

Indigenous Peoples in Viet Nam and their knowledge of biodiversity in traditional health care

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INDIGENOUS PEOPLES OF VIET NAM

Viet Nam is a multi-ethnic nation with a total population of over 80 million. There are 54 Indigenous Peoples, of which the Viet is the dominant group with 86.2% of the total population; the remaining 53 groups consist of ethnic minorities (dân tộc ít người) that make up the remaining 13.8%. Most ethnic minorities live in the mountainous regions in the northwest adjacent to the Viet Nam-China border; in the west adjacent to the Viet Nam and Laos border, and to the south in the central Highlands along the Viet Nam-Laos-Cambodia border.

After the dominant Viet there are 6 Indigenous Peoples with a population of between 700,000 to approximately

1.5 million. They are the Tày (1,477,514), Thái (1,328,725), Muong (1,137,515), Khmer (1,055,174), Nùng (856,412), and Chinese (762,371 mostly in large cities). Of the remaining 47 peoples, 42 of them each has a population of 50,000 to 500,000 (often scattered into local groups); the last 5, each with a population of 1,000 or less, include the Sila (840), Púpéo (705), Rmăm (352), Brâu (313) and Odu (301) (see Map).

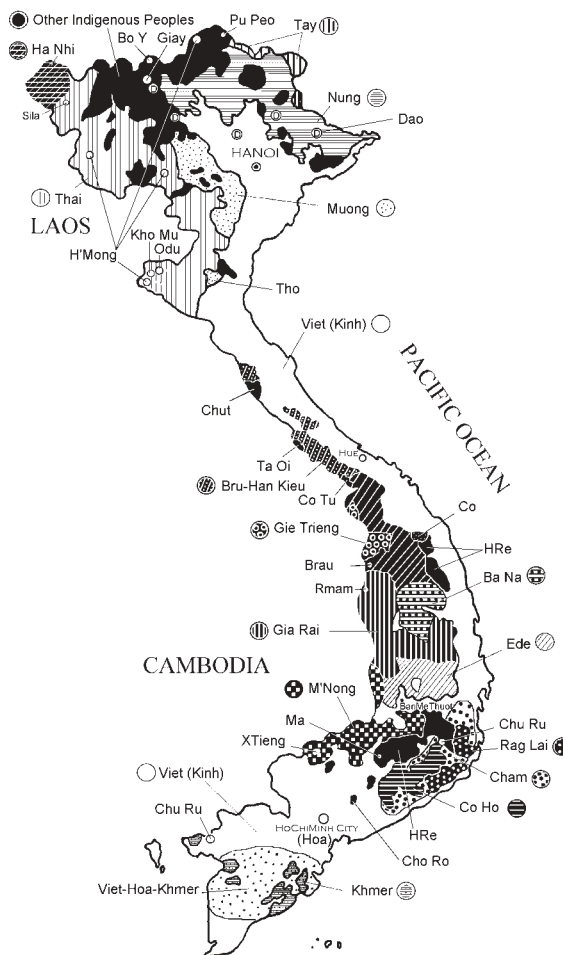
The Viet live mostly in the lowlands delta and coastal regions. They always consider peoples living in the mountains as their cousins. According to legend, the Viet believe they and mountain Peoples are the offspring of the same parents: a fairy Au Co from the mountains and a dragon Lac Long Quan from the sea. The brief union of their parents resulted in Au Co giving birth to one hundred eggs. That's how the first one hundred people of Viet Nam were born. Later 50 children followed their father returning to the lowlands and the sea and became the Kinh (the Viet). The other 50 remained with their fairy mother and became the mountain Peoples.

BIODIVERSITY RESOURCES

Viet Nam is a narrow country extending between 8.5-23° North latitude with a long coastline of over 3,000 km. The regional climate (tropical with dry and monsoon seasons) and special geographical feature of Viet Nam support a rich biodiversity in dense tropical forests, fertile wetlands, rivers and sea. According to Viet Nam Statistics 2001, there are approximately 12,000 plants of which 3,800 have medicinal potential. The Viet and other Indigenous Peoples have lived in this region for thousands of years, interacting with and living in harmony with other living organisms, and using these living resources to support them. The rich biodiversity has provided the Indigenous Peoples of Viet Nam with food, medicines, and other materials and commodities, as well as shelter and biological barriers to sustain their unique cultures.

TRADITIONAL MEDICINE

Surrounded by rich natural food sources and the great diversity of plants, animals and other organisms, the Viet and other Indigenous Peoples, over millennia, have developed a tremendously rich knowledge of using these readily available resources for medicine and nutrition. These resources are still the main source of medicinal ingredients used for primary health care in the treatment of various ailments, from snake bites, dysentery, pain, fever, common cold, indigestion, to fractures and drug addictions.



Distribution of Indigenous Peoples in Viet Nam.

The following are examples of this traditional medicinal knowledge (1) Leaves and bark of Guava (*Psidium Guajava*), and the weed purslane (*Portulaca oleracea*), are well-known medicinal ingredients in the traditional treatment of common dysentery. (2) Instilling a mixture of garlic and cayenne pepper solution into the nostrils is considered by many as an effective remedy to fight common cold and flu. (3) Ginger (*Zinziber officinale*) is among the most common ingredients used either internally or externally to treat pain, vertigo, and various digestive disorders. Rubbing the freshly cut end of a piece of Ginger against the skin surface known in Vietnamese as “cao gio, danh gio” helps improve circulation, relieve local pain and discomfort, combat common cold and a host of other ailments. (4) In villages, experienced persons who know how to treat various ailments with local plants are highly respected individuals known as “Thay Thuoc, Thay Mo, Ong Then, Ba Put” roughly translated here as “traditional doctors.” I had an opportunity to observe and followed a few treatments by an elderly “traditional doctor” woman experienced in treating women’s ailments and diseases in cattle. She used the odor of crushed leaves of a legume, *Erythrina indica*, to effectively repel maggots from open wounds in cattle caused by an unidentified screw worm fly. In using this remedy, she cured this devastating disease of cattle from lowlands to mountainous regions in north and northwestern Viet Nam. In Mai Chau (Hoa Binh), Thai women carry with them crushed leaves of this legume and material from the scent gland of the Perfumed Fox (*Moschus moschiferus*); the combined odor of these two ingredients is said to be effective in birth control. (5) The Ba Na People have isolated 18 different poisons with 18 corresponding antidotes. These are dangerous substances, most are used in hunting and fishing.

Please note: The traditional medicines just described have not been scientifically verified. These remedies may be harmful in their present state.

The above examples represent a fraction of this traditional knowledge. Hoang Tuan (1993) and Do Tat Loi (2001) have documented the medicinal use of traditional resources in Viet Nam.

CONSERVATION OF MEDICINAL BIODIVERSITY

Vietnamese always show their respect and compassion to all components (biological and mineral) that make up their country. They call “country” “nuoc non” meaning “waters (rivers and sea) and mountains” or “dat nuoc” meaning “lands and waters.” These terms clearly express an extremely close relationship between the Vietnamese and nature, and their deep appreciation of biodiversity and the environment. Fishermen consider whales and dolphins as their friends that come to assist them when they have trouble in the open sea. To show their gratitude, fishermen build shrines to honour whales wherever whales have beached and died. The Ede living in the



Guava, *Psidium Guajava*, a small fruit tree; the leaves are used in treating common dysentery. (Photo courtesy of Tropical Conservancy)

western highlands recognize and value the importance of forests and have strictly observed their traditional rules to protect these resources. The Ede rules: people must not carry fire into the forest; hunters and food gathering must not cut or kill seedlings and young animals; and must not hunt animals during their reproductive seasons. Children often follow adults during food gathering chores and learn how to use and appreciate these resources from an early age.

The traditional medicine in Viet Nam is commonly known as “thuoc nam”, traditional medicine of the south (Viet Nam), as opposed to “thuoc bac”, traditional medicine of the north (China). This valuable knowledge is being endangered because most traditional medicinal remedies are transmitted orally, and because forests and other ecosystems in which medicinal resources are located are being destroyed and shrinking fast due to lack of appreciation of biodiversity and environmental knowledge. In addition, people trained in Western medicine do not believe in this traditional knowledge. Fortunately, many scientists recognize the importance of traditional medicine, and have made efforts to verify selected traditional remedies that have high potential, not only to validate their use according to pharmaceutical standards, but also to promote documentation and preservation of the Vietnamese traditional medicine. At present, an Institute for Traditional Medicine has been established in Ha Noi.

FURTHER READINGS:

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