

# People With Long Necks: The Controversial Kayan Tribe in Thailand

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Long neck tribe Thailand. What is it? They are actually Kayan woman (aka long neck women or Padaung), Burmese refugees, famous all over the world. Some call them, Karen Padaung Tribe, but that term isn't exact. Here, among other things, we will try to clarify the terms.

The appearance of Kayan women is unique and eye-catching. The vast majority of people in the world think that Kayans are just people with long necks. Wrong! There is much more about them. We wanted to visit their village in [Thailand](#) for a long time.

Last year, even though we were in Thailand, we run out of time and we just didn't have the opportunity to travel to the North. Thankfully, we are now in [Chiang Mai](#), and the ride to their village takes only 3,5 hours. We made it. Finally.

Here we will explain to you what we saw, what we research, and we will present some pictures of people with long necks.

### Kayan or Padaung?



Kayan woman. Neck rings.

Kayan or Padaung tribe? The writer and historian Khin Maung Nyun said that this community prefers to be called Kayan, but the term Padaung is also valid. To be more specific, however, Kayan tribe neck rings are actually called Padaung. That means that the expression “Padaung neck rings” is correct. Padaung is the rings they use.

If we want to be even more accurate, the Kayan tribe is actually part of the Kayan Lahwi tribe. Some people believe they are called “Karen long neck village Chiang Mai”. But, firstly, Karen is just a nonrelated name, and the village where they live isn’t exactly Chiang Mai, even though it’s pretty close. They live in a refuge.

We were very curious about the Kayan tribe, and the whole story about long neck women. We had read many negative opinions about the village, their inhabitants and their tradition. Some people said that when they visited they felt like there was something off about the situation and that it’s not right to treat another human being as a tourist attraction. But this discussion is really tricky.

Well... we wouldn’t be ourselves if we didn’t go and form our own opinion. We packed our things, we drove, and this is what we experienced.



Kayan girl working.

## Kayan Village

The village is pretty small and... surprisingly empty. Our first thought was that it was going to be full of tourist, but there we were, almost alone. Only a few other foreigners were around.

We walked the empty streets only to get more and more impressed. These women look amazing, sophisticated, mysterious and definitely different. Their long necks, adorned with coils, seem to make them taller, slim, somehow closer to heaven.

But why exactly do they wear coils around their necks? There is not an absolute answer. Some people say it was developed as a protection gadget from tigers. How? Their necks, a fragile part of the body, would be protected from bites. Even though this approach is practical, it's symbolic as well.

Others claim, on the other hand, that they are offsprings of Dragons, and their long necks are something they inherited from their old look.

# Kayan Culture or Padaung Culture?

During centuries, having a long neck was a symbol of beauty, not only between the people of the Kayan Tribe but also in the west. That is why many others have tried before to elongate their necks and to find ways on how to get a longer neck. However, what happens with Kayans is that the coils are part of their culture, even when the origin of this practice remain mysterious.

By the way, the person with the longest neck in the world is indeed part of the Kayan tribe.

If you're feeling like learning more, here there is a short video about the practice:

## Interesting Facts About Kayan Tribe

### 1. Kayan Tribe Neck Rings Removed

It's a **myth** that if the ring neck removed, their necks will break. Even so, it is still dangerous, as their necks are weaker than ours. Kayan long neck women are all about culture, beauty, and symbolism.

## The Importance of Accuracy and Respect

Nevertheless, it's incorrect to call them "giraffe woman", firstly, because it's a derogatory term, and secondly, because any Kayan woman has no longer neck. So please avoid the term "giraffe woman" or even, the most polite version of it, "giraffe lady". Necked ladies is also used to describe them I'd be more accurate to call them "Kayan women", just that.

## Girls with Long Necks

Now, about their necks: a little girl with long neck isn't necessarily what you thought. It just works the same: they seem to have a longer neck too, but they don't either. However, they do look as if they did. Why?



Kayan girl, neck rings.

Kayan tribe neck stretching. Is that a really a stretching process or what is it? The use of the brass coils lowers their collarbones and makes their necks thinner. These two things create an optical longer look. We all have just 6 cervical vertebrae and nothing will change that (at least in the next million evolutive years).

That means, actually they are not people with long necks, nor they are just tribes with long necks. By the way, in case you missed it: this practice is only for women. Even if you're looking to forward to get a neck elongation, remember that it will only push your collarbones and might harm you in the long run.

## **Are there more tribes with long necks?**

It is true that there are many tribes that wear rings around their necks. However, the truth is that "tribes with long necks" in the world is actually one tribe, instead of many. And that is exactly the Kayan Tribe.

There is also a story about a US American woman who tried to elongate her neck by using this tradition. But isn't it appropriation? By the way, she did, in fact, called herself "giraffe woman", or "giraffe lady".

What is the longest neck human? It comes from the "Kayan neck rings history", and accomplished an impressive 40cm (15.75in). That is the world record. But how to beat that!

## 2. Brass Coils or Padaung

Kayan women start wearing rings when they are 5 years old, and they add a new coil every 2 years. They can have a maximum of 30, which means that the whole process takes up to 60 years to complete!



Working Kayan woman.

## The Controversial Reality of The Kayan

# Tribe

Kayan women are refugees from [Myanmar](#) who sought for a new home in [Thailand](#). According to Thai law, foreigners can't work in jobs that any other Thai person can do (cook, driver, waitress, and a long list of jobs are banned for Kayans). That's why for these women is hard to find a job that isn't related to the tourist dynamic.

Tourists are the main source of money for them and their families.

They get paid for anything related to their appearance (souvenirs, photos, etc.), and they are beautiful in a way that is hard to find anywhere else. But that also means that they are able to earn their money and provide for their families. Last but not least, they also sew and create beautifully-handmade crafts. So, what some call "long neck Chiang Mai" is more than necks and rings.

## Refugee Status

Kayans are refugees who fled from the Republic of the Union of [Myanmar](#), also known as [Burma](#) (that is why they are sometimes called Kayan Bruma), to [Thailand](#). The civil war in Myanmar started in the late 1980's early '90s and caused death and a big flow of refugees who left the country looking for a peaceful home.

Currently, the Myanmar government is looking forward to bringing the tribe back in the country. Why? Money. The government is aware that what some call "long neck women" has turned into a tourist attraction. And tourists are a source of money.

Even though Kayan women have refugee status, they are not completely free in [Thailand](#). The majority of them has a hard time finding jobs or even moving around.

For example, they can't travel anywhere without special permission issued by the Government of Thailand directly. Not even [to Bangkok](#). That means, they must remain in the village to please the tourists.

The tourist flow is really controversial because it also seems to nourish a circle of

moral and practical questions nobody has been able to answer. But this tradition has been part of the Kayan culture for a long time and their Padaung helps them to earn a living in a hostile context. Now:

***What Do You Think About Kayan Women?***