

# Documents

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## THE STIENG

**Other names:** Xa Dieng or Xa Chieng.

**Local groups:** Bu Lo, Bu Dek (Bu Deh), Bu Biek.

**Population:** 50,194 people.

**Language:** The Stieng language belongs to the Mon-Khmer language group (Austroasiatic language family). It is fairly close to the Ma, Mnong and Cho Ro languages. The writing system was formed before 1975 following the Latin alphabet.

**History:** The Stieng are long time inhabitants of the southeastern section of the Truong Son - Tay Nguyen central highlands region.

**Production activities:** The main source of food is rice, with 80% of the crop cultivated on terraced fields. The Bu Lo group lives higher on the mountain and deeper in the forest; thus, they only work in terraced fields. The Bu Deh group lives in the lower area; hence, they have cultivated wet fields for 100 years. Their cultivating technique is exactly like that of the Viet. There are various kinds of rice planted on terraced fields. They are planted after the "slash and burn" technique, planting seeds with the aid of a digging stick. As a consequence, the outcome of a harvest depends very much on nature, and on protecting the crop from birds. Stieng work tools include an axe and knife used to cut down trees. After burning down the trees, they use a five-tined rake to tidy up, then burn the trees again. To plant their seeds, the Stieng use two pointed sticks, one in each hand. They use hoes to weed, and harvest the rice crop by hand. Fruit picking, hunting, and fishing yield practical benefits. popular domestic animals are water buffalo, cows, pigs, and dogs; some Stieng even raise elephants. The main poultry raised is chicken. Handicrafts include weaving and plaiting. The Stieng used to trade directly for their goods, but now they use money. The Stieng enjoy trading relations with the Viet, Khmer, Mnong, and Ma people, as well as with various groups living in Cambodia.

**Diet:** The Stieng eat rice and sticky rice. Their main source of food comes from the forest or the rivers, although today they also get food from the

markets. Traditional beverages are water and rice wine. Food and water containers are all made from dried gourds. The Stieng smoke tobacco with pipes (rarely seen nowadays).

**Lifestyle:** The majority of the Stieng live in Binh Phuoc province, some in Tay Ninh and Dong Nai. In higher elevations, the Stieng live in houses built directly on the ground, covered with roofs that almost touch the floor. In some places, the side roofs bend down into a circle. Doors are located on the sides, and in the front. In lower elevations, the Stieng live in magnificent stilt houses. In the old days, each village was comprised of only a couple of long communal houses. Nowadays, private homes are becoming more common.

**Clothing:** Normally, men wore loin cloths, with no shirt; women wore shirts with wrapped skirts. Poorer women used to wear loin cloth as well. Women like to wear lots of jewelry, usually metal and beaded jewelry. One woman might wear up to 20 aluminum or silver bracelets. Stieng women may also wrap copper strands around their arms and legs. Big earrings made from elephant horns are very popular. Today, men and women wear shirts and blouses. If they live near the Khmer, the Stieng women may adopt the Khmer style of wrapped skirts.

**Transportation:** Baskets are commonly used. The way the Stieng carry baskets is similar to that of other ethnic groups in the region. Stieng groups who live near the Viet and Khmer may transport their goods using a cart pulled by two oxen or buffalo - a method that has long been a popular means of transportation.

**Social organisation:** Each couple with their children comprises one "kitchen" (*nak*). Many "kitchens" combine to make one household. Each Stieng village has a couple of households. Lately the number of households have increased, due to the fact that many families are splitting off on their own. Each individual is not only a member of a "kitchen", a house, a village, but also of a certain family clan, as well as of some other blood relations. With regards to the traditional social system, a village is a complete and significant unit. The oldest man and other older men in the village play special, important roles. In the past, although there were some wealthy families, the majority were poor thus there was the practice of servitude.

**Marriage:** Normally, once the groom has enough money and gifts, he can then take his bride home. But in reality, most grooms have to live with their wife's families because they don't have enough of what their in-laws request (precious jars, gongs, water buffalo, etc.). But in Binh Long, the son-in-law always lives with the bride's family. Wedding customs are different among groups. For example, the Bu Dek group allows cousins to marry each other. But among the Bu Lo group, only a sister's son can marry a brother's daughter, and this can only happen once in the family.

**Birth:** Pregnant women have to avoid many things. It used to be that women gave birth in the forest all by themselves. Today, before a woman gives

birth, the rice in her house has to be covered, then the woman gives birth in a little hut built next to main house. This practice is followed because the Stieng believe that the Rice God is offended by giving birth at home. After the child is born, the family has to offer a pig to this God.

**Funerals:** The Stieng coffin is traditionally made from unpolished wood. In the case of a normal death, the body is buried in the village cemetery. In addition to the corpse, rice and tobacco are placed in the coffin as well. Jars, pits, and tools, which are shared at death, are put on and around the grave. The Stieng do not have the custom of visiting graves. If there is a funeral, the whole village will refrain from beating gongs and making merry for about 10 days. If it is an unusual death, there are more rituals and worshipping to be done; this has to be done outside the village, and the body can't be buried in the village cemetery.

**Beliefs:** The Stieng believe that human beings, animals, trees, and all other objects have supernatural power - a spirit. There are many gods as well: The Lightning God, Sun God, Mountain God, Rice God, etc. The Rice God is in the image of a beautiful young girl. In all the ceremonial rituals, Gods and supernatural powers are mentioned to ask for, to thank, or to inform about something. Offerings include wine, chickens, pigs, water buffalo, cows. The more offerings and the bigger the animals are, the bigger and more important the Gods.

**Festivals:** There are many big and small festivals in the life of the Stieng. The most important one is the buffalo sacrifice to celebrate successful crops (this families harvest at least 100 big baskets of rice each, to celebrate victory, to celebrate wealth, and to celebrate the growth of children. Beside buffalo, cows and pigs are usually offered. If the offering is only one buffalo, then it is simply done; but if there is more than one, then it is a very elaborate festival. The Stieng holiday is called "the straw ritual", which happens after harvesting, before burning the fields for the next crop, to thank the Rice god.

**Artistic activities:** The Stieng love music. Musical instruments are most important; they are traditional precious possessions, especially gongs. The Bu Lo group mainly uses gongs, and each set has 6 gongs. The Bu Dek use a set of 5 gongs. In funerals, they only use 3 gongs. Beside gongs, there are also horns, drums, and other instruments. The Stieng also have a good collection of folktales and folksongs.

## THE TA OI

**Other names:** Ta Oi, Pa Co, Ta Uot, Kan Tua and Pa Hy, etc.

**Local groups:** Ta Oi, Pa Co and Pa Hy.

**Population:** 26,044 people.

**Language:** The Ta Oi language belongs to the Mon-khmer language group (part of the Austroasiatic language family), and is similar to Co Tu and Bru-Van Kieu languages. There are small differences in languages spoken by the sub-groups.

**History:** The Ta Oi are the most permanent inhabitants in the Truong Son Central Highlands region.

**Economic activities:** Cultivation of terraced paddy fields is the main source for food of the Ta Oi. Their agricultural techniques are similar to those practised by the Cotu and Bru-Van Kieu. In many places, the growing of wet rice has been popular for quite some time now.

Hunting, fishing and gathering also bring the Ta Oi a substantial amount of food. Cloth weaving is still done only in a few places, but Ta Oi women cloth is admired by neighbouring groups (especially clothing decorated with colourful threads and white beads). Their household crafts include plaited and woven bamboo products which are sufficient to meet local needs. Iron, ceramic and bronze products are obtained by the Ta Oi from barter trade with the Viet and other peoples. Their trading relationship with neighbouring Laos plays an important role. The Ta Oi use money nowadays, but bartering remains widespread.

**Diet:** Rice is the Ta Oi's main staple, while corn, manioc, potatoes and yams are supplements consumed when there is a shortage of rice. Common foods are vegetables, bamboo shoots, mushrooms, snails, fish, birds and meat from other forest animals. The Ta Oi like to eat a special dish that is a mixture of meat cooked in congealed animal blood. Their popular drinks are water and alcohol, including a type of wine widely consumed that is distilled from the liquid of one of the trees of the coconut family. The Ta Oi smoke pipes they make themselves out of bamboo, *goc le* wood, ivory or earthenware.

**Clothing:** Women wear either a short, cylindrical skirt and vest or a longer version of the skirt which reaches above the chest (a style that is common among Ta Oi living near the border area of A Luoi). In some places, they wear a silk waistband. Men wear a loin cloth and vest, sometimes they leave the upper torso naked. In addition to wearing clothing made from cloth they have woven themselves, the Ta Oi, especially men, also buy materials from Laos and wear clothing from the Viet. In the past in certain regions, people used to wear clothes made of tree bark. Ta Oi ornaments include wrist and ankle bracelets made from copper, silver, beads and agate. Women also wear copper wire spiraled into tubes covering the lower legs and arms. The customs of filing teeth, stretching ear-lobes, and skin tattooing are still observed by a small number of Ta Oi elders.

**Lifestyle:** The Ta Oi live in a region extending from Quang Tri Province (Huong Hoa district) to western Thua Thien Hue Province (A Luoi and Huong Tra districts). They are concentrated in villages; their stilt houses are long - they used to run hundreds of meters long, occupied by many couples and their

children (each known as a *bep*). In each *bep* of the house, there are separate compartments for private families. Ties between relatives exist between the *bep* in the village. The roofs of Ta Oi houses have two round-ends curved toward the gables with a curved finial called *khau cut* at the top.

**Transportation:** The Ta Oi mainly carry things by *gui*, or the back-basket. There are different kinds of *gui*, usually woven of bamboo or rattan. Men use a three-sectioned *gui* (the bat-wing type), like those used by the Cotu, which they use when they go hunting and gathering or make visits to other villages.

**Social organisation:** The Ta Oi observe their traditional custom of respecting their elders, showing respect and obedience to the patriarchs of the village (*gia lang*), and showing affection towards children, regardless of gender. Each village is composed of people of different lineages, each lineage being presided over by a lineage head. Each lineage also has its own particular taboo and name. Although Ta Oi society is differentiated between the rich and the poor as well as according to social status, the communal character of the community remains strong and deep. The village remains the basic and autonomous social unit.

**Marriage:** Boys and girls are considered as true adults only after they have had six teeth of their upper jaws filed, which is also a condition for courtship and marriage. A marriage is initiated by the boy's family. The girl's family will accept and receive the boy's gifts of marriage which include bronze gongs, porcelain pots, cooper cooking pots, buffalo and pigs. In a wedding ceremony, the marriage couple will have to undergo a ceremony called *dap bep* at the home of the girl's family, after which the bride becomes a full member of her husband's family. Several years later, they will have to conduct another thanksgiving ceremony, thanking the gods for bringing them a happy life. The Ta Oi prefer marriages between the daughter of the maternal uncle and the son of the paternal aunt. Those who are wealthy may take more than one wife.

**Birth:** Women abstain from doing work and eating many kinds of food during their pregnancy and after birth, in order to ensure an easy delivery and the good care of the newborn. A woman usually receives help during childbirth. Whether a boy or girl, the child is given much love and the general wish is to have both. The women work until their pre-birth confinement and rest after delivering.

**Funerals:** Only those who have died under normal circumstances are buried in the village cemetery. The coffin is made from a hollowed-out tree trunk. For the wealthy, the coffin is more decorated on the ends.

The Ta Oi adhere to the custom of distributing the property of the deceased, as is done among other ethnic groups in the region. The burial is only one part of the funeral rites. Some years after the death, the family of the deceased holds an exhumation ritual and puts the bones into a new, smaller coffin which is reburied next to the loved ones of the deceased. The Ta Oi tomb is usually decorated beautifully with sculptures and drawings.

**Beliefs:** The Ta Oi believe that everything possesses a transcendent spirit or soul, including people and animals as well as the earth, heaven, mountains, streams, rice, trees, and other plants. Fortune telling and worshipping play an important part in each individual's life as the life of the community. Each lineage has an altar at the home of the lineage patriarch, where all the families of the line can come to conduct their rituals each time there is an illness, some misfortune, or other necessities including prayers for good health and good luck. Many villages also worship sacred objects such as a stone, a bronze bracelet, a big jar, etc. These can have unique shapes or origins and are believed to be linked to the village's well-being.

**Festivals:** There are many spiritual ceremonies relating to health, property, rice cultivation, prevention of epidemics, etc. The buffalo sacrifice is always part of large ceremonies and village festivals. At different cultivation periods, people observe important spiritual rites to pray to the rice spirit for bumper crops and prosperity. The traditional Tet Festival takes place during a period of relaxation which occurs after the rice has been harvested and threshed and before the new crop is planted.

**Calendar:** The Ta Oi follow the lunar calendar, setting the date of each month by the appearance of the crescent moon. A month has 30 days, a year has 12 months and there are good and bad days to do certain things.

**Education:** Decades ago, the Ta Oi language came into existence, based on the Latin alphabet and using the Pa Co spoken language as a reference.

**Entertainment:** The Ta Oi preserve many interesting proverbs, folksongs, riddles and folktales. Knowledgeable elders often tell ancient tales to their grandchildren for entertainment and educational purposes. The famous alternating verse folksong of *Ca loi* is sung when drinking wine, usually at festivals; the *Ba boih* song is performed individually, usually when one is working or walking along a road; *Roith* is sung to convey advice to young people during festive occasions; *Cha chap* is a song reserved for couples who are in love, etc.

There are different kinds of musical instruments: gongs, buffalo and goat horns, 14-bamboo-tube panpipes, 6-holed flutes, a zither-cum-organ, the *Ta lu zither*, etc. They are used in different contexts according to local customs. For example, a gong and a drum are played at funerals, while horns and panpipe sets are added for festive occasions.