



Morality Discourses in Tourism: A Critical Look Through a Case Study of the Ring-Wearing Kayan

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Received 6 September 2019; Received in revised form 25 December 2019

Accepted 24 January 2020; Available online 9 June 2020

Abstract

Morality discourses have become an omnipresent language to describe, interpret and act in the tourism industry. However, these imposed moral judgements about what 'proper' tourism should be, can ironically reproduce the perceived immoral practice and consequently perpetuate power imbalances. This article will use a case-study of the Kayan whose women wear heavy brass rings around their neck, and are involved in the tourism industry in Thailand. The dominant moral discourse of being passive victims of their cultural practice waiting to be gazed at, will thereby be unpacked. By giving a voice to the Kayan and having a thorough look at the context, the complexity of their lives will be revealed. It will become clear that in their particular, sometimes even restraining situation, many Kayan are actually strategically using their ethnic identity to negotiate their positions to gain access to certain resources or resist more powerful forces.

Keywords

Morality, Ethical travel, Kayan, Ethnic identity, Harmful cultural practices

Introduction

The Kayan, popularly called the 'longnecks', are particularly remarkable because the women of this group wear a brass coil around their necks. This ethnic feature is of high interest with tourists who like to gaze at the exotic Other. Kayan villages that cater for tourists and the ring-wearing practice in itself evoke different emotional responses with visitors. Some are in complete awe, but some are completely disgusted. The mainstream discourse often depicted in the media represents these women as victims, for example, being called "hostages to tourism" (Mirante, 1990), "living in human zoos" (Rose, 1995, p.4; Theurer, 2014, p.55), or forced to wear the rings to cater for tourists (Theurer, 2014).

This mainstream discourse has an undeniable morality. Generally, its overtone is that it is a wrong or despicable form of tourism. The moralization of tourism and what 'proper' tourism is, has a long history in tourism studies. Since the sixties, tourism was considered either inherently "good" or "bad", whereby a lot of attention was given to the (in)authenticity and staged performances within the tourism industry (Castañeda, 2012; Mostafanezhad & Hannam, 2014). By the nineties, scholars did not consider the tourism industry as homogenized, but started to look at the diverse range of stakeholders involved in tourism and attempted to define what ethically responsible tourism should be (Castañeda, 2012; Mostafanezhad & Hannam, 2014). The moralization of tourism became more frequently linked with terms as ethical, sustainable, responsible, eco, sensitive, alternative, and so on (Baptista, 2014; Castañeda, 2012; Molz, 2013; Lansing & De Vries, 2006). They imply promises of positive effects for specific stakeholders, different forms of cultural heritage and the environment (Castañeda, 2012), such as economic benefits for local communities, non-commodified tourist arrangements, or environmental preservation (Baptista, 2014; Lansing & De Vries, 2006; Molz, 2013; Wearing & Wearing, 2014). Nowadays these terms have become signifiers for "all morally superior forms of being on holiday" (Baptista, 2014, p.125).

The aim of this paper is to take a critical look at the underlying morality that is feeding into discourses of 'ethical' travel or 'sustainable' tourism¹. By using a case study of the Kayan who cater to tourists, I would like to unpack the morality discourses evoked by encounters with the ring-wearing women. Who decides what is moral or ethical? Are these discourses covering up or sustaining (hidden) power imbalances? Are all these proposals for ethical or sustainable tourism always ethical or moral? What does this morality label invoke, and what implications does it have? How do the Kayan perceive this morality label?

¹ Although the terms tourism and travel are contested and their use is not considered as neutral, I will use these two terms interchangeably as umbrella terms for all kinds of mobilities for leisure seeking activities.

This study is therefore a critical reflection on the moral values and assumptions that lie beneath particular visions of what tourism is or should be (Caton, 2012; Mostafanezhad & Hannam, 2014). These morals are often implicitly rather than clearly expressed. They are often taken for granted and not perceived as morals anymore (Fassin, 2012; Mostafanezhad & Hannam, 2014). The goal of this paper is to uncover these implicit moral norms underlying our judgements and sentiments which shape our opinions regarding what 'proper' tourism should be. These morals can then be scrutinized to disclose if they really invoke the justice aimed for, or if they rather create or sustain inequality. Data will be drawn from a case study of the Kayan because even though a visit to their village is a very popular, but highly controversial highlight on many tourists' itineraries, few academic research or literature is available about the Kayan and their points of view. It is hoped that this research will eventually lead to a more inclusive and critical approach in tourism studies and what is considered as 'proper' tourism in general.

Firstly, the theoretical framework used will be further elaborated. Thereafter, a historical overview of the Kayan, their arrival in Thailand and consequent involvement in the tourism industry will be provided in order to have a thorough understanding of the context. This will be followed by a brief overview of my fieldwork. After this, the meaning and function of the rings will be discussed and how they have evolved through time and space. This way the ring-wearing practice can be comprehended from the Kayan's point of view. Subsequently, the opinions of the Kayan will be contrasted with mainstream morality discourses in the tourism industry. Attention will thereby be given to the implications of these discourses on the Kayan.

Theoretical framework

The implication of morality in tourism has received little direct consideration in the past. However, a moral dimension is present in all human activities, including tourism encounters (Caton, 2012; Fassin, 2012; Mostafanezhad & Hannam, 2014). Even researchers are not immune from letting moral norms slip into their interpretations (Caton, 2012; Mostafanezhad & Hannam, 2014; Fassin, 2012).

The adjective 'moral' or 'ethical' thereby encompasses what is considered 'good', 'right', 'just', 'true' or 'altruistic' (Fassin, 2012; Molz, 2013)². There is often an imaginative layer in moral norms and values. What is considered 'good' or 'right' is frequently based on ideas or beliefs about "how things should be", or "ought to be" in society (Caton, 2012, p.1907). Terms like 'ethical', 'responsible' or 'sustainable' travel are also informed by moral imaginaries about how travel or tourism ought to be. These moral terms or labels are then used to classify certain types of travelling as superior to others. They become part of our political language, as they are used to describe and interpret the tourism industry, and to justify choices made (Baptista, 2014; Fassin, 2012).

Since the moralization of tourism, these moral imaginaries have even become "driving forces in modern tourism consumption" (Baptista, 2014, p.132). Next to imaginaries about seeing the authentic, underdeveloped or exotic, Western tourists nowadays also have imaginaries about what is an acceptable or ethical way of travelling (Baptista, 2014). In the current neoliberal times where the making of the subject through smart choices is paramount, the decision to pursue 'ethical travel' is often considered as a personal or individual choice. Nonetheless, it is important to look at the forces that are operating behind these moral imaginaries (Baptista, 2014).

Adopting a critical approach to morality implies not taking for granted our common-sense moral values, judgments and sentiments. The goal is to uncover and question the "reasons, justifications and consequences, of the deployment of morality and ethics as a language to describe, interpret, and act" (Fassin, 2012, p.15) in the tourism industry, and thus to disclose if these morals really invoke justice or if they rather create or sustain inequality. Hence the broader political, economic and social context should be scrutinized as these morals do not exist in a vacuum. They are embedded in power relations and are culturally and historically inscribed (Fassin, 2012; Mostafanezhad & Hannam, 2014).

The sight of the ring-wearing Kayan women often clashes with "the West's assumed superior model of democracy, freedom and 'liberated' women" (Beckmann Al Wazni, 2015, p.326-327). The special rapporteur Coomaraswamy from the UN even classifies all cultural

² Often 'morality' is considered as being external or imposed to individuals through a system of prescriptive codes, rules or principles aimed to regulate their conduct. The term 'ethics' is usually preferred when the agency of people is studied, as the idea of ethics refers to how people behave according to what a moral life is to them (Fassin 2012). Yet, research has revealed that a clear-cut difference between the two terms seems to be difficult. 'Morality' and 'ethics' can appear at the same time, overlap and be entangled, thereby "revealing multiple logics at work" when assessing something as 'good' or 'right' (Fassin 2012, p.8). As it is not the goal of this paper to uncover the difference between what is imposed from above and what people do to act in a moral way, the terms morality and ethics will be used interchangeably. The aim is rather to have a critical look at the moral norms and values themselves that are used to judge what 'ethical travel' is.

practices that “involve ‘severe pain and suffering’ and may be considered ‘torture like’ in their manifestation” under the moral label “harmful” or “violence against women” (UN, E/CN.4/2002/83, para 6). The neck rings are not explicitly mentioned, but they do classify as harmful or violent under their definition. The weight of the rings deforms the body by pushing down the shoulders, it restricts the women’s physical movement and can be painful when they need to do physical work.

Unfortunately, the ‘harmful cultural practice’ motif is too often resorted to, without further reflection on the causes of the behavior or ignoring local women’s empowerment or agency (Beckmann Al Wazni, 2015; Gruenbaum, 2015). Under the second-wave of feminism, male patriarchy has frequently been identified as exercising control over women and their bodies, disciplining them to attain the politically or economically correct body (Bordo, 1993; Snyder-Hall, 2010). However, even if women might comply with patriarchy, rarely it is considered that they might do so willingly (Bradley & Longman, 2015). Critiques also overlook the fact that in some contexts, denying the perceived harmful cultural practice could be costlier to women, such as less access to certain resources (Lawson e.a., 2015), or that it might be a form of resistance against other power imbalances, like Muslim women who consciously choose to veil themselves to resist against Western dominant values (Beckmann Al Wazni, 2015). The more inclusive and pluralistic approach of third-wave feminism acknowledges the very different circumstances and perspectives women might have. Their focus lies on “choice” or “the ability of women to determine one’s own life path” (Snyder-Hall, 2010, p.256-259). It is argued that even if there are power imbalances or if women cannot make “perfectly free choices”, the decisions of women “about how to live their lives should [...] be respected” (Snyder-Hall, 2010, p.256). So, before a practice is automatically classified as harmful, the voices and experiences of the women concerned should be taken into account. How do the Kayan perceive the wearing of the rings? Are they really passive victims of their practice or do they have agency in their particular context?

Next to the perceived harmfulness, the commodification of their practice has also provoked moral judgements. The endless tourist’s desire to gaze at the ‘exotic’ Other has been considered as a form of entrapment of the Kayan in the tourism industry. The focus is thereby often on their restrictive living conditions in the villages. Also, the women are deemed as being forced to continue with a harmful practice because of the financial gain through tourism. They are seen as passive victims of a ruthless tourism industry who keeps them as “hostages” in “human zoos” (Mirante, 1990; Rose, 1995, p.4; Theurer, 2014, p.55). Yet, although their situation and living conditions are undeniably restrictive, it does not automatically imply that the Kayan consider themselves as victims. Research has shown that people can be aware of the negative effects of tourism without subduing “their acceptance and support of [it]” (Lansing & De Vries, 2007, p.81). Moreover, the Kayan are not a uniform

group. What is unacceptable for some, can be fine for other Kayan, because “ not all members of a community share the same needs” (Mowforth and Munt as cited in Lansing & De Vries, 2007, p.82). Nor do labels like ‘ethical’ or ‘sustainable’ automatically entail that it is ethical or sustainable in all contexts and for all persons involved (Bradley & Longman, 2015; Lansing & De Vries, 2007). In the case of the Kayan, we must ask how they themselves view their involvement in the tourism industry. Do they see themselves as trapped in their situation or do they have room for negotiating their position(s)? Are there any differences in opinions amongst the Kayan?

The Kayan: origins and arrival in Thailand

Literature on the Kayan is limited, so most of the information provided here was obtained through interviews with the Kayan (living in Thailand). The Kayan are an ethnic minority originally from Myanmar. They have been classified by the Myanmar government as a subgroup of the Karenni, who are nowadays called the Kayah and are one of the seven big minority groups recognized in Myanmar. The Karenni/Kayah are, in turn, a subgroup of the Karen (Oxford Burma Alliance, 2016). Most of the Kayan are located in Karenni (Kayah) State. Some also live in Shan State, Mandalay and around Kayin State (Naw Hsa Eh Ywar, 2013). Most of my research participants came from Kayah State.



Figure 1 Myanmar and its States

Source: Ministry of Labour, Immigration and Population, 2017.

The Kayan and the rings

The ring-wearing Kayan girls usually start at the age of four or five. The rings are one long coil wound around the neck, a process which can take several hours depending on the length. It is a real art to wind the coil in a symmetric and evenly formed spiral around the neck and demands a lot of strength in the arms. Being a task strictly reserved for women, only some women in the village are endowed with this skill and have the power to do so.

About every three to five years more weight is added. The old coil is taken off and a new, longer coil with more weight is put around their neck. There seems to be a lot of variation in the rings worn. Some wear very thick coils, other wear quite thin spirals. Some wear a one-piece set; some have a two-piece set. It depends on the girl or woman who is wearing them, the weight they can carry, and the budget they have to spend on the rings. The material used is diverse. Some people indicate the rings can be made from an alloy of

silver, brass and gold (Khoo Twe, 2002), others claim the Kayan used to wear silver rings (Boorootpat & Kummuang, 1999), or gold according to my participants. The material used nowadays is brass.



Figure 2 A Kayan woman wearing a two-piece set

Source: Embring, Corey.



Figure 3 Four Kayan women wearing a one-piece set of different height and width
Source: Embring, Corey.

Between the ages of eighteen and twenty or when they marry, they usually stop adding more weight. A copy of an X-ray clearly shows the neck is not stretched, but the shoulders are being pushed down because of the weight of the rings. The longer sets can add up to seven kilograms. In contrast to what many authors have claimed before (Davis, 1988; Rose, 1995), the women will not die when they remove the rings.

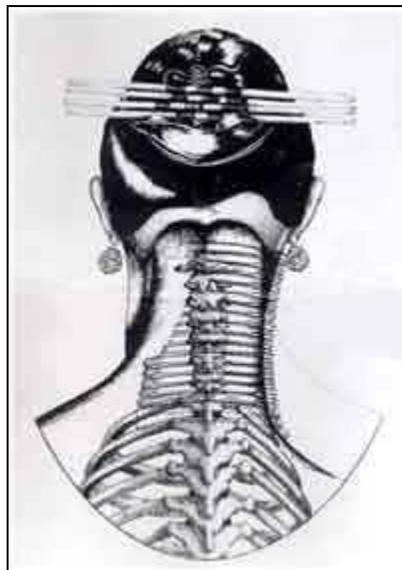


Figure 4 On the left is a shoulder of a normal person, on the right a shoulder of a Kayan lady
Source: Van Roekegem, Johan.

Kayan nowadays

The public infrastructure in Kayah State is substandard. Due to its remoteness, only a few villages can be reached by vehicle, which has resulted in a lack of basic infrastructure, including limited electricity and water supply (UNHCR, 2014). With the conflict in Kayah State being the longest conflict in the country, the war has had devastating effects. About twenty-two per cent of the population of Kayah State has been displaced (Ma & Kusakabe, 2015; Grundy-Warr & Wong, 2002). Many of these displacements were due to forced relocations. In the early eighties, the Myanmar army targeted ethnic army strongholds in the border zones. They declared these strongholds rebel zones and prohibited villagers from living there due to security reasons. Villagers were then forced to move to areas under tight military surveillance. Villagers who failed to comply were considered rebels and shot (Grundy-Warr & Wong, 2002).

These invasions, forced displacements, and general insecurity has compelled many Kayah and Kayan to flee to safer heavens. As Thailand was just next door, it became a popular refugee site in the late eighties. On the other hand, people who chose to remain in Myanmar are now living in an underdeveloped area. This situation often causes them to go to Thailand which is considered to be a place with more opportunities for work and a better quality of life.

The Kayan in Thailand

There are no exact figures about how many Kayan are currently living in Thailand. Estimates range widely from a few hundred up to almost three thousand (Barron et. al, 2007; Manson & Manson, 2005; Schliesinger, 2000). The situation of the Kayan living in Thailand is also quite diverse. It varies a lot depending upon when they entered Thailand and in which village they live, but roughly they can be split up in two groups: those who entered Thailand as refugees and those who were later recruited in Myanmar by businessmen.

In the beginning of the eighties, when the war was fully raging in Myanmar, some Kayan groups decided to move with the Karenni rebel army for protection. On the run for the Myanmar army for more than two years, they were pushed right next to the Thai border and were living under the protection of the Karenni army. A Thai travel agency, aware about the presence of the Kayan next to the Thai border, made arrangements with the Thai and Karenni army to take tourists to meet the Kayan. The agency figured that the Kayan women who wear brass rings around their necks might be of interest for tourists. A scenic boat trip along the Pai river in Mae Hong Son took them right over the border into Myanmar where the Kayan were residing (Meyer, 1988).

A few years later, their village was attacked by the Myanmar army so the Kayan and Karenni army were obliged to go into Thai territory. The plan was to keep a low profile until

the attacks were over. However, the Myanmar army occupied their old village across the border so they could not go back. Being stuck in Thailand, the Karenni army agreed to work together with the Thai as they had nowhere else to go and fighting the Thai army would be pointless. In the beginning, the Thai government considered them as having entered the country illegally. They had to live in special camps along the border (UNHCR/ILO, 2007).

Towards the end of the eighties, a couple of Thai government officials allegedly came to the camp to meet the Karenni army leader. Still having memories about the interest of tourists to see the Kayan, they asked for his permission to let some Kayan go back to Mae Hong Son. As tourists are not allowed to go inside these concealed camps, arrangements were made to allow the Kayan to live in villages outside of these camps (Grundy-Warr & Wong, 2002). The first tourist village erected on Thai soil was named "Huay Pu Keng" (HPK) and was originally under the care of a Thai person. Later, a refugee camp moved to another place but allowed the Kayan who lived in the camp to stay on the old site (UNHCR/ILO, 2007). This way a second Kayan village for tourists was established, named "Baan Nai Soi".

At the end of the nineties another group of Kayan came to Thailand because they were recruited by Thai and Karenni businessmen. They noticed the high interest from tourists and consequently the big money opportunities from such 'longneck' villages. With still a lot of Kayan in Myanmar wanting to flee the dire living conditions and hearing success stories from Kayan already in Thailand, they were easily convinced. In the beginning some horror stories came to the surface. A businessman allegedly kidnapped some Kayan with the promise that they would join their relatives in Mae Hong Son. However, he brought them to a village far from Mae Hong Son denying them any contact with their families, and allegedly controlled them at gunpoint. Fortunately, the village and the person in question were uncovered and the Kayan involved were released (Chant, 1999). Nevertheless, this story is one of the reasons these Kayan villages received a negative reputation in the media. It did not stop the curiosity of the tourists though. The business is still booming. More and more Kayan are being recruited and new villages are opening, scattered from Mae Hong Son, to Pai, Chiang Mai, Thaton and Chiang Rai. A Kayan village has even been set up in Pattaya, a beach front city popular for its go-go bars.

Two kinds of villages

For the sake of clarity and to demonstrate that the Kayan in Thailand are not a homogenized group, a distinction will be made between two different kinds of villages: the semi-independent and the 'business' villages³. This is not intended to put any moral judgement on what is good or more preferable above the other.

The first village on Thai soil was Huay Pu Keng (HPK) and originally consisted of Kayan refugees. Over time, the village has evolved from a set-up village for tourists to a rather 'real' or semi-independent village⁴, with an elected village head responsible for the management of the village and a school subsidized by the Thai government. The involvement of the non-Kayan person, who is in control of the village and previously collected all entrance fees before giving a fraction of the income to the Kayan, has also been scaled back. Nowadays, tourists can directly pay the Kayan. In total there are about 110 Kayan people living in this village.

The villages that will be called 'business' villages are completely controlled and managed by non-Kayan. A lot of Kayan in these villages are recruited by businessmen in Myanmar. Some have already lived in Thailand for more than ten years and invited more family members to join them. Mostly the younger and most beautiful female relatives are invited. Family members do not always stay in the same village but are scattered over many different villages in the North of Thailand. It is difficult to give exact numbers because villages close and new villages are being set up all the time and the 'villagers' often move from one village to another.

³ The Kayan villages that were known during the time of research:

- Chiang Rai province: 'Union of Hilltribes Villages' and 'Mae Kaow Tum Ta Suk'
- Chiang Mai province: 'Huay Nam Ya', 'Huay Pa Rai', Long Neck village near Tiger Kingdom, and 'Baan Tong Luang'
- Mae Hong Son province: 'Huay Pu Keng' (HPK), 'Baan Nai Soi', 'Huay Seua Tao' and 'Mae Ping Long Neck village'
- Pattaya: unnamed village

⁴ The other (semi) independent village is Baan Nai Soi, located next to a UN refugee camp. At the time of research nobody was in control of the village. It was the only village that did not collect an entrance fee. There were only about ten to twenty people living in the village. Due to a sharp drop in tourist numbers a lot of Kayan had left the village to go live in the more profitable 'business' villages. The Kayan still living there were looking for ways to make their village more attractive for tourists again, and to persuade more Kayan to go live there again.

Research details

Having been involved in the tourism industry in Thailand for over ten years, I have paid almost monthly visits to Kayan villages. The first years were mainly to Huay Pu Keng (HPK) village in Mae Hong Son, and later mostly to the Union of Hilltribe village located in Chiang Rai. These regular encounters were complemented with ethnographic research spread over different periods, places and settings. In March 2015, I visited eight different Kayan villages during a four-day trip. In July 2016, I lived for ten days in Huay Pu Keng (HPK) village in Mae Hong Son and in August 2016, I stayed for two days at Nam Ya (NY) village in Chiang Mai. I have also been involved with an organization which was organizing workshops to help the villagers to attract more tourists.

The main part of my ethnographic research was observation and to a lesser extent participation. The scale shifted according to the place and setting I was in (Passaro as cited in Davies, 2012). It went from mainly observing while staying in the villages to almost full participation during the workshops. These shifts gave me the opportunity to view my participants from different angles and consequently gave a more profound insight into their lives. A substantial part of my research also consisted of in-depth and informal interviews. I have done eighteen in-depth interviews and interviewed about ten different people in a more unstructured style, some of them multiple times on different occasions⁵. As the focus was on the ring-wearing women, the majority of my participants were women, however an inclusive approach was adopted so men were also included. Moreover, a selection was made to cover different age ranges and backgrounds⁶.

As the goal of this paper is to uncover (implicit) moral sentiments and judgements evoked by the encounter with the Kayan, an emic approach was adopted. This approach offers a more profound insight into the lived world of the Kayan, their stances on the ring-wearing practice and involvement in the tourism industry. This can give food for thought to

⁵ More specifically, I have done 10 in-depth interviews in HPK, 1 in 'Huay Sue Tao', 1 in 'Baan Nai Soi', 3 in Nam Ya village, 1 in Mae Rim village (near Tiger Kingdom), 1 in 'Union of Hilltribe Villages', and 1 in 'Mae Kaow Tum Ta Suk'. For the casual interviews, I have interviewed 5 persons in 'HPK', 1 in 'Huay Sue Tao', 3 during the workshop in Pai, 1 in 'Mae Kaow Tum Ta Suk' and 1 in 'Union Hilltribe Villages'.

⁶ Some additional remarks regarding my research: At the entrance of every field I informed all my participants about my research intentions (except the four-day research in March 2015). This way the Kayan could decide what to tell me or even refrain to cooperate with me. Because I wanted them to feel at ease, I did not re-emphasize this every day or with every conversation. I am aware this might have improved contact and that some people might have said things they would have not said if they were updated every time about my intentions. Because I did not re-announce my presence every time or constantly made sure my participants were aware of the implications of what they are saying or doing, I have decided to guard their privacy and to alter all the names even in my field notes.

consider their situation from a different perspective than the mainstream discourse often depicted in the media. Their points of view can be contrasted with common moral judgements and beliefs on how tourism should be. It permits to look at moral positions from different sides and to question taken-for-granted moral beliefs. Hence, it also allows researchers greater reflexivity in their work to avoid infusing their moral views into their interpretations (Fassin, 2012).

The evolution of the rings

The rings function as an important identity marker for the Kayan. The sheer property of the material of the rings, namely the heavy brass coil, has a direct impact on the formation of their body and permanently changes their body structure. Even if they decide to take off the rings, their shoulders will never return to the same position as a 'normal' person, so they can easily be recognized as Kayan. In this way, their identity as Kayan is literally inscribed onto their body. The rings also function as an individual identity marker among the Kayan. Some women wear the rings to indicate their status, while other women wear them to enhance their beauty. They are "ways of writing one's autobiography on the surface of the body" (Schildkrout, 2004, p.338). Women also told me they keep wearing the rings because they feel responsible for upholding Kayan tradition. The rings can be heavy and painful though. One of my participants talked about the rings cutting into the flesh of her shoulders when she did heavy work. For her, it represents she is in control of her emotions and feelings. The rings are thus also a marker of one's inner strength to endure difficult situations.

Over time however, the meaning and function of the rings for the Kayan has changed. This is not unusual, as cultures are not static (Meyer & Geschiere, 2003). In these current globalizing times, more and more influences from the 'outside' world are happening and translated locally (Appadurai, 1990). Hence, also, markers on the body are volatile. They "mean one thing in one period, and then shift as they move through time and space" (Schildkrout, 2004, p.235). Nowadays the ring-wearing practice is in decline in Myanmar. My participants told me the girls in Myanmar want to be educated. If they go to school wearing the rings, it makes them feel shy because they feel different than the other students. Also, they do not want to endure the inconveniences caused by the rings anymore. All my research participants confirmed it is now up to the girl or woman involved if they want to wear the rings or not. In Thailand on the other hand, the practice seems to continue or even be picking up as the women see advantages of still wearing the rings.

Ma Noe was born in Myanmar but has lived in Thailand since her forties. With a blessed age of almost seventy, she is one of the eldest women of the village (HPK). She has a never-ending smile, dark red lips colored by intensive betelnut chewing and a face showing the signs of her age. It is impressive how her small body carries the weight of the rings.

She wears one of the longest sets in the village, five kilograms in total. She told me: "I have lost my husband at a young age (during the war). I had two children to take care of, and I was scared as a woman alone. The Myanmar army had a bad reputation. I was scared they would come to rape me. Relatives told me about a group of Kayan who had fled to Thailand. They were living in a village for tourists. The women just had to sit on their porch waiting for the tourists to come and take pictures. They just had to weave some scarfs. I thought, I can do this as well. This life is much more comfortable than the life in Myanmar, working hard on the rice fields. I do not have to be scared anymore and my children can have a better future."

The move to Thailand and the consequent involvement in the tourism industry has influenced the meaning and function of the rings. Next to being a marker of their identity, it has also become a 'ticket' for a better and safer future, and even a source of income. Tourists go to the Kayan villages to see the ring-wearing women. In order to enter the village, the tourists have to pay a fee. The women with rings and complete traditional outfit are entitled to a monthly salary. Needless to say, tourists are only attracted to women who wear the rings, so these women have a better chance to sell their souvenirs. This money is for their own pocket. On top of that, they also have a better chance of receiving tips from tourists who take pictures. Hence, the rings of the Kayan in Thailand have become commodified. Their tradition of wearing the rings has acquired a monetary value, and this is often what instigates the Kayan women to pick up the wearing of the rings.

Ma Li is twenty-five and an energetic young lady. She arrived in Thailand almost six years ago. She had always felt like she wanted to discover the world and know what is outside of Myanmar. That is why she decided to travel and come to Thailand. She visited HPK village, fell in love with a man, and married him about five years ago. Ma Li decided to wear the rings about two years ago. Before, she was not interested in them, but when she came to Thailand she noticed she could earn money from wearing them, therefore she became interested. She feels happier in Thailand than in Myanmar, because in Myanmar she had to go work on the field every day, even when it was raining. In Thailand, she only needs to work on the field some days as she can also earn money from the tourists. She feels very happy that she can earn her own money. She is also happy that she can share her money with her husband, that there is no competition like "this is my money and this is yours." If her husband would ask her to take off the rings she is only willing to do so, if he gives all the money he earns to her.

Although the wearing of the rings can be painful, the source of income created through wearing the rings is often considered more advantageous and less difficult than their former life in Myanmar. Moreover, the monetary income seems to empower the women financially in their community. The fact that Ma Li would ask her husband to give all his earned money to her if she would lose her income from the rings shows her decision-making

power in managing the family finances. This is a significant shift because I was told that normally the men are in control of the money and that the men are supposed to be the money earners. The money earning potentials are not the same in every village though. HPK village, located in Mae Hong Son, is a quite remote place in the mountains of Northern Thailand. It takes a horrendous five-hour drive and about 1.864 curves from the nearest big city Chiang Mai, which discourages a lot of tourists from making the journey to Mae Hong Son. More conveniently located 'business' villages around tourist hotspots in Chiang Mai and Chiang Rai are therefore preferred on many tourist itineraries.

Sitting at a table in the main street of HPK village, Ma Ja strolled by and came for her daily talk with me. One morning she asked me "Did you hear already?" "What?", I replied. "This morning, very early when the sun just came up, a man and woman left the village to go to Chiang Mai. They hear longneck can earn almost 14.000 baht per month. They leave their baby with their parents... It is bad... But she has many debts everywhere. Not only in the village but also in the Thai village a little bit further from here. She needs money to pay back everybody."

Nam Ya (NY) is such a 'business' village where earnings are much better. Ma Pang sat down on a plastic chair under her stilt house, encouraging me to eat more of her very delicious minced pork wrapped in pumpkin leaves. "Life in Myanmar is difficult", she sighed. "We do not have a lot of opportunity to earn cash money and life is very expensive. "This meat", pointing at what I was eating, "is double the price in Myanmar compared to Thailand. Vegetables are sometimes even more expensive. We come to work in Thailand because we can earn cash money and send it back home to our parents. Because the life in Thailand is much cheaper we can save a lot of money. Things have changed for the Kayan, before only the rich could afford to buy the rings. Nowadays it is the poor that have to wear the rings."

In the 'business' villages the rings are often their only source of income. They are not allowed to cultivate the land to grow vegetables or raise pigs for their own consumption or for sale like in HPK. The story of Ma Pang indicates that the Kayan living in these 'business villages' are more in need of cash, not only for their own lives but also to take care of their often very large families who still reside in Myanmar. They are like migrant workers, coming to Thailand to work as tourist caterers to be able to support their families back home. Therefore, the function of the rings as a money earning tool has become more significant in the 'business' villages. The Kayan women living in those villages are solely using their Kayan identity to earn money.

Because the dependence on the rings for money is much higher in the 'business' villages, almost all the women and young girls wear the rings. The children go to public schools near the city where they are not allowed to wear the rings, so they have started to

wear removable rings. In this way, the children can help their parents during the weekend or school holidays. These removable rings are now also used by some adolescent girls or adults. In order to cater to the tourist's desire to gaze at the rings and under the pressure of earning cash money, the Kayan women have started to use a different kind of rings. These removable rings are used to take the advantage of earning money without the usual physical disadvantages and discomforts of wearing the rings. They can be considered as the total commodification of the rings as the function is completely focused on earning money. Nearly all previous identity markers of the rings have become lost. These removable rings all look alike, there is almost no differentiation in height, thickness, weight and in the art of putting the coil around the neck. In HPK, the removable rings are explicitly forbidden by the village head. Whoever decides to leave HPK to go live in a 'business' village is not allowed to come back. The village head, backed by the other villagers, indicates that HPK wants to preserve the 'traditional' life of the Kayan. Whoever wants to abuse their culture only for the sake of earning money is not welcome in HPK.



Figure 5 Removable rings on a child. The vertical interruption is clearly visible

Source: personal collection.

The usage of the removable rings has led to an opposing movement that focuses on Kayan traditions and tries to keep hold of them or 'fix' them. This way a boundary is put between the cultural 'preservers' and the cultural 'abusers'. "It is an attempt to fix the flow and mark boundaries in the ongoing flux of [homogenizing] globalization processes" (Meyer & Geschiere, 2003, p7). This movement to 'fix the flow' is not surprising when ethnicity is becoming more commodified. As Comaroff and Comaroff (2009, p. 24) have argued,

the ability to exist as an ethnic group depends on their capacity to position themselves in the global circulation of capital. This especially holds true if they do not have a lot of other options to earn cash money in the ever-growing capitalist world. So, in order to fortify themselves these groups will have to lay claim on certain elements of tradition or cultural belonging. Consequently, there will be a bigger concern with identifying who is inside or outside the group, or who has “ownership of the ‘native’ cultural products and practices” and who has not (Comaroff & Comaroff, 2009, p.37).

The rings and ‘ethical’ tourism

The commodification of the rings or more generally, their Kayan identity is brought about by the tourism industry. Even though the Kayan villages are sometimes very remote and disconnected from internet and even electricity, they are still involved with the global world through tourism. They are part of global flows like financescapes, ethnoscapescapes and mediascapes to use Appadurai’s (1990) concepts. Tourists’ desire for an encounter with the ‘exotic’ connects people from all over the world (Meyer & Geschiere, 2013). Tourism imaginaries are thereby travelling around and influencing whoever enters into contact with the tourist industry

Ma Ja asked me: “So you have visited many other longneck villages already? Where do they have the most beautiful longneck women?” I answered: “Over here (HPK), because here they only wear the real rings”. It made her smile. She told me that the other village in Mae Hong Son, named Huay Sue Tao, is very popular with the Thai and Chinese tourists because there are a lot of cute girls over there. “They only want to take pictures of the beautiful ones so the owner only wants the most beautiful girls in her village”.

The tourism industry thrives on fantasies based on issues of gender, sexuality, race and ethnicity (Kinnaird & Hall as cited in Pritchard & Morgan, 2000; Mostafanezhad & Hannam, 2014). The advertisement is often shaped upon “a particular kind of tourist: white, Western, male and heterosexual” (Richter, as cited in Pritchard & Morgan, 2000, p.889), “privileging the gaze of the ‘master subject’ over others” (Pritchard & Morgan, 2000, p.889). It perpetuates a discourse whereby the exoticized female body is generally seen as passively waiting for the tourists to come and gaze at her (Aitchison, 2001).

These discourses and imaginaries are travelling via mediascapes through a global world and are eventually influencing which Kayan bodies are eligible for work in the tourism industry and which are not. In Huay Sue Tao village, only the most beautiful girls are accepted. Ma Ja also added that Western tourists are not so much interested in the beauty as in the most elongated neck. I have visited a ‘business’ village in Chiang Mai that specifically seemed to cater for these kinds of tourists. There were about eighty percent elderly women, which is exceptional compared with other villages. The elderly women are

probably of interest because they still have the very long necks; much longer than the younger generation who are not willing to wear such heavy rings anymore.

Tourists can be in complete awe by seeing the ring-wearing Kayan women, and lately some voices are even rising to promote visits to the Kayan villages. However, many online reviews and feedback from tourists while I was involved in the tourism industry indicate that most Westerners are disappointed after visiting these villages. Even the mainstream discourse in the media claims the villages look like a “human zoo”, where the “women are forced to wear the rings” (Mirante, 1990; Theurer, 2014). At the workshop in Pai, all participants had to give their opinion on tourism in the Kayan villages. Most of the Westerners expressed their sadness by comparing the village with a human zoo where women are just sitting passively, waiting to be gazed at by the tourists. The Kayan on the other hand said they liked the tourists a lot. The tourists gave them a chance to earn money and to learn about the world. They did not say anything about feeling gazed at or feeling objectified through the gaze of the tourists. However, they said they do not like it when outsiders call them “giraffe women” or call their village a “human zoo”. This would imply they are considered as animals, even lower than human beings.

This difference in perspective is probably due to the tendency for Westerners to look at the Kayan villages through the lens of the dominant tourism discourse. They are consequently disliking this imaginary view of ‘exotic’ passively waiting women and therefore rejecting the set-up of these villages. They are victimizing the Kayan women and feeling pity for constantly being gazed at. However, they are actually (unconsciously) looking at the Kayan from this hierarchical ‘gazing’ perspective, colored by prevailing tourism imaginaries, and then imposing their moral values on them.

d’Hautesserre (2014, p.84-86) even literally says from her visit to such a Kayan village “it was a scene for me of a most reprehensible practice, a major form of gendered political oppression.” She thereby asks “How ethical is it to gaze on certain practices that seem to cause suffering to those gazed upon?” This interpretation is a very modern view, though one that is popularly conveyed in the West. It is rooted in the modern conception of emancipated women which clashes with the ring-wearing women whose movements are confined and painful, and who are deemed as passively waiting for pictures being taken from them. For d’Hautesserre (2014, p.88) this “visual consumption [has] transformed [their] practice into an abstract, disembodied spectacle in which the body of the [Kayan] is ignored”. But it is not the touristification of the Kayan that dehumanizes and disembodies them. It is the lens through which one looks at them. By looking at them as helpless victims who do not have any agency, who do not have a voice, who are just there to be gazed at, tourists negate the Kayan women’s agency.

In her article, d’Hauteserre (2014, p.84) admits she did not do any research on the position of the Kayan women, their experience and their point of view. She relied on her own impressions as the basis of her interpretation. Hence, it might be worthwhile to ponder on how far this concept of ‘being ethical’ can be stretched. Questions that can be asked are: how ethical is it to speak for someone without knowing their point of view, or to condemn someone’s practices if one does not know their position? Is that not silencing the Other, treating them as an object that cannot speak for itself? Objectifying them is to render them dead to mere “blobs of matter”, as Ingold (2007) claims all objects are dead. However, by looking at them as a human, as alive and having the potential of agency, the situation changes. The human comes back into focus again and not the rings with some “blob of matter” in it.

In fact, the moral outrage of ethical tourists is ironically re-inscribing patriarchal perspectives, and consequently reproduces the passivity of the Kayan women. By focusing on their exotic features, the women are viewed as the Other (Aitchison, 2001, p.139-140). This creates a hierarchical difference between the ‘ethical tourists’ and ‘the Kayan women’ which renders the women “mute while the culture of the producers of such [moralizing views] ‘gains in strength and identity’” (Said as cited in Schein, 1997, p.72).

I do not claim the rings cannot be restraining at times, or that living in these villages they do not feel like they are suppressed and exploited. For example, the first Kayan who entered Thailand were treated as illegal immigrants. Until today many Kayan in HPK are still waiting for their papers to be regularized. Those without Thai nationality have to apply for special travel permits whenever they want to go around Thailand or even go abroad. In the ‘business’ villages some Kayan claimed they have a valid work permit and visa, while others claimed they did not have any legal paperwork. They also had to apply for special permits to leave their village. Moreover, most of the villages are in the hands of non-Kayan owners. An entrance fee is collected from the tourists, but only a fraction goes to the Kayan.

Many more restrictive factors can be added to this list. However, even though their situation is far from perfect, focusing only on the restraining side leads to a very biased consideration. It is true some Kayan see their situation as intolerable, like one Kayan lady who said: “I love my culture, but it is our tradition which has made me a prisoner” (Zember, 2008). Some have even taken off their rings out of protest (Ma Lo, 2008; Zember, 2008). Still, it also needs to be acknowledged that next to this, there are Kayan who think differently. Instead of objectifying all Kayan involved in tourism as passive victims, they should be considered as humans who have a voice. Through power imbalances their voices are not always heard, but unheard voices are not less valid. When judging certain forms of tourism as immoral or unethical, one’s own value framework is (unconsciously) imposed on others, thereby strengthening the voices that support one’s framework while silencing others.

The Western model of democracy, freedom and emancipation goes hand in hand with the victims-that-need-to-be-saved discourse causing the Kayan's involvement in the tourism industry to be judged as unethical. Yet, for many Kayan their involvement in the tourism industry is actually a powerful tool to negotiate their positions. Not only as an individual through the money earning potential or to improve their living conditions, but also more broadly as a separate ethnic minority trying to resist more powerful forces.

"We like the tourists...we can learn many things from them...We want to stay connected with the outside world [...] we do not want a foreign power to come and control us because we don't know anything about the world", a Kayan man told me. As Appadurai (1990, p.295) has noted "for polities of smaller scale, there is always a fear of cultural absorption by polities of a larger scale". Those in the minority are often "surrounded by 'the Other'", and in order "to survive they need strategies that allow the reproduction of their societies in a global economy" (Swain, 1993, p.47). Strategies of survival become a way to resist (global) forces and oppose assimilation. Ethnic identity can thereby be strategically used to subsist structures of domination and to get access to certain resources for survival (Comarrof & Comarrof, 2009).

Because of the rings and the consequent tourism, the Kayan can stay connected with the outside world. Instead of being a compliant, submissive body for the desires of the tourism industry, this body can also interact with the tourists. They can gain 'outside' knowledge and learn about new ways to survive or cope with their situation. In their accommodation to tourism, they have found a form of resistance at the same time. It is not done consciously every day, but it is through the mundane, repetitive acts of encounters they are learning. This way, they will not become an isolated entity somewhere in the mountains. They know what is going on around them and they are able to make conscious decisions about which direction they want to go with their village. For example, the villagers of HPK told me their aim is to stay in Thailand because many villagers, being originally refugees, cannot go back to Myanmar as their land has been confiscated. They eventually would like to create a self-sustainable village recognized by the Thai government and become completely independent of state support.

When I asked a Kayan man how he would feel if one day there would be no more Kayan who wear the rings, he answered: "How would you feel if your culture would disappear...sad of course." This was an opinion shared by many research participants. Involvement in the tourism industry can serve as a viable way to resist cultural assimilation. This happens because their identity is bringing in money, so they are stimulated to keep wearing their markers of identity (Swain, 1993). This way the ring-wearing practice does not die out and the risk of becoming slowly assimilated into the dominant group is reduced.

Concluding thoughts

“Ethical travel” and “sustainable tourism” have become buzzwords in the tourism industry. However, the discourses behind these words should be scrutinized carefully. Using moral labels does not automatically imply it is inherently moral or ethical. When certain forms of tourism are judged immoral or unethical it is important to be aware through which lens one is looking. Moral labels can be (unconsciously) used as a hidden feature to perpetuate dominant discourses, thereby creating or maintaining power imbalances. Moral sentiments, judgements and their imaginaries come from expectations about how tourism should be. But how ethical are these morals? The objective behind ethical travel is eventually to create a ‘better’ tourism industry. The scales can tip quickly though when hidden discourses are imposed on others and already vulnerable groups silenced under the guise of ‘morality’.

The tourism industry is highly ambivalent: it can be simultaneously restrictive and empowering for the people involved. In this paper, attention was mostly given to voicing Kayan who are using their situation to their advantage, who try in their specific contexts to fight for their ‘survival’ and negotiate their positions. Through this, it became clear the Kayan are not a uniform group. Some reject tourism and consider it as a prison, while others use their ethnic identity and the rings, as a tool for strategic negotiation with the State, for economic benefits or other future opportunities. Like the removable rings that are used to get more freedom in the ‘business’ villages, which in turn are firmly rejected by the Kayan in HPK who emphasize their ‘traditions’. In HPK their involvement in tourism is considered as a way to preserve their culture and to resist global forces, but also as a general improvement in their living conditions with the ultimate goal to permanently settle in Thailand. While others, especially in the ‘business’ villages, see their involvement in tourism predominantly as a way to earn money and to support their family in Myanmar.

This research pointed out that the focus should turn to the effect moral labels have on the lives of all people involved. To critically look at morality in tourism should entail a profound study of the context at hand. By providing a detailed historical overview and by using an intersectional approach that considers simultaneously cross-cutting factors such as gender, ethnicity, class or even citizenship status, the complexity of the Kayan’s lives has become clear. This has led to a deeper understanding of what is at play, instead of looking through a common lens whereby a community in their entirety is considered. A lens still often used by state and civil society actors (Bradley & Longman, 2015, p.40). Moreover, instead of asking whether tourists are responsible in perpetuating perceived unethical practices (d’Hautesserre, 2014), this research has suggested that critical studies on tourism should contribute by uncovering the discourses behind these ethical labels. This way supporting certain value frameworks to the detriment of others will be avoided, which can then lead to more inclusive approaches in tourism studies, the tourism industry in general, and what is

considered as 'ethical' travel. It would take into account all stakeholders or voices involved, resulting in more context-specific strategies to create a 'better' tourism industry. A practical contribution to the Kayan's situation could be a better distribution of information on their history and current living circumstances through for example well-educated guides, informative pamphlets at the village entrance, or interactive activities to enhance contact with the Kayan, which could alleviate a lot of moral judgements on their involvement in the tourism industry.

Acknowledgements

Special thanks to Dr. Alexandra Denes for her endless support and valuable suggestions for the improvement of this article.

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