CHAPTER III

MYTH, MEANING, AND MARKETING: TRADITIONAL KAYAN CULTURE TRANSLATED INTO TOURISM COMMODITY

3.1 Tradition, Culture, and Authenticity in Ethnic Tourism

The ethnic tourism industry caters to vacationers desiring a unique experience of a foreign culture, and no human spectacle is more foreign or exotic than the image of the "long neck" Karen. In an era when many western youth and counter cultures have adopted traditional tribal techniques of body modification into fashionable trends—such as piercings and tattoos—there is yet to be a documented case of any outsider adopting the brass coils of the Kayan. The initial visual shock of the women's physical appearance is an intangible and subjective experience that is highly sought after by the foreign tourist, and a valuable and saleable commodity within the ethnic tourism industry.

In ethnic tourism, culture is the product, but when certain aspects of culture become more profitable than others, they also tend to become overemphasized and their original meaning diminished. One of the great paradoxes in Thailand's ethnic tourism industry is that, the more a village develops as an economic success, the less appeal it has for tourists who wish to see untouched, undeveloped or impoverished areas—a village that seeks to develop its living standard through ethnic tourism thus guarantees itself diminishing returns when its allure to tourists subsides. By improving infrastructure into the village, increasing the frequency of arriving trekking groups, and attracting more Western customers to visit "primitive" and "remote" communities, the interactions between tourist and villager will result in a natural diffusion of culture, fashion and technology that serves to lessen the disparity between the two groups (see McCaskill 1999). This disparity, however, is the main selling point of ethnic tourism, so villagers hoping to continue profiting must hide their earnings while maintaining a facade of backwardness and poverty. Cohen (2001) has named the desire of the tourist to see real, untouched areas, the quest for "authenticity". In response, villagers strategically objectify themselves and hide their

symbols of modern prosperity—such as televisions, motorbikes and refrigerators—to pass themselves off as stereotypically impoverished hill peasants in an act of "staged authenticity". This staged authenticity may be enforced from outside entities, such as Thai businessmen or tour companies, and the tribes themselves may also initiate their own effort to maintain an appearance that will generate more tourist income for their village.

In the Kayan villages there are varying degrees of authenticity and staged authenticity, the institution of which is decided on mostly by external actors, not the Kayan themselves. For example, Mae Hong Son's Department of Transportation purposely leaves the roads leading up to the villages in bad condition so that the tourists "will have a better experience." (Worichat G 2008) Villagers' access to electricity is limited to batteries or personal generators and they are strongly encouraged to keep cell phones and other technology out of the sight of tourists (Zember 2006). Perhaps the most conspicuous element of staged authenticity is the tradition of brass coiling: where in Burma, the practice is starting to wane, Mae Hong Son's tourist villages have seen a resurgence for its commercial viability. Unlike other more superficial forms of staged authenticity—such as hiding a village's wealth or technology, reluctantly wearing traditional clothes and enacting traditional ceremonies—this particular form of staged authenticity differs from all others in Thailand's ethnic tourism industry in that it purports to conserve a desirable element of Kayan tradition through an irreversible process of body modification. It puts a price and incentive on changing a woman's physiology, whereas formerly this choice was decided formerly on a cultural, religious, and communal basis.

This chapter will first investigate elements of traditional Kayan culture, life and livelihood as it was in Burma, and then compare this classical ethnography to the new changes that have occurred since living in the tourist villages. Particular focus is given to the practice of brass coiling, since it is advertized as the axiomatic practice of authentic and traditional Kayan life—in other words, it is the very basis for Mae Hong Son's ethnic tourism industry.

3.2 Kayan Traditions in Burma and Their Translations in the Thai Context

There are few reliable sources detailing the cultural practices of the Kayan, and a vigorous search of Thai and American libraries for secondary published material on the traditional culture of the Kayan produced only scant results. While there is a diverse array of unstudied aspects of Kayan culture deserving closer anthropological documentation, this study prioritizes particular focus on investigating the specific aspects of traditional culture considered most important in promoting ethnic tourism, and how these aspects of culture have been objectified and re-conceptualized so as to maximize their touristic appeal.

The following sections will illustrate basic aspects of Kayan life in Burma, and compare these aspects as they have changed since migrating to Thailand.

3.2.1 Livelihood and Way of Life

The Kayan in Burma were subsistence farmers, as most people of Karenni State traditionally were. They practiced shifting cultivation, with rice as the staple crop, and both men and women participating in the sowing as well as harvesting seasons. Karenni State is almost entirely mountainous with thick rocky soil that that makes crop cultivation difficult. As such, the Kayan and other Karenni subgroups developed specialized agricultural methods, planting on areas that other tribal groups deemed uninhabitable or uncultivable. When James George Scott visited Kayan state in the late 1890s he observed that the hills were, "intensively farmed and criss-crossed by a well-aligned, broad, and much used road network," and also noted that the Kayan were, "most zealous agriculturalists…every nook of the valleys is terraced for irrigation often with great labours, streams are diverted and then volume increased by catching water from adjacent valleys and running it across saddles in a most ingenious way." (Scott, 1900)

Since arriving in Thailand, however, the ability for the Kayan or any refugee group to perform agriculture has been severely limited. Most of the refugee camps are located on land that has since been delineated as national park, thereby prohibiting slash and burn agriculture or other activities that officials have deemed harmful to the surrounding ecosystem. Agriculture in the tourist villages is also limited to small family or semi-communal plots, where villages might plant long green beans,

pineapples, or snap peas. These plots produce only enough food to supplement a family's monthly rations, but are nowhere near enough for subsistence survival. The disappearance of traditional agriculture is one of the biggest changes in lifestyle that the Kayan have made since their move to Thailand.

As subsistence farmers, the Kayan in Burma have also traditionally used a variety of forest products in their daily lives. The construction of houses requires timber, bamboo, and thatch paneling, all of which are obtainable from the jungle. The concoction of traditional medicines requires local botanical and mycological knowledge as well as the ability to combine specific herbs and plants by a spirit doctor. The forest was also used as a source of edible roots, plants, bugs, and animals that supplemented their diets, while boiled banana stalks and other edible leaves were used to feed pigs and raise livestock. These forest resources were common property, and settlements were dispersed such there was rarely more than a single community accessing the same section of forest. In other words, each village had exclusive and essentially private rights to both the use and maintenance of a wide area of forest that was the basis for their livelihood and subsistence.

Since migrating to Thailand the forest remains a source of many products for the Kayan, and their continued relationship with the forest is one of the many ways in which the Kayan reconstruct their former identity in this new land. But while they are able to preserve some old methods of interaction with the local jungle, the types of natural products available and the frequency and level of access to them has been altered. Traditional medicines are still used, though in lowered amounts due to differences in biodiversity between Karenni State and Mae Hong Son, as well as degradation of traditional spirit knowledge of the forest through decades of progressive resettlements and relocations to new localities as well as legal restrictions on spirit doctors to practice their craft. Additionally, as international health NGOs provide western-made medicines, and the local Mae Hong Son hospitals and clinics initiate World Health Organization (WHO) sponsored vaccination programs, the influence and preference of modern medicines has changed the practices of tribal groups who formerly used only forest remedies.

Traditional Kayan houses in Burma were paneled with lumber from the forest and elevated atop four wooden stilt posts. In Thailand, however, this method of

construction is officially forbidden by RFD regulations, which prohibits the felling of tress (although many wood houses can still be found in the three villages). Lesser uses of wood are still permitted, however, since a fire pit and hearth are indispensible elements of the home where family meals are cooked, and small amounts of firewood and kindling can be legally collected from the forest. Some men also use wood from the forest to carve "long neck" dolls for their wives to sell at their stalls.

The Kayan in the tourist areas also still seek nourishment from the surrounding Mae Hong Son jungle, but in varying degrees between the three villages. In Ban Nai Soi, foraging seemed most prevalent, with dinner often consisting of bamboo shoots, crooked black roots and tubers pulled from the jungle, and garnished with fried ants or caterpillars. At night the children gather around a battery powered television and pluck the insects that swarm around the bright screen; they hold the bugs by the wings and roast their bodies over a candle until they crackle and sizzle, then bite off the cooked body and toss the wings away. In Huay Seau Tau, on the other hand, since they generally have more stable income, villagers were more likely to supplement their diets through food purchases at the downtown Mae Hong Son market rather than by foraging in the woods.

Figure 3.1 A bucket of live caterpillars collected from the jungle by residents of Ban Nai Soi. Foraged forest products constitute a significant portion of the Kayan diet.

The shift from Burma to Thailand has changed the balance in which forest products are being accessed most frequently. On the one hand, moving to Thailand has increased many Karenni and Kayan villagers' dependence on the forest for sustenance, especially for those living in the refugee camps. Rations from the UNHCR and other international NGOs, or monthly rice rations from the village chiefs are often scant or unreliable and, for these villagers, the forest has become an indispensible resource for feeding their families. On the other hand Thai forestry policy and the generational loss of spirit-doctor medical practices have conversely lowered the degree to which the forest is used in the building of houses or the amelioration of illness. There has therefore been an increase in dependence on edible

forest products, with a simultaneous decrease in the access of natural construction materials and traditional medicinal herbs and plants.

Perhaps most significantly, the Kayan no longer have exclusive rights to the use of their surrounding forest areas. The Kayan in the refugee camps have very few rights to access the forest, and the Kayan in the tourist villages live as guests within the larger host Thai and Shan communities, having to share access with their surrounding neighbors. Competitions and rivalries have erupted over the past few decades between the Kayan and their hosts regarding the overuse of forest resources, with the indigenous Thai and Shan growing to resent having to share access with the newly arrived Kayan.

One traditional practice that has continued and has actually been promoted is the custom of cloth weaving. Karen of all subgroups and denominations have earned a reputation for their fine skills at cloth weaving using a traditional loom. Royal patronage has long supported the preservation and promotion of hill tribe handicrafts and indeed this aspect of tribal culture has been one of the few that has flourished and prospered under hill tribe assimilation policies over the past four decades. Likewise, in addition to the many products and postcards for sale, Kayan women also sell handmade scarves and blankets of high quality. This is one of the only things available for sale that is not emblazoned with the image of a woman in brass coils.

3.2.2 Gender Role Reversal

One of the most drastic changes in everyday life, social interaction, and inter-village relations since migrating to Thailand has been the reversal of many of the traditional Kayan gender roles. Previously, men worked hard, performing strenuous, often backbreaking physical labor, toiling in the fields, hunting, gathering, chopping wood, working the farm, collecting timber firewood and other necessities from the jungle, building homes, and engaging in various other specialized tasks such as blacksmithing. They were also the ones to venture out to engage in long distance trade with neighboring villages. Women, while seasonally assisting in agricultural labor during intensive sowing and harvesting periods, were more often occupied with child rearing, cooking family meals, feeding household livestock, fetching water, and taking care of other domestic tasks. Men provided food and security while women

guaranteed the successful running of the family home, as well as cared for elder family members.

Since settling in Mae Hong Son, however, the men have lost almost all their traditional roles in providing for the family: they can no longer engage in agriculture, they cannot own guns (only slingshots) and therefore cannot hunt anything beyond small birds, and, as refugees, are technically not allowed to engage in any form of gainful employment outside of their delineated vending space. Women have now become the breadwinners of the families. They receive monthly cash bonuses for wearing brass coils, and they are also the only ones allowed to engage in gainful employment, selling souvenirs and postcards from stalls in front of each of their homes. The women themselves are the display pieces, hawking products that look exactly like them. Contrary to Kayan culture, the man now moves into the woman's house after they get married (Dunlop, 1999). Because of the emphasis on promoting the women and disregarding the men, tourists often leave these villages with little to no recollection of encounters with Kayan men at all. In an industry that emphasizes the exotic and the unusual, the traditional male Kayan outfit is a simple pair of black baggy trousers with a white button down shirt, a look that harkens a waiter's uniform at a restaurant more than the colorful sartorial image of "tribal exoticness" promoted to tourists.

In the absence of their traditional roles, Kayan men seem to have lost their sense of usefulness and dignity. Without a chance to engage in any kind of meaningful work or labor, many of the men literally have nothing to do all day. In Burma, Zember's father was the village headman, but 20 years later in Ban Nai Soi, he has been reduced to collecting empty beer cans to make a living (see also Chapter 5 herein). Younger men often play cards, gamble, or play *Ta Kraw*, and many of the older men are alcoholics. The village headman for Ban Nai Soi is a notorious drunk who wails in his sleep, and the villagers call him "crazy man" (*Pu Yai Ba*) behind his back, a play on the Thai term for "headman" (*Pu Yai Ban*). Mu Li, the daughter of the headman of Huay Pu Kaeng told me, "I have been seeing the men for 20 years already; they are just hanging around, asking money from their wives, and getting drunk…but if they had the opportunity to work, to earn at least minimum wage, then they could help support their families, and the men might also feel, 'I'm proud of

myself. I have responsibility and can contribute my skills to my family.' But right now they are only disempowered." Because they serve no economic or business purpose, the Kayan men largely remain hidden to the tourist—nearly invisible, though sometimes seen idling or napping on porch verandas away from the vending areas. In Huay Seua Tau they are "actively encouraged to stay out of the way" during business hours (Thong 2008).

There are some positive niches, however, that certain male members of the Kayan community have found for themselves. Some have found a creative outlet carving the "long neck" dolls that their wives then sell at the vending stalls. Many men play music, especially guitar, and throughout the three villages there is almost always an audible male voice singing from inside one of the huts away from view. Other, more politically minded male youths disobey the "recommendation" not to make their presence known and can be seen venturing out to practice English or other languages with tourists. Older men are not typically as gregarious, but do take responsibility in the maintenance and transmission of customary religious ceremonies and traditions. Many older men take this role very seriously as they are worried that the transition from Burma to Thailand has set the course for the Kayan culture to disappear (Khun Joh 2008).

Figure 3.2 Wooden “long neck” dolls, hand-carved and painted by the Kayan men to be sold by their wives at their vending stalls.

Perhaps most significantly, there is an existent Kayan network extending back into Burma and it is the men who chiefly maintain these connections. While the women are occupied in selling products and entertaining tourists, the men are often free to contact other Kayan in other villages, both within Mae Hong Son, as well as back across the Burmese border into Karenni State. A web of forest paths connects the three tourist villages in Mae Hong Son, and small side trails branching off the main path leading to various Kayan settlements or rendezvous points along unguarded areas of the border. Many Kayan in Thailand have relatives that are active soldiers in the KNPP, and they provide these troops with rice and other supplies transported by family members living in Thailand, apportioned either from their monthly tourist village rations or purchased separately in the Mae Hong Son city market. The men are the ones responsible for arranging these deliveries, maintaining contacts, and relaying

news across the border (Nai Nong 2008, Thong 2008, *also informal discussions with villagers*).

All told, however, the quality of life for the average Kayan woman in the tourist village seems fuller and richer in variety than the average Kayan man. Women have the opportunity to talk with tourists, and operate a stand to sell a selection of items. The men on the other hand have little opportunity to contribute to their villages or surrounding community. Outwardly, the women are more objectified, given identical jobs selling trinkets and acting as display objects for tourists, but they are also gainfully employed and active while males often simply languish. The inertia of the Kayan men in the tourist villages are nearly identical to the suspended space typical of life in the neighboring refugee camp where one is expected simply to idle, not engage in work, and not form political or social groupings. I was able to communicate with most of the Kayan women operating vending stalls in both Thai and English. Some speak other languages including Spanish, Hebrew, Japanese, German or French; evidence of both the diverse cycle of tourists that move through the village as well as the women's keen knack for informal language acquisition. On the other hand most men hardly know a dozen English words and even their Thai language skills seem only minimally functional. From enforced inactivity and reduced contact with anyone outside their immediate peer group, the resultant isolation and marginalization of the men has resulted a more morose demeanor compared with most of the women I encountered.

From a methodological standpoint this presented challenges. I wanted to know the lives of both the men and the women as equally as possible, but lower levels of language capability, unwillingness to speak with foreigners, and increased reclusiveness of men were all impediments to developing friendly relations. Most residents in the tourist villages had lived there for over a decade, and the women had already been conditioned to interact with guests just as the men had been conditioned to remain out of sight.

The differential treatment of men and women obviously stems from the importance of the rings. Thus, the remainder of this discussion of traditional practice, and its translation into the modern tourist village, will center around the practice of ring-wearing, and the meaning and significance of the rings as self-concept, versus the

meanings and concepts created by outsiders and instilled in the rings. As we will see, in addition to the reversal of traditional gender roles, there has also been a reversal of the traditional interpretations of the myths and stories that give the rings their cultural meaning.

The stories and traditional myths surrounding the rings are filled with bits of historical contextualization that serve to illustrate traditional Kayan daily life, their relationship with the forest, relationships with neighboring tribes, and other anecdotal information relating the history of the Kayan peoples in Burma. A society's mythology connotes both cultural meaning and historical precedence, and much of the above details regarding the daily lives of the Kayan in Burma will be enriched and expanded upon through the metaphorical settings and characterizations found within the narratives of these classic Kayan myths.

3.3 Brass Coiling

For most minority communities engaged in the ethnic tourism business, their tribal costumes, adornments and other photogenic or aesthetically pleasing characteristics are emphasized above all else. In the case of the Kayan, it is their exclusive tradition of body modification—visibly stunning and captivating to outside observers—that has become the main selling point of Mae Hong Son's tourism industry and prime focus of objectification. The evolution of the tradition of brass coiling has taken place over hundreds, perhaps thousands, of years—but the violent changes occurring in the last 30 years of Burmese ethnic strife and resultant flight and resettlement into Thailand has created arguably the most drastic mutations in both the meaning of rings as well as the culture of the Kayan as a whole.

The following section will describe the practices and origins of the Kayan culture in Burma, covering all aspects of traditional belief and daily life, but focusing specifically on the practice of wearing the rings. It then will draw comparisons between the classical elements of belief and the contemporary objectified culture of the Kayan as they have settled into Thailand's tourist villages; the ancient conception of Kayan culture compared with the modern changes, adaptations, and negotiations in the lives of those in Mae Hong Son's modern-day tourist villages.

3.3.1 The Practice and Method of Brass Coiling

Girls are usually fitted for their first coils around age four or five, sometimes six. During the initial stages of coiling the pressure on the shoulders, ribs and chin is quite intense, and some girls stay awake nights due to the pain. If it's too much for her to bear, the rings will be removed, though traditionally this is rare. Coil length is increased twice between the ages of five and fifteen and after that a minimum of two or three more times until the desired length of around sixteen inches is achieved. Many women push themselves above and beyond this standard (Naw Wah Paw, 2005; Wiwat, 1997).

The arrangements for winding the first set of coils on a girl's neck are on an individual basis, with negotiations between the ring fixer and the ring wearer typically priced at a moderate amount of cash and a mature cock (Naw Wah Paw, 2005). In Burma, the deal is made in the morning just before heading to the feilds, and the rings are put on after returning from farming that evening. As with other Kayan practices, coiling is to be avoided during the period of menstruation as it is considered an impure and inauspicious time (Khon Eden Phan, 2004). Normally there are at least two fixers per village, which can either be long neck or short neck Karen women; but amongst the three long neck Karen communities in Mae Hong Son, there is only one real trusted ring fixer remaining that all the women go to—she lives in Huay Pu Kaeng.

Kayan women traditionally cultivate their fields, chop wood, carry water up steep slopes, and perform all domestic duties in full brass collar. I had initially assumed their distended shoulders and long necks inhibited or handicapped them somehow from performing everyday tasks. Sometimes tourists ask what would happen if the rings were removed, and their tour guides explain with graphic gestures how the neck muscles flop over from atrophy, the weight of the head bending her spine, snapping her upper vertebrae and killing her. I watched as a Huay Seu Tau woman had her 17 coils removed so that she could extend them to 18. She had no problem balancing her head using only her neck muscles for support while the village fixer performed the recoiling. I asked if other women had trouble keeping their head up when their rings are removed. "We move our necks around inside here all the time," she rotated her head side-to-side, "It stays strong."

Indeed, the rings appear not to impair mobility, motor capacity, or the ability perform labor, but they do alter both the external physical appearance and internal structural anatomy of the women. Over the years, the coils create stretch marks on the neck, which become dark and pronounced (though they remain hidden behind the coils). Chafing also occurs from constant rubbing against the neck, which most women damper with decorative cloth stuffed in the space between coil and neck as padding between brass and skin. The cloth also serves as an insulator when the metallic rings become too hot in the summer sun.

The skeletal structure is also altered—though non-restrictively—as was first shown with x-ray photographs taken by the Belgian Doctor Johan Van Roekeghem at the Mae Hong Son hospital (Roekeghem, *publication date unknown*). His x-rays proved that the coils do not extend the neck, but rather, push the shoulders down, revealing more of the vertebrae. The vertebrae themselves are not affected at all, nor could they be: if they were stretched, the spinal chord would snap, causing paralysis or death. The ribs are connected to the vertebrae by a hinge joint and normally grow almost perpendicular to the spine. But the immense and constant pressure of the brass on the ribs of the Kayan women cause their ribs to slowly be pushed downwards, so by the time a woman has the ideal length of 25 coils her ribs will be depressed to a 45 degree downward slant. As Roekeghem writes, "This is the only deformation that occurs and it doesn't cause any damage to the skeleton."

3.3.2 Traditional Brass-Coiling Mythology

The most frequent question that a tourist asks a Kayan woman is, "Why do you wear those rings?" and their most common reply is "Tradition." Ask a woman from any village and she will answer in this same way, whether in Burmese, Thai, English or Karen. If she learns only one word in a tourist's language it is this quick response to a recurrent inquiry, and the answering of this question becomes almost a phatic communication, a social formality between tourist and host as common as a hello or goodbye. It became quickly apparent, however, that most women were not willing or able to explain this aspect of their culture beyond the simple one word answer—and when pressed to elaborate on the origins of the practice, their answers were invariably equivocal and uninformative.

When I first began my research I reckoned the villagers avoided explaining their origin myths to me because they had recited it so many times prior with previous visitors—that perhaps it was a monotonous tourist query that they simply were bored of entertaining. Many Kayan also don't bother to explain the multiple origin tales of the brass-coiling tradition to tourists because they know this is the role of the tour guides. I suspected that perhaps might also be reserving the more sacred aspects of their faith so as to preserve some sense of privacy, their lives already being so open to the public.

But I persisted in my inquiries, and as it turned out, the overriding reason for the Kayan's reticence at explanation is that they themselves are largely not certain of the specifics of the ring-bearing tradition, with respect to both the original ancestors who first adorned the rings, and, to a lesser degree, the mythology that surrounds the practice.

Reaching the true origin of the tradition of the brass coils has proved a difficult if not impossible task. At the end of the 19th century, James G. Scott, the first westerner to traverse Kayan territory in "trust-building missions" to pacify Burma's mountain communities, wrote of the Kayan, "They have no knowledge of their previous home or history," (1900) and later, "There is no traditional explanation of when or how the women came to be so hampered and brass-bound." (1932) Howard Y. Bary, an American who visited the Kayan in the 1930s wrote, "No one among them knows how many hundreds of years the custom of placing brass rods around the necks of the women has existed." (1933) Without a written tradition, oral transmission is the only retainer of the origins and history of the practice, and if visitors to Burma more than a century ago could not unearth the origins of this practice, it seems that in the 21st century the true progenitor of the coiling custom is forever lost to time.

I also suspected, however, that the hesitancy of the Kayan to divulge to me their origin myths was for the same reason they also didn't tell Scott or Bary: because I was an outsider, an intruder. To a large degree this is true since, as the following sections will illustrate, the Kayan are an insular and largely isolated people who have lived a solitary existence in the hills of Karenni State, Burma, and whose culture has developed with little outside influence. In this light, it is not surprising that the most

successful historians of Kayan mythology have been indigenous Kayan researchers themselves.

The first indigenous attempts to collect and compile a text of Kayan traditions and myths comes from the contemporary Kayan scholar Khon Eden Phan of Huay Pu Kaeng village, who has researched and self-published a volume on traditional Kayan culture, entitled, "The Narratives, Beliefs and Customs of the Kayan People." (Khon Eden Phan, 2004) I had the opportunity to speak briefly with him as well as the Huay Pu Kaeng spirit doctor, Solomon Nan Sein, during the 2008 Kan Khwan (tree felling) festival and discuss the meaning behind the myths, poems, and practices of the Kayan. These two specialists are also quoted in Naw Wah Pah's undergraduate thesis entitled, "The Development of Wearing Rings As a Tradition in the Long Neck Karen Culture" completed in 2005 at Mahidol University, Thailand. These two written sources, and those of James G. Scott, are the only extant records that document, with significant accuracy and specificity, the meanings behind a number of Kayan traditions.

Local Mae Hong Son tour guides were another source of information regarding origination myths, but their stories must be taken with a grain of salt. Many guides are entertaining storytellers, but the historical accuracy of their information is sometimes questionable. When I asked Mu La about her ring tradition, she suggested I speak with the tour guides, and then come back to the village and relay the stories "so we can laugh." Guides often embellish upon the original versions of traditional tales so as to draw their customers more fully into the exoticness of their tourist experience.

On the other hand, tour guides can also be invaluable sources of information regarding topics that the villagers themselves are not willing to speak about. Mr. Noi, a White Karen, and native of Mae Hong Son had become a guide after many years of close association with the Kayan living along the Mae Hong Son border areas. He openly answered sensitive questions regarding the politics between the tourist villages and the local government—issues that the villagers themselves were uncomfortable to discuss with me. He was also my source for certain Kayan myths as described below.

Through the information from tour guides, Kayan scholars, and secondary historical sources, I was able to assemble many of the traditional Kayan myths

regarding the brass coiling tradition, and examine common themes and threads that run through these narratives. From the collections of stories proceeding, two main metaphorical themes run prominent: Coils as Protection from Outside Evils; and Coils as a Symbol of Status and Wealth.

3.3.2.1 Coils as Protection From Outsiders

There are many myths that describe the brass coils as originating from a desire to shield and protect Kayan women (both literally and figuratively) from the invasion of outsiders. This theme of protection, and the need for isolation (almost bordering on xenophobia) is a recurring theme in Kayan classical mythology.

Mr. Noi, the White Karen tour guide with a penchant for alcohol and in constant company of his drinking buddies in Huay Seu Tau, passed this explicit myth indirectly to me at high noon as he sipped the day's first glass of Sang Som whiskey. Incorporating the history of feuds with the neighboring Shan, this tale illustrates the need for safety from unwelcomed intruders. The older men of the village had originally spun him this bawdy yarn during a late night bender:

> A long time ago, the women of the Kayan tribe were very flirtatious. If a Shan trader visited, she would charm him into falling in love and they would leave together at night. The chief of the village, in order to solve this problem, put the brass rings around her neck, so when she became old enough to begin menstruation, she could not bow her head to see her cunt for herself. After that, she no longer knew herself and her charm disappeared (Interview with Mr. Noi, 2006, *grammar altered by author*).

This vulgar tale of obstructing the temptation of carnal knowledge—analogous perhaps to the biblical serpent and apple in the Garden of Eden—was a story never related to me directly by any Kayan since its graphic content would offend their sense of social propriety and etiquette toward foreign guests. This story is the most explicit rendition of one of the main thematic variations found constantly throughout the multitude of Kayan coil-bearing origin myths: protecting women against the sexual advances of outside groups.

Another tour guide, the clean-cut Mr. Ruangsak, who offers prepackaged, air-conditioned Toyota Commuter Van excursions roundtrip between Chiang Mai and Mae Hong Son, related a tamer variation of this story to me:

> In the Burmese jungle there are many wild animals and dangers, and the worst and most feared is the tiger. The men were afraid to go out to hunt because their wives would be alone for the tiger to kill and eat. So one day the women decided to put the rings on their necks to protect them from the tiger bite. But also, some tiger saw his face in the reflection and scared himself away too! (Interview with Mr. Ruangsak, 2007)

This analogous version of the same myth (narrated in subtler metaphors) echoes the theme of protection from aggressive outsiders. In this version, the invader is changed from a Shan male into a tiger (this switch, however, is hardly a coincidence considering that the tiger is the official Shan national animal and is pictured in Shan nationalistic imagery and emblazoned on flags and military fatigues). These tales depict attempts to deter an outside masculine figure from stealing Kayan women away by modifying the women's physical appearance to render them unappealing to outside groups.

The Shan were historically the dominant ethnicity in the Karenni and Shan States, subjugating other tribes within their realm, including the Kayan, which has left them with bitter memories of being ruled by the Shan *Saophas* (local feudal chieftains). Khon Eden Phan tells of a story dating back to 1000 A.D. in which the Pa-O (ethnic relatives and frequent trading partners of the Kayan) had sent a messenger to forewarn Kayan villagers of the atrocities the Shan were committing against Pa-O women. As a way to ensure safety and security, the women's necks were lengthened to make them unattractive to the Shan "aliens":

> After the Kayan groups started wearing brass coils, the aliens were astonished at the sight, and their lust diminished. The Kayan women wearing the bass rings were free from the threat of being taken away by outsiders because their

> appearance might scare them off or make them uncomfortable to be with Kayan girls (Khon Eden Phan, 2004, *translation altered by author*).

Mr. Noi, related a similar story, explaining the origin of the coils as a deterrent to intruders:

> A long time ago there was a king who had power over all the Burmese states. Each state had its own chief or leader. One day the king commanded the chiefs of each state, "You must bring your most beautiful girls to the capital for a sacrifice at the pagoda." The chief of Karenni state knew all his women were beautiful. So to prevent their deaths, he ordered them to put rings on their necks and present themselves at the palace. When the king looked at them, they were ugly, and he sent them all home. (2006, *grammar altered by author*)

These stories show the rings as a method to shock and frighten outsiders away, desexualizing the Kayan women in the eyes of foreigners. Amongst the Kayan themselves, however, this form of body modification is not considered to deform the women, but rather to increase and enhance their existent natural beauty. It has the dual effect of deterring outsiders, while simultaneously magnifying their sexual appeal for those within the community. This has proven to be a very successful means of binding the Kayan society together, with a strong sense of ethnic identity and has increased their tendency toward isolation.

The dichotomous goal of the Kayan, both wanting their own people to see their long necks as graceful, and to have outsiders repulsed by it, seems to have been achieved in many cases. Pascal Khoo Thwe writes of his grandmothers, "They looked to us like mythical creatures, half-human and half-bird—and yet it never occurred to us that the Padaung were different from other people." (2003) While Scott, on the other hand, in describing the sight of an uncoiled Kayan woman noted that the shape, "suggests nothing so much as a cockrel [*sic*] learning to crow," (1900) or alternately, "a dead hen." (1932) It seems less a matter of the women appearing grotesque or disfigured by the rings but rather the initial shock of her appearance and, more fully,

the social stigma attached to an outside male marrying a woman with such physiological abnormalities. Indeed, Scott later concedes, "Some of the girls are by no means bad-looking, but their formidable armour not unnaturally seems to deter suitors other than the men of their own race (ibid)."

The brass coils serve not only to scare away outsiders, but to strengthen bonds between insiders, adding a unique element in Kayan gender relations and courtship. The next section will discuss the origin myths that describe coils as accessories to beautify women and to preserve the material wealth of the family on their physical person. This beautification also illustrates symbols of classic Kayan legends, and aesthetically harkens the image of the "dragon mother", which the Kayan regard as their ancient saurian progenitor.

3.3.2.2 Coils as Symbols of Status and Wealth

Within the Kayan there are four main sub-groups—Kayan Ka Khaung ("Crane Kayan"), Kayan Lahta ("Giant Kayan"), Kayan Ka Ngan ("Vulture Kayan"), and Kayan Lahwi ("Dragon Kayan")—and each believe they originate from "bird-like angels (*Ka Kwe Bu Le*)" and a "she-dragon (*Ka Kwe Bu Pe*)" and each sub-group dons sartorial adornments that reflect the animals their names represent: The Crane Kayan wear white smocks to resemble a white crane; the Vulture Kayan imitate a vulture's plume with white silver on the front of their outfits; and the Dragon Kayan extend their necks to mimic the elegant neck of the she-dragon. Khon Eden Phan (2004) relates the following tale:

> One day, two girls, Mu Don and Mu Dan, visited their grandmother, the great she-dragon, to pay their respects. As they left, the she-dragon presented them each with a bar of gold. The granddaughters were humbled and, in honor of their grandmother, wound the gold round their necks to honor her graceful appearance.

This myth helps explain the egalitarian proclivity of the Kayan between the sexes since the female dragon is honored as the source of life, wealth, prosperity and beauty. As Pascal Khoo Thwe (2003) remembers from his childhood living with his

own grandmothers, "Even their husbands consented to their absolute rule in domestic affairs." The golden coils are meant to transform their necks into shining reptilian scales, enveloping them in the potent strength of the dragon mother. In old age, if the woman chooses to remove her coils in "retirement", her protracted bare neck will change its resemblance from a dragon neck to the necks of the "bird-like angels", the other ancient progenitor of the Kayan race.

The visual appeal of the rings carries strong mythological meaning, and similar pairs of origin myths describe the practical functionality of the metal rings as mobile walking safe boxes, literally stacking a family's riches on the women's shoulders. Solomon Nan Sein, the Kayan spirit doctor at Huay Pu Kaeng, explains:

> In ancient times, there were few rules and regulations guaranteeing the safety of property—plus, there were no fireproof boxes to store valuables. The villagers were thus vulnerable to bandits and thieves.
>
> In order to solve the problem, Kayan villagers melted all their gold and silver into necklaces, rings, bracelets, earrings, hairpins, and ornamental ear-studs. After that, they decorated their daughters, with the intention that their wealth would not easily be taken away or stolen.
>
> The more gold and silver they had, the more they accessorized their women's hands and legs, adding pins to their hairstyles, and adding metal loops to their daughters necks. The ancient Kayan women were primarily used to safeguard gold, silver and other precious items.
>
> During that time, their coils…were made of pure gold, and their bracelets, hairpins and ear-studs were pure silver. Therefore the Kayan people still believe that the longer the woman's neck, the more valuable she is.
>
> (Naw Wah Paw, 2005, *translation altered by author*)

According to the story, Kayan men appear to objectify the women as safe deposit boxes. But another origin story from the same spirit doctor shows women using their store of riches strategically and from their own volition:

> In the Kayan tradition, family property such as livestock, farmland, and houses are passed on to the sons, whereas women get valuable materials such as gold and silver. To guarantee property, the Kayan women fashioned gold rings and put them around their necks. The women who had longer necks were more attractive and desirable because it revealed to the man how wealthy she was (ibid.).

The Kayan men inherited property in sedentary possessions, while women inherited wealth in mobile accessories.

A century ago in colonial Burma, adornment in full gold rings was ideal, but realistically most people chose brass as an affordable alternative by exchanging English silver pieces with neighboring Shan traders from Shan State (see Scott, 1900, and Naw Wah Paw, 2004). These are the same silver pieces that Akha women still stitch into their hats and costumes today. Modern Kayan villagers in Mae Hong Son say they still obtain brass from Burma through cross-border jungle liaisons, but the brass is traded for Thai Baht, not British silver pieces.

From the above review of Kayan mythology, adorning the women in brass coils both enhances the positive self-image of the Kayan, as well as erodes the aesthetic draw and sexual appeal to outsiders. Over hundreds of years these combined factors solidified a steadfast sense of tradition and identity within the relatively small Kayan population in Burma. The bond between women and brass became so strengthened that the coiling tradition continued in practice even after the original ceremonies and reenactments of the origin myths had been abandoned. As far back as the 1890s, Scott notes that these stories had either been forgotten already or were of little significance in everyday Kayan life.

Women living in today's Mae Hong Son tourist villages acknowledge these myths in song and story, but most do not profess much weight to them as far as bringing meaning or significance to their daily lives. Most of them feel that the coils

enhance their beauty, but they hardly attach deeper spiritual meaning to the practice. While the act of brass coiling has been performed and carried out through centuries and generations, the meaning, significance, and original reasons for doing so seem to have eroded and deteriorated. The fact that from most Kayan women are not familiar with the basic tenets of their own myths regarding the origins of the practice speaks volumes to this.

The next section will discuss the main reasons why the importance of meaning in wearing rings has deteriorated over generations. It will also examine why, at the same time, the actual implementation of brass coiling has remained steadfast, despite the loss of traditional meaning and significance that used to accompany it.

3.3.3 Historical Continuance of the Tradition in Burma Despite Deterioration of Meaning

The reenacting of ritual and ceremony is a communal representation of the meaning and significance of the practices and traditions of a culture. When the meaning behind a tradition dies out, it is rare to see the corresponding practice continue, as in the anomalous case of the Kayan

One reason for the historical deterioration of traditional meaning was that the everyday practicalities of survival in the rugged mountains of Karenni state offered farmers very little free time. Agriculture on uneven terrain forced the Kayan to toil without respite just to achieve subsistence, with little time left over for ceremony. Scott (1932) wrote, “The Padaung is a most diligent agriculturalist, and every possible nook of the valleys is terraced for irrigation; often with great labor.” The imperative toward labor instilled a strong work ethic in the Kayan to the extent of sacrificing celebration for improved productivity and agricultural output.

A second and complementary reason their traditions have only been loosely transmitted is because of the fluidity of the oral culture. Traditions pass through generations in the dynamic form of stories, songs, poems, dances, and other transitory mediums. If, through the ages, a tradition lost its applicability to everyday life, it simply would not be reenacted and eventually it would vanish into oblivion.

The pragmatic commitment to hard labor and livelihood thus took precedence over elaborate spiritual ceremony, leaving the Kayan with—save for the Kan Khwan

ceremony—very few large celebratory cultural gatherings. Because of this, and remarkably so, there is not even a significant ceremony for Kayan girls who start wearing their rings for the first time. In the analysis of Naw Wah Paw (2005), who studied the Kayan in Mae Hong Son from 2004-2005:

> It is my theory that, having prioritized work over…ritual ceremony, most of the Kayan…women don't really know how the practice of wearing rings developed, [and] when asked, they merely state that they wear the rings to maintain their culture. Since they don't have a special occasion for the first day of wearing rings, young girls are not reminded about the meaning of this practice, which has been passed down in chants, songs, or prayers. Thus, the real meaning of wearing rings gradually disappeared over time.

Rather than a right of passage or coming of age event, the wearing of rings for girls is an unquestioned given, as predictable as a birthday or anniversary, and treated with similar nonchalance. I was incredulous that such a life changing event and central practice of Kayan culture could be largely dismissed in celebration—so one woman asked me, "Did you have a party when you started wearing shoes?" For at least a century already (since the arrival of Sir James George Scott) hardly any pomp has been associated with brass coiling. What has kept the tradition alive for so many generations? What has filled the void of meaningful ceremony or religious significance of coils over the last few centuries of Kayan history?

As discussed earlier, the main reason the ring-binding tradition on the Burmese side was preserved is attributable chiefly to the geographic and social isolation of the Kayan. This isolation was, to a large degree, desired and achieved socially through deliberate shunning of outsiders, and sticking to their small, enclosed community. Topographically, it is difficult, inconvenient, and largely pointless for other tribes to incur on land they deem uninhabitable and whose people desire not to intermingle. Scott, in the 1890s figured a Kayan population of only around 7000, estimating that, "The country of the Padaungs covers …something like one hundred and fifty square miles." (1900) Throughout recorded history, Karenni State has ranked amongst the poorest, least developed, and most inaccessible areas in Burma, and the

Kayan of the pre-colonial and colonial eras were largely left to their own affairs. Elders in Mae Hong Son claim that before the conflicts with the Burmese military began, most Kayan never traveled outside of their village, and some may never have met people from other tribes.

Because of this isolation, inculcation from peer pressure within the community can be quite strong. The models of femininity for young Kayan girls are her ring-bearing relatives and elders. As Naw Wah Paw (2004) points out, "Kayan girls who don't wear rings feel out of place among their female group. Those who don't wear ring[s] seem to be boring and uninteresting to look at" and Khon Eden Phan says, "Girls…show off their adornments to their playmates, and those without would pester their parents for coils." Girls ask for rings as soon as they can speak and as they mature they also require rings to attract Kayan men, who were known to say, "Without a slight glitter, I would not prefer." (ibid)

These have been historical factors for the Kayan in Burma to continue the tradition of ring wearing despite losing much of the original meaning behind it—the most significant factors being a concentrated, isolated culture, and the social obligations inherent in such a close-knit community. In modern-day Burma, however, ethnic conflict and social chaos over the last 30 years has played a large role in the gradual decline of even the practice of coiling itself. It is becoming rarer to see Kayan women in full adornment in Burma, largely for the risks involved in wrapping one's body in precious metals during a military situation where villages are regularly sacked and pillaged.

On the other hand, it is becoming more and more commonplace to see a brass-coiling woman on the Thai side of the border. Thailand provides a whole new political, social, and economic context for the Kayan, and as they have settled along the Thai side they have found new reasons to revive the tradition of wearing the rings, even though the practice is gradually dying out in their homeland. The next section will discuss the new reasons that the Kayan refugees living in Thailand have continued the practice of wearing rings.

3.3.4 Current Continuance of the Tradition for Kayan Refugees in Thailand

For many Kayan, the flight from Karenni State, Burma, into Mae Hong Son, Thailand, has been a long chain of successive displacements, geographic uprootings, and involuntary reshufflings around volatile border areas, looking for a permanent settlement that can guarantee them security and shelter.

Exile has a profound impact on the self-concept and ethnic identity of the Kayan living along the Thai Burma border, who, as refugees, seek ways in which to recreate their communities and preserve their culture and heritage in a new land. Despite the social difficulties that accompany their unusual appearance, Naw Wah Paw says that most of the Kayan "accept the practice of wearing rings as part of their culture, which can't be eliminated for any reason." (2005) Ma Nang of Ban Nai Soi told me in December 2007 that, after a lifetime of wearing the rings, they have become part of her and that "I feel strange even when I take them off just for a few hours for neck-lengthening." With a sense of displacement and homelessness, the significance of adhering to tradition is magnified, and rings have become a way for the Kayan in Thailand to maintain a sense of identity.

This desire for a sense of community is an endogenous factor in the continuance of Kayan custom, an internal incentive for both men and women to benefit their own community and to reform their classic beliefs and social structures to adapt to a new land. But there are also a significant number of outside—mostly economic—influences that have furthered the preservation of traditional body modification since moving to Thai soil. These include pressures from local Thai government officials, entrepreneurs, and tour operators interested in the value of promoting the Kayan image, as well as pressures from the curiosities and expectations of the tourists coming to visit.

3.3.5 Economic Influences in the Change of Meaning of Brass-Coiling

The urge for a sense of rootedness in diasporas, and the economic incentives that are offered to wear rings, are two very strong factors in the continuation of the tradition for the Kayan living in the tourist villages in Mae Hong Son. These new and pervasive influences in Thailand have caused the Kayan in Mae Hong Son to reinvigorate the practice while those in Burma increasingly forgo it.

Fiduciary considerations have always played a role in shaping the brass-coiling tradition, as rings brought not only a sense of beauty, pride, and social prestige, but they served both to showcase a family's wealth and prosperity as well as eventually to bequeath it. The matrimonial receipt of dowry from the groom's family was balanced by this inherent endowment upon the bride's neck. These traditional economic factors, however, were all long-term considerations: the maturation of wealth in the length of the neck would transpire over a lifetime, and "transactions" or exchanges of that wealth would only take place on a significant social occasions such as marriages or funerals.

In the contemporary Thai tourist villages, the chance for economic benefit through ring-wearing occurs monthly in the form of the 1500 Baht "ring bonus", and this newly instilled meaning of brass coiling has begun to displace traditional social significance. This has altered not only the implications of the traditional significance in the lives of the Kayan people, but has also created notable changes in the practice and application of ring-wearing itself. Local policies, as dictated by Mae Hong Son's provincial office, and carried out within the tourist villages for purposes of economic promotion and development, have notable repercussions and influences on traditional Kayan custom.

In most cases, a woman earns an extra 1500 Baht per month if she wears rings. This money is apportioned by the village controller, who takes it from the 500 Baht admission fee that each tourist pays. If the woman's neck is unadorned, then she receives no supplemental income. In Thailand, peer pressure also plays a large role, but in a much different way than in Burma: women are influenced to wear rings for economic purposes by Thai entrepreneurs who offer a monthly stipend, but the women are also pressured by family members and their own personal considerations of self-preservation and the near indispensability of an additional 1500 Baht per month. The income is unskilled and cannot be classified as "labor" since no physical work—outside the lifelong coiling process itself—is required. The ring bonus is an inducement for the Kayan to voluntarily maintain the particularities of their surface aesthetic that have the proved the most profitable for tourism.

All three tourist villages implement this monthly bonus incentive system, but the collection and distribution of funds differs slightly between each village:

1. Ban Nai Soi has an admission booth located just inside the village entrance gate, costing 250 Baht per foreign tourist, with Thai citizens allowed free entry. The rules are lax and tourists visiting consecutive days will generally be allowed free readmission. A personal or friendly word or two with the admissions guard seemed to guarantee me unlimited free entry to the village even before I became a regular presence there. The distribution of the 1500 Baht per month bonus to women with rings also seems to follow this relaxed system: when I visited in June 2008, Ban Nai Soi villagers informed me they had not received their monthly bonuses since February of that year.

2. Huay Seau Tau, collects its money from each visitor at a designated booth just before going down the path to the village and shares the same pricing system of Ban Nai Soi. In line with the business-like nature of Huay Seua Tau's administration, however, the admission fee grants a tourist a single entry with few exceptions, and is strictly enforced. Those wishing to enter consecutive days or even multiple times in a single day will have difficulty reentering without paying additional fees. Aunt Peng manages the money behind the scenes and distributes the allotted monthly bonuses with the same degree of precision that the admissions fee is collected.

3. The admission fee for Huay Pu Kaeng, as mentioned earlier, is collected indirectly through the Huay Deua longboat system and divvied each month by the controlling business and tour owners. This village stands alone, however, in its bonus allotment system, as the amount varies in direct proportion to the number of coils around the woman's neck. This sliding scale ranges from 600 Baht all the way up to 3000 Baht for necks exceeding 27 loops (Thong 2008). In the low tourist season, the payment is reduced proportionately to match the total monthly amount collected from boat tickets. While all of the villages use money and additional income as an incentive system to encourage the wearing of rings, Huay Pu Kaeng is the only village that offers payment on a sliding scale, rewarding specific lengths with corresponding degrees of profit to encourage the women to look as "authentic" and "exotic" as possible.

3.4 Analysis and Discussion

With few options to earn additional income, the monthly bonuses have become a crucial factor in promoting the continuance of brass coiling among the Kayan diaspora in Mae Hong Son's three tourist villages. As the above discussion has shown, the reasons for the historical continuance of the tradition in Burma came mostly from within the Kayan community, from cultural isolation and peer pressure, while conversely, the new impetus for preservation in Thailand comes mainly from the outside. As the reasons for continuing the tradition shifts progressively from internal to external, so too does the meaning and interpretation of the custom.

How exactly do the new meanings conflict with the old? In fact, most of the new reasons for wearing the rings run in direct opposition with those of traditional Kayan mythology. While the coils were once a way to keep outsiders away, they are now attractions to bring them in. In isolation, their metallic necks ensured repulsion and avoidance from outsiders, but in the global tourism market this very characteristic makes them valuable. Moreover, neck coiling was originally a way to display a family's wealth and earnings over generations, but in today's tourist villages it is a tool to *generate* additional monthly household income. Traditionally symbols of status and heritage, the rings have become an incentive to earn a stipend and, for some, a symbol of their objectification as objects of tourist consumption. Despite these new, largely superficial meanings attached to the brass coils, however, most women who wear them still do so with pride, and the men still seem to prefer the girls with a slight glitter.

The next chapter will discuss the objectification of the Kayan in terms of suppressive regulations within the tourism villages, the transformation of the Kayan into a national product, and the history of trafficking Kayan into Thailand by tourism entrepreneurs.