

Perception of neck ring wear using SD Method

Atsuko Shimoda¹ and Seiji Ohsawa¹

¹Institute of Human Culture Studies, Otsuma Women's University
12 Sanbancho, Chiyoda-ku, Tokyo, Japan 102-8357

Key words : Kayan people, Body modification, Brass neck ring coils,
Beauty, Semantic differential method

Abstract

There are Kayan people in four villages near the Thai border of Myanmar's remote Kaya State. The custom of Kayan women of wearing neck rings persists here.

They go through their daily life wearing long rings weighing as much as 3 kg for their entire lives. To the outside world, this is a very strange custom. Why do they wear neck rings? What does it mean to them? To answer these questions, we used Semantic Differential Method (SD Method) on 30 pairs of contrasting words describing different perceptions of the neck rings. We interviewed and compared results from three groups: women who wear or have worn neck rings (A group), women with no experience wearing neck rings (B group), and men (C group). Our results show that wearers are proud of their neck rings, seeing them as a beautiful and preferable ornamentation and extension of her body.

Culture is very relative. We can interpret that this 'strange' custom of the Kayan women is not strange to themselves, but a part of creating a beautiful body through ornamentation.

1. Introduction

Let us suppose that in Kayan society, women who wear neck rings since childhood have a life without prejudice from non-wearer women (no experience wearing) in that society, and that there is no advantage or disadvantage conferred by wearing neck rings. This unusual practice continues simply as a traditional custom. Men in this society do not practice anybody modification. It is only observed in women.(Photo 1)

Different people give different answers to the question of why this custom continues. Some say women wear the rings to protect themselves from the attacks of wild animals living in the mountains or from the threat of different ethnic groups, or that it is a way to pass on a unique culture, to decorate oneself, or to earn money in tourist spots. Other reasons given are that neck rings are beautiful, or make the wearer look important, or that it is something to be proud of. There is no fixed opinion. Why has this custom survived uninterrupted, here in this remote area deep in Myanmar? There must be few places in the world where such an unusual practice as the Kayan's neck rings has persisted.

In this paper we asked Kayan women who wore neck rings to evaluate the attractiveness of the custom.



Photo 1. Neck ring wearing Kayan woman

What was their response? How did men living in the same village evaluate the custom, or women who did not practice this body modification? We focused on the following points for our research:

- 1) How did women practicing the body modification feel about their long shiny gold neck rings?
 - Did they feel the rings are beautiful?
 - Did they feel that they are wearing their pride in

their ethnic identity?

- Did they feel that the rings were very inconvenient during daily life?
 - Did they feel superior to others? Did they feel that neck rings gave them dignity or authority?
- 2) How did men living in the same village feel?
- Did they feel that these were obedient women who were preserving the culture's traditions?
 - As a member of the opposite sex, were the women attractive? Or did they feel like it was a strange custom?
- 3) How did women living in the same village but who were not making body modifications feel?
- Is it more rational to not wear these restrictive and inconvenient neck rings, rather than preserve tradition?
 - Do you feel that neck rings are not beautiful?

We analyzed the data from this survey and from the survey respondents below.

The survey below was conducted in the same place as the main survey [1] [2].

2. Survey Method

2.1. Survey Area

The survey was conducted in S village, T village, R village, and P village, in the Demoso Township of Kayah State, in eastern Republic of the Union of Myanmar.

As indicated on the map (Fig.1), it is an extremely remote part of the country, reached by taking mountain roads heading east from Naypyidaw, the capital, to Demoso Township, and then deeper into the countryside from there. The turbulent Thanlwin (also called Salween) River that defines the border with Thailand, is a few kilometers east of the survey area, and runs north-south with the survey area on one side, and Thailand's Mae Hong Son Province on the other. The survey area is located at N 19° 31-38 and E 96° 38-97.

2.2. Period of survey

The survey was comprised of a preliminary survey conducted during the dry season of 2014.

2.3. Number of Survey Subjects

We surveyed 31 Kayan neck ring wearing women (wearer group), 170 non-wearing women (non-wearer group), and 111 men who lived in the same village.

2.3.1 Neck ring wearers: in preparation, a population survey was conducted of the area where the research subjects live. 85 people (10.6%) out of the total population were practicing body modification. We asked women from this group to participate in an interview-style survey. [1]

2.3.2. Neck ring non-wearers: the conditions for this survey was that these men and women live in the same village as the neck ring wearers, and that the women have absolutely no experience wearing neck rings.

2.3.3. To implement the survey, the Kayah State ministers, village mayors, elementary school heads, etc. asked for cooperation with the survey, and 10 elementary school teachers conducted individual surveys in the Karen languages, part of the Sino-Tibetan languages

2.4 Ethnic group: Lahwi tribe, a subgroup of the Kayan People.

85 women were neck ring wearers, or 10.6% of the total female population.

(Complete survey of neck ring wearers conducted by Shimoda, A. [1])

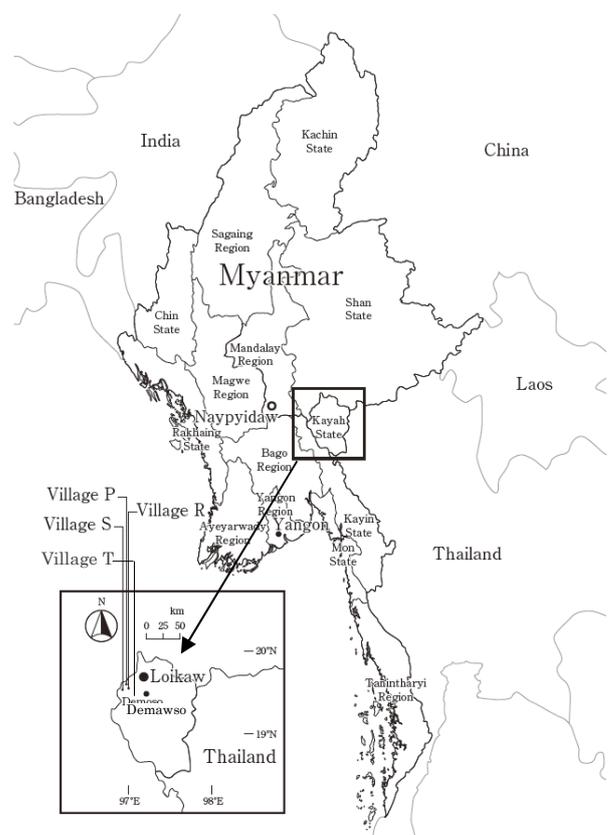


Figure 1. Survey Area

2.5. Oral survey Method

This survey was conducted by permission of the Kayah State government, whose senior officials guided us to the survey site in Demoso Township. By government request, teachers from the elementary schools in S village, R village, and P village came to be trained as survey-takers, and then conducted individual home-visit surveys. These Kayah language speakers asked their survey subjects each question one by one, as they had practiced, making sure to be thorough. If the survey subject could not finish the survey at one time, the survey-taker would return on another day. The completed survey data was then taken home and checked. Furthermore, we obtained the consent of the survey subjects through the village mayors of each village.

2. Results and Discussion

Questions relating to the perception of neck ring wear using Semantic Differential Method (SD Method) (5 levels of evaluation)

1. comfortable – painful
2. loose – constricting
3. wide – narrow
4. beautiful – ugly
5. tall – short
6. clean – dirty
7. young – old
8. new – old
9. heavy – light
10. like – dislike
11. familiar – unfamiliar
12. long – short
13. feminine – not feminine
14. traditional – modern
15. expensive – cheap
16. clever – stupid
17. strong – weak
18. strong, willed/determined – fickle
19. obedient – rebellious
20. good – bad
21. mysterious – mundane
22. useful – useless
23. inconvenient – convenient
24. warm – cold
25. bright – dark
26. quiet – noisy
27. progressive/urban – backward/provincial
28. proud – embarrassed
29. important-looking – unimportant-looking
30. safe – unsafe

A Group: wearer group

B Group: non-wearer group

C Group: men

1. "comfortable – painful" (Fig. 2)

A 2.806 ±1.223, B 2.076 ±1.026, C 2.387 ±1.097

In the comparison of the three groups, group A perceives neck rings as somewhat painful, followed by group C and group B. However, all three groups scored below 3 points.

2. "wide – narrow"

A 4.000 ±0.577, B 3.953 ±0.651, C 3.946 ±0.616

All three groups scored very high, nearly 4, in perceiving neck rings as "narrow".

There was hardly any difference between the three groups.

3. "loose – constricting"

A 2.355 ±1.082, B 2.818 ±1.144, C 2.441 ±0.997

All three groups perceive the neck rings as 'loose'. Perhaps this image comes from the relaxed posture and movements of neck ring-wearing women (as we observed at the survey area).

It is fascinating that group A most strongly perceives the neck rings as 'loose'.

4. "beautiful – ugly"

A 2.290 ±1.243, B 2.571 ±1.272, C 2.865 ±1.210

Group A most perceived neck rings as 'beautiful', followed by group B and C. The data variation is approximately 1.2 for all groups. It is noteworthy that the self-evaluation of wearers is significantly more 'beautiful' than the other two groups.

5. "tall – short"

A 2.290 ±0.529, B 2.370 ±0.841, C 2.505 ±0.672

The neck rings have a height of ~20-30 cm. It appears that the length of wearers' necks have been extended by several centimeters. 'Tall' perception was group A > B > C, with the self-evaluation of group A the highest.

6. "clean – dirty"

A 2.742±0.930, B 3.171±1.115, C 3.207±0.945

Since the neck rings are worn 24 hours a day, 365

days a year, it is reasonable to imagine they are not clean. Furthermore, the survey area is a hot environment and very dusty in the dry season. Unsurprisingly, neck rings were perceived as 'dirty'. Group A scored below the midpoint, slightly inclined towards 'clean' (i.e. group A is self-affirming for this characteristic.) Group B and C's perception tended towards 'dirty'.

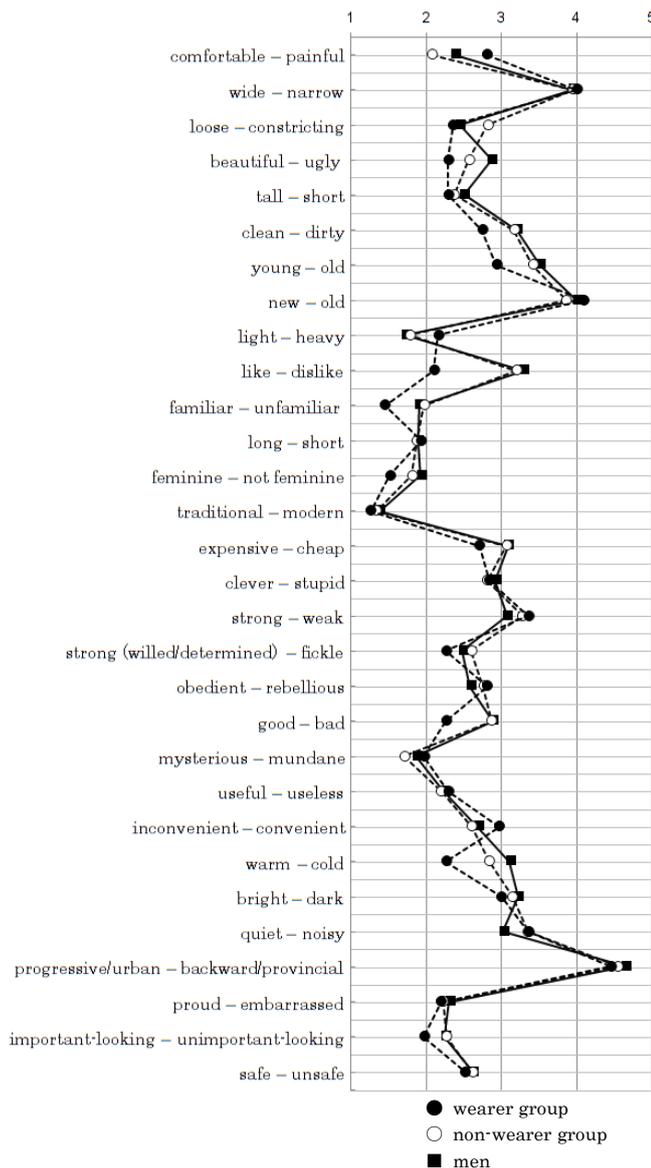


Figure 2. Comparison of means by 3 groups

7. "young - old"

A 2.936±0.727, B 3.418±0.854, C 3.514±0.841
Group A (neck ring wearers) felt most strongly that the rings were 'young'. In contrast, group B

and C felt neck rings had an slightly 'old' image. This is another example of Group A's active self-affirming evaluation.

8. "new - old"

A 4.097±1.350, B 3.859±1.390, C 4.000±1.362
Wearing neck rings is a traditional ethnic custom. However, wearers are gradually declining. Villagers avoid neck rings as their villages modernize and have contact and exchange with the outside world. The spreading influence of Christianity is another undeniable factor. The Christian church instructs members to abandon traditional Kayan customs, so Kayan who convert are gradually giving up neck ring wear.

Thus, there is a tendency to perceive wearers as 'old'.

Most wearers in Group A are older, with few young wearers. Group A is the most aware of this fact.

All groups score close to 4.000, recognizing neck ring wear as an 'old' culture and custom.

9. "light - heavy"

A 2.161 ±0.779, B 1.777±0.834, C 1.721 ±0.690
Neck rings can weigh as much as 5 kg for adults. The rings are even heavy to hold by hand, and feel even heavier when worn on the body.

The rings are perceived as 'heavy' in the order of group A> B> C. It is interesting that men most perceive neck rings as 'heavy', while wearers most consider them to be 'light' relative to the other groups.

10. "like - dislike"

A 2.097 ±1.423, B 3.200 ±1.466, C 3.288 ±1.410
For this characteristic, we investigated the psychological preference or affinity for neck rings, separate from the perception of their physical shape and weight.

Group A tend to 'like' neck rings, while groups B and C score 3.000 or more, tending toward 'dislike'. A statistical difference is detected between the former and the latter. Neck ring wearers affirm their own beauty. In contrast, both men and women non-wearers are undecided or ambivalent.

11. "familiar - unfamiliar"

A 1.452 ±0.624, B 1.971 ±1.000, C 1.901 ±0.904

Group A, who wear neck rings as an extension of their body all year-round, score lower than B and C. It is interesting that men of group C perceive neck rings as more 'familiar' than the non-wearer women of group B.

12. "long – short"

A 1.936 ± 0.680 , B 1.877 ± 0.588 , C 1.892 ± 0.528

The neck rings are 7 - 8 meters long when uncoiled. Naturally, as a long object, it is perceived as 'long'.

However, the difference between the 3 groups' perceptions is very small.

13. "feminine – not feminine"

A 1.516 ± 0.890 , B 1.806 ± 1.056 , C 1.928 ± 0.997

Neck ring wear is a custom practiced by women only, and is therefore a symbol of women.

As shown in the data, neck rings are universally perceived as 'feminine'. Also, wearers most strongly see themselves as 'feminine'.

14. "traditional – modern"

A 1.258 ± 0.631 , B 1.329 ± 0.67 , C 1.378 ± 0.751

Needless to say, neck ring wear is the custom most strongly recognized as an ethnic tradition. Therefore, all groups strongly perceive it as 'traditional'. However, here too, A is the most conscious of this 'traditional' image, followed by B and C.

15. "expensive – cheap"

A 2.710 ± 1.006 , B 3.065 ± 1.094 , C 3.090 ± 1.083

Neck rings are shiny and gold, appearing to be an expensive ornament. Average values are near 3.00 for all groups. However, group A most perceived the rings as 'expensive', and the other two groups are almost equivalent. Wearers are again somewhat self-affirming.

16. "clever – stupid"

A 2.839 ± 0.779 , B 2.806 ± 0.740 , C 2.919 ± 0.715

For this characteristic, there were no clear trends in the 3 groups' perceptions.

17. "strong – weak"

A 3.355 ± 0.798 , B 3.276 ± 0.884 , C 3.072 ± 0.912

Both group A, B and C score more than 3, perceiving neck rings as 'weak'. Group A most strongly held this perception, followed by B and C.

18. "strong-willed/determined – fickle"

A 2.258 ± 0.893 , B 2.600 ± 0.900 , C 2.478 ± 0.807

Continual wear of long and heavy neck rings requires considerable patience. Among the Kayan, wearers and are not excluded and earn a certain respect as someone who protects tradition and has perseverance. Group A most strongly evaluated themselves as 'strong-willed/determined'.

19. "obedient – rebellious"

A 2.807 ± 0.910 , B 2.759 ± 0.860 , C 2.586 ± 0.847

The men of group C most perceive the custom as 'obedient', then women of group B, and least, group A. In other words, group A perceives less than the other groups that they are 'obedient'. Perhaps neck ring wear seems 'obedient' when seen by others. This difference between the perception of wearers by non-wearers, and wearers' self-perception, is very interesting.

20. "good – bad"

A 2.258 ± 1.182 , B 2.865 ± 1.367 , C 2.883 ± 1.353

When evaluating the overall impression of neck ring wear, group A has the most self-affirming 'good' evaluation, 0.6 points higher than the other two groups.

21. "mysterious – mundane"

A 1.968 ± 0.875 , B 1.706 ± 0.888 , C 1.865 ± 0.847

The unusual custom of wearing this long neck ring is perhaps mysterious and strange when seen by the outside world. Interestingly, the Kayan themselves perceive the custom as 'mysterious'. Kayan women most strongly perceive it as 'mysterious', with Kayan men following. Of the three groups, wearers had the weakest 'mysterious' perception.

22. "useful – useless"

A 2.290 ± 0.824 , B 2.194 ± 0.944 , C 2.225 ± 1.042

Needless to say, neck rings are impractical. To an observer of the outside world, it is a rather unnecessary ornament. However, people in this village from all three groups do not see the rings as 'useless', and will admit some practicality. While we are not able to find statistical differences between the three groups, it seems from their data that the collars have a somewhat 'practical' image.

23. "convenient – inconvenient"

A 2.968 ± 1.080 , B 2.606 ± 1.213 , C 2.685 ± 1.198

This characteristic trends the same as the previous item.

It seems natural to perceive the neck rings as 'inconvenient'. Survey results show that group A perceives them as 'inconvenient', while group B and C feels less so.

24. "warm – cold"

A 2.258 ±0.930, B 2.835 ±1.322, C 3.108 ±1.186

This characteristic investigates the perception of the cold brass neck rings.

Although 'cold' may spring immediately to mind, it is surprising that group A in fact perceives them as 'warm', not 'cold'. There are significant differences between the group B and C.

25. "bright – dark"

A 3.000 ±1.155, B 3.147 ±1.058, C 3.216 ±1.115

Here we indirectly asked about the 'bright' image of neck rings in a metaphorical way, trying to reveal the subconscious view of neck rings. All groups scored in the middle of the scale, neither 'bright' nor 'dark'.

26. "quiet – noisy"

A 3.355 ±0.877, B 3.353 ±0.938, C 3.018 ±0.934

As with the previous question, the results do not bear not special interpretation. All three groups perceive neck rings as somewhat 'noisy'.

27. "progressive/urban – backward/provincial"

A 4.452 ±0.961, B 4.547 ±0.800, C 4.649 ±0.627

This was the highest scoring characteristic in the survey. The "backward" and "provincial" perception was very strong in all 3 groups, with C > B > A.

28. "proud – embarrassed"

A 2.194 ±1.276, B 2.224 ±1.119, C 2.306 ±1.077

Kayan women's pride is highest in group A, followed by B and C. However, all groups score in the low 2 points, perceiving the custom as a source of pride for the Kayan people.

29. "important-looking – unimportant-looking"

A 1.968 ±0.836, B 2.271 ±1.031, C 2.243 ±0.956

Like the previous question, there is a strong sense of esteem evident. Especially group A scored under 2 points, indicating a strong sense of

self-esteem and a high regard for neck rings.

30. "safe – unsafe"

A 2.516 ±1.222, B 2.612 ±0.931, C 2.622 ±1.088

As with other body modification, neck rings may have been worn to provide some kind of physical safety. As with tattoos, neck rings may have been a means to prevent injuries or to protect women from foreign enemies. However, in modern times peace is almost guaranteed, and the area Kayan people inhabit (while inconvenient) is extremely peaceful, without invasion or harm from foreign enemies. It follow then that these days the neck rings are not perceived to confer any special safety.

Through the comparison of perceptions of the 3 groups regarding the 30 characteristics covered in the survey, I have studied the meaning and image of neck rings to the Kayan people. It appears that a wearer is proud of her rings, seeing them as a beautiful and preferable ornamentation and extension of her body.

Culture is very relative. We can interpret that this 'strange' custom of the Kayan women is not strange to themselves, but a part of creating a beautiful body through ornamentation.

References

- [1] Shimoda, A. (2015), *Body Modification / Ornamentation and Value System of Kayan Women: Based on a 2013-2014 Survey of Current Lifestyle Conditions in a Remote Region of Myanmar*, Tokyo, Kasei Kyouikusha Publishing Co., pp.1-103.
- [2] Shimoda, A. and Ohsawa, S. (2017), *A quantitative aesthetic study on body modification (neck ring wear) by Kayan women*, Tokyo, International Journal of Human Culture Studies., pp.610-620.

(Received September 2, 2017; accepted October 6, 2017)

Abstract (Japanese)

ミャンマーの最も奥地であるカヤー州のタイ国境に近い4つの村に、カヤン人がいる。カヤン人の女性には今もなお首輪装着という習慣が残存している。

3kgにもなる重く、長い首輪をつけて、日常を送り、しかも生涯を通じて行っている。この奇妙な習慣を外部世界の人々は非常に奇異に感じている。では、なぜ彼女たちは首輪をつけるのか？

意味するところは何か？ この研究ではこの問いに答えるために、30対の対照的な言葉を用いるSD法 (semantic differential method) を用いて、その意味を探索した。比較のために、首輪をつけた群、首輪をつけない群の女性群と男性群の3群にインタビューをした。その結果、首輪装着者が首輪を誇らしく、好ましく、そして美しい装飾品として身体の一部のようにイメージしていることが明らかになった。

文化とは非常に相対的である。カヤン女性の奇習は彼女らにとって奇習ではなく、美しい身体を飾る身体の一部であるという解釈が成り立つ。

下田 敦子 (しもだ あつこ)

現職：大妻女子大学 人間生活文化研究所 専任講師

専門：民族服飾学，生活技術論

博士 (生活科学)

フィールドは、タイ北部からミャンマー東部にかけての少数民族が暮らす山岳地域。

主な著書：

無文字社会における染織技術の伝承ータイ北部山岳民族カレン人集落における16年間フィールドサーベイの記録からー (下田敦子，家政教育社)

カヤン女性の身体変工・装飾と価値体系 (下田敦子，家政教育社)