scarfs are often worn on the head when going to work, around the neck in winter, and as an accessory for dancing.



White cotton fabric



Indigo leaves



Indigo dyeing



Thai women embroider traditional motifs on the scarf. This process takes two to three months to make a completed "Pieu" scarf.



"Pieu" scarves with different embroidery patterns are finished.



"Pieu" scarf in daily life, used in traditional dance and other customary ceremonies.

6 Traditional bamboo weaving



Traditional bamboo weaving

Weaving is a traditional profession of the Thai people for generations, creating items for daily life, using bamboo of different types. To keep the utensils durable, the Thai people put the bamboo utensils above the kitchen. Similarly, bamboo materials after splitting are also put above the kitchen until they get dried and ready to weave. In this way, the utensils are not eaten by termites and insects and have a golden color. The pictures below introduce some of the everyday bamboo utensils of Thai people.



Mr. Lo Van Xuong - Dinh Cai Village - bamboo weaving craftsman - sitting in front of his house



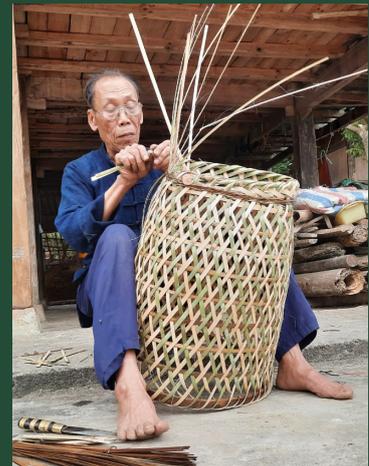
"Cống khẩu" (rice basket): When the rice/sticky rice is cooked, it is put in this basket to keep it hot and sticky. It has a handle which is convenient to hold when going to the fields.



"Ca Xa" (a racket used for shoveling fish) is also used in spiritual practice called "lấy vía" (get the soul back to the body). When someone is sick in the house, the shaman will put the sick person's shirt in this racket, bring it out into the garden to get the soul back, and prevent the soul to go away.



"Sày" or "năn" is used for catching stream fish, clearing fields or for decoration.



"Pế" is a basket used to bring to the fields, cutting grass and put on or carrying heavy objects to work.



"Lếp" or "Ổp" is used as belonging to go to the fields, carrying vegetables, fish, and other items, etc.



"Háp" is used on the wedding day to store dried fish and other wedding presents from the groom's family to welcome the bride.



Utensils and bamboo for weaving are put above the kitchen to increase durability and maintain colour (called "giảng xá").



7

"Tả̃ng cầ̃u"
Thai woman's bun

"Tả̃ng cầ̃u" - the beauty of Thai woman's bun

Authors: Lo Thi Nhien, Hoang Thi Thu, Cam Thi Mai, Lo Thi Huong

"Tang cau" is the custom of bunning the hair of married black Thai women. The "Tang cau" ceremony is performed on the wedding day; a matchmaker madame - chosen by the husband's family - makes a bun for the bride before going to the husband's house on a pre-selected good hour and day. The bun represents a woman's loyalty to her husband and a covenant for married life. Young women today integrate into modern life, so they only make "Tang cau" on holidays, new year, and important family occasions. "Tang cau" is the unique beauty of Thai women; therefore this cultural practice needs to be maintained and promoted to future generations.

Unmarried Thai girls often let their hair down. They have a habit of growing their hair long without ever cutting it.



Thai women use natural ingredients for daily hair care. Fragrant leaves such as pomelo leaves, lemongrass, hibiscus, and betel nut are boiled with rice water to wash hair. Beside washing their hair with leaf water, the wig (called "cản trọng" - messy hair gathered) used for shaping hair bun is also soaked in leaf water for durability and softening.



Steps to make "Tang cau":



Comb the air



Shape the bun



Roll hair around



Fix the bun and put on brooch

To make a hair bun, it is necessary to have: a wig - "củn trọng" (one part of long straight hair to roll, one part to shape high bun inside); hair nets and hair brooch. First, the woman's hair is combed back to the top of the head by combing back and forth several times to keep the hair in place. Hold the hair tight and roll the wig on, tie it tight, use the wig to roll it into a bun. Then, roll the natural hair over the wig, forming a round bun. Use the net to cover the bun and shape the bun evenly without falling out. Finally, secure the bun with a brooch, also for decoration. The hair brooch is usually engagement jewelry that the husband gives to the bride on their wedding day.



Ban Phiang village's folk dance team all with "Tang cau" to take part in the National unity festival 2020.



Teaching Thai singing

Teaching Thai singing

Authors: Dinh Thi Tom, Ha Thi Doan, Lo Thi Thanh, Hoang Thi Tuoi

Thai singing, also known as "Khắp Thái", is folk songs of the Thai people which have been handed down through generations. Since I was a child, I have listened to grandmothers and mother singing. I felt the sweetness going deep into people's hearts. Since then I have loved the Thai traditional melodies and learned how to sing. Since 2010, I have participated in multiple activities, exchange programs, and competitions organized by the province, district, and commune on Thai singing. I have also been taught many songs by artist Dieu Thi Xieng such as "hấn nê", "hà ơ", "nả lầu", "nôm" etc. In recent years, seeing Thai songs have been gradually lost, I want to teach children to preserve the culture of the Thai people in Muong Lo.



At the end of 2018, my friend Nhien and I implemented the idea of teaching Thai singing for children aged 10-15 in Ban Phieng Village. This is the first class ever on Thai singing, so the children were delighted and eager to learn. When I listen to the children singing, I am always touched and proud because the melodies of the Thai people are well received and will be passed on. This has strengthened my confidence and motivated me to continue this work.



Currently, I open Thai singing classes at home or at the village culture house whenever I have free time at the weekends. I always welcome all children to join my classes, including both boys and girls. The children learn quickly, showing their passion.



To help them learn easily, I choose meaningful and appropriate songs for children from my collection of ancient folk songs.



To sing Thai songs beautifully, you need to slur the notes, hum your voice up and down, and understand the lyrics' meaning to express the beautiful melody and spirit of the songs. I try to explain to the children and make examples for them to follow.



The children are very eager to show their abilities in public. Unfortunately, due to COVID-19, many cultural activities and festivals have been cancelled. I hope to have more time to teach and that more children participate in the classes to preserve our ethnic identity.

The story is written according to the narration of Thai singer Dinh Thi Tom.



9 "Quả còn"

"Quả cò" in Spring festival

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

Throwing "Quả cò" ("Con" ball) is a folk game indispensable in the Spring festival of Thai people. There are two ways to play with "Con" ball, throwing back and forth and throwing through a circle hanging on top of a high bamboo pillar. Tossing back and forth shows couple harmony between the thrower and the catcher. Men and women form 2 teams (throwers vs. catchers) to compete in this game, if any side misses the ball, they will have to give the winner an object of trust. Throwing "Con" ball into a circle hanging on a bamboo tree symbolizes a good harvest if it is thrown through. The "Con" ball, which also means dragon ("luông con" - in Thai language), is the most important object of the spring festival. The act of "tossing or throwing the ball" means to let go of bad things, to get rid of sickness and sorrow of the old year, and wish for more joy and health in the new year. Before the game started, a worshipping ceremony must be performed at the foot of the bamboo pillar.

How to make "Con" ball



Materials: Multi-colored cloth, needles, "Muối" fruit seeds, parachute cords, colored cords of all kinds.



Step 1: Cut the fabric into a square shape for making the ball and borders for decoration.



Step 2: Stuff the "Muối" fruit seeds into the fabric.



Step 3: Sew the ball



"Con" ball and strings are completed



Making "Con" ball brings joy to many generations



When the new year comes, people gather to make "Con" ball, chatting, and recalling memories of the previous festivals for their children .



Community Exhibition



The work of the women were displayed and introduced in the Thai community in Hanh Son commune on March 31, 2021, on the occasion of Women Union Congress.

The exhibition attracted a lot of attention from the people because it was the first time that familiar activities of the Thai 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 given recognition from the audience for their meaningful work.



The group of authors took commemorative photos with their work.



