



**Location:** With a population approaching 150,000 people, the Padaung inhabit places near thick forests west of the Salween River and throughout the Pekon Hills. The traditional Padaung homeland is northwest of Loikaw, the capital of Kayah State. Other communities have spread as far as Kayin and Shan states and the nation's capital, Naypyidaw. The 1911 Burma census returned 8,516 Padaung people, rising to 16,483 two decades later, in 1931. A few thousand Padaung people also inhabit three villages across the border in Thailand's Mae Hong Son Province, where they fled in 1988 to avoid fighting in Myanmar.

**Identity:** Although they have long been known as the Padaung, that label was given to them by Shan people. In Myanmar the self-name of this group is Lahwi, while those living in northern Thailand refer to themselves as Kayan or Tamangao and object to being called Padaung.<sup>2</sup>

**Language:** The Kayan language that is spoken by the Padaung consists of 22 consonants and 17

vowels. It also has six dialects with significant variation, although most understand the Pekon dialect.<sup>3</sup> Kayan enjoys vigorous use, but in some of the larger towns, Kayan children are not taught their mother tongue, but are using S'gaw Karen or Burmese instead.

**History:** The Padaung are undoubtedly the best known and most photographed of all ethnic groups in Myanmar due to their women wearing up to 32 heavy, gold-colored brass rings around their necks, arms and legs.<sup>4</sup> The appearance of the Padaung "Long Neck" women was such a curiosity that they were once taken to Mandalay to be exhibited before the king and his court. One tale says the Padaung were originally called Lae Khoe and ruled over the Burmese people. Later, the Burmese and other ethnic groups joined forces to fight against the Lae Khoe and drove them off their land. During the war, "a young Lae Khoe princess escaped. She wrapped the tribe's sacred gold-colored Padaung plant around her neck and declared that if the Lae Khoe failed to regain their

land, she would never take it off."<sup>5</sup>

**Customs:** In the past, Padaung girls were given their first neck rings on their fifth birthday, and one more coil was added each year until they were married. There are several theories about the origins of this custom. One is that Padaung men put the rings on their girls and women to prevent them from being carried off by marauders. Others say the rings protected the women from tiger attacks, as the beasts often attack people by biting their necks. Another theory claims the Padaung "were created after a dragon was impregnated by the wind and that the lengthening of women's necks is supposed to imitate their dragon mother's own long neck."<sup>6</sup>

**Religion:** About half of Padaung people today continue to observe the traditional animism of their ancestors, while the other half are adherents of Christianity or Buddhism. At the time of the 1931 census, 60.9% of Padaung people were animists and 35.6% were Christians, percentages that have changed little in nearly a century. Describing the animistic beliefs of the Padaung, a visitor in the early 1920s remarked: "Some of the spirits are bad, some indifferent, and a few amiable. The malignant ones are sedulously worshipped with sacrifices, the others only at moments of leisure or expansiveness, after surplus liquor has been consumed."<sup>7</sup>

**Christianity:** Today many Padaung are Christians, with numerous Baptist and Catholic churches among them. Early Baptist missionaries found medical missions to be an effective way to reach the Padaung, while the strongest resistance to their conversion came not from the people, but from British officials who despised the missionaries and spared no effort trying to disrupt their work.<sup>8</sup> The Bible is not available in Kayan, although Scripture portions were produced in 2009 using the Roman orthography. The Jesus film is available in Kayan, which has helped both to evangelize non-Christians and to strengthen the faith of believers.



**Population in Myanmar:**  
146,000 (2024)

**Location:**  
Kayin State, Kayah State, Shan State, Naypyidaw Territory

**Language Family:**  
Tibeto-Burman

**Main Religion:** Animism (50.0%)  
Christians: 43,800 (30.0%)

## OVERVIEW

**Population:**  
146,000 in Myanmar  
(2024 Joshua Project)  
133,000 (2005 E. Phan)  
16,483 (1931 census)

**Other Countries:**  
2,900 in Thailand

**Other Names:** Hashwie, Ka Kaung, Kayam, Kayang, Kayan Lae Kur, Kayan Lahwi, Kayang, Kayun, Kekawngdu, Lae Khoe, Lahwi, Lee Kur, Long Neck Karen, Padaung Karen, Padong, Padoung, Tamangao

**Location:** Kayin State: Thandaung Township in Hpa-An District; Kayah State: Loikaw and Demos townships in Loikaw District; Shan State: Pekon Township in Taunggyi District; Naypyidaw Territory: Pyinmana Township

**Language:** Kayan [pdju]

**Dialects:** 6

**Scripture:** Portions 2009

**Jesus film:** Kayan

**Global Recordings:**  
Kayan #1164

**People ID:** 14250

