

CHAPTER II
THEORETICAL APPROACHES TO ETHNIC TOURISM,
COMMODITIZATION AND ETHNIC WOMEN, AND THE IMPACTS OF
THE TOURISM INDUSTRY

2.1 Introduction

In line with my problematization, I will review the relevant theories and concepts which support my study, the theoretical approaches to be used as tools for analysis and discussion of the literature, and the empirical data. I divide this approach into two main parts. The first is concerned with the nature of ethnic tourism and the process of cultural commoditization. In this part, I will review the development of the actors in terms of ethnic tourism and the changing meaning and value of their cultural practices as part of the commoditization process. In the latter part of this chapter, I will outline the role of the Kayan women and the impacts of the tourism industry upon them. I will also review the gender situation in terms of ethnic tourism and the women's body modifications, which can be seen as not only an issue of cultural identity, but also as holding emotional and spiritual value.

Academic work focusing on the Kayan is hard to find. The first and earliest record of the Kayan appeared in *The Upper Burma Gazetteer* (J. George Scott, 1901). Scott described the Kayan's history, settlements and belief, saying that: (a) they lack knowledge of their own history and country of origin, (b) according to Kayan seniors they have moved from the southern part of Myanmar and their last place of settlement was Taung Ngu - a town from the middle part of Myanmar, and (c) the Kayan suppose that their settled region, Taung Ngu, is the center of the earth.

Marshall added a few pieces of information on the Kayan in his study of the Karen also, in which he suggested that the Kayan had formerly lived in China,

because their race, language usage and religious rituals were similar to people there. He also thought that the Darat people of Borneo in Indonesia were related to the Kayan (Marshall 1922: pp. 14-15).

Other studies have been carried out in terms of medical research on the neck strength of the Long-Necked Kayan. In his research 'Giraffe-Necked Women: A Myth Exploded', Robert Loaf (1961) explores how the Long-Necked illusion arose. About the Long-Necked Kayan, the Myanmar Encyclopedia (1963) has only half a page and just an introduction, saying that the Padaung people are honest and hard working and that they are hillside cultivators, but it does not explain any cultural background.

Nipa's (1993) short note¹ on the Padaung appears in a Tribal Research Institute publication. Nipa explores the early migration of Padaung families to near Nan Phiang Din and highlights tourist companies' involvement in the Padaung migration. Nipa also highlights the unstable situation along the Thai-Myanmar border and describes the myths of the brass rings, saying:

The ghosts and spirits will not happy with the Padaung ladies and sent a tiger to bite them. The women feared the tigers would harm them, so they put coils around their necks to protect themselves...".

Wiwat (1997) wrote an article² on the Long-Necked Padaung, entitled: 'Padaung: Magic Power in Brass Coils'. In Wiwat's article, a Long-Necked woman says that she is not happy to be seen by outsiders. Wiwat mentions the business woman who controls the villagers and how she and the KNPP share the benefits derived from them.

¹ 'Padaung', Tribal Research Institute, 17 (3) (in Thai)

² Written in Thai

An in-depth study of the Kayan tribes and the first complete book compiled by a Kayan writer, Khon Eden Phan, appeared in 2001. He joined the Karenni National Progressive Party (KNPP) and noticed people's curiosity towards the Long-necked Kayan. This experience inspired him to compile a document about them. In it he focuses on the Kayan's traditional beliefs, the origins of their language and the judiciary. His work is unique and rich in terms of information, although his comments on the origins of the Kayan, the cultural background of the brass rings and history of the Kayan alphabet are controversial and need to be revised academically. This book is written in Burmese and was distributed around the Thai-Myanmar border region when completed. An English version was published in 2005, but some chapters were omitted.

Around the same time, Myanmar anthropologist Shin Htway Yin's (2005) published her research, entitled 'Kayan (Padaung)', in Yangon. Her study focuses on the life of the Padaung in Myanmar, while Khon Eden Phan focuses on the Padaung in Thailand as well. Shin Htway Yin carefully avoids the impacts of the Myanmar military's restrictions upon the Padaung and their cultural changes, and in general, her exploration of the historical and cultural background of the Kayan (Padaung) is little different from Khon Eden Phan; most of the background is based on narratives and stories.

A student of the 1988 generation and a former student fighter, Pascal Khoo Thwe, published his memoirs called 'From the Land of Green Ghosts: A Burmese Odyssey' in 2002. He describes his childhood in a remote part of Myanmar's Shan State and his university life. He tells the story of his flight to the Thai-Myanmar border, his departure for England and his graduation from Cambridge University. His childhood was spent with his Long-Necked grandma, and his exploration of daily life in Burma is interesting, though senior Kayan scholar Khon Edin Phan has pointed out that some of the cultural factors in Khoo Thwe's book are slightly different from his own experiences and knowledge.

In a work derived from her undergraduate degree project, a Karen student, Naw Wah Paw (2005), outlines four factors that have led to the involvement of the Long-Necked Kayan in ethnic tourism, these being: the small size of their communities, peer pressure, economic opportunity and ethnic identity. She concludes that these four factors have promoted in equal measure the continuation of Long-Necked Kayan culture along the Thai-Myanmar border. She states that the rings are worn to maintain culture, but that they themselves cannot avoid the curiosity of the tourists who visit. Her study focuses on the practice of wearing the neck rings and the reasons why such a practice is encouraged. By the time I started my study, the situation had reversed; the number of Kayan taking off their rings was increasing.

2.2 Ethnic Tourism and the Commoditization of Culture

Ethnic groups are generally incorporated into the tourism market through the commoditization of their ethnicity; the production and exchange of ethnic goods and behaviors for consumption by others. As ethnic goods and behaviors are transformed into commodities for tourist's consumption, the interaction of cultural and political factors in the economy affects just how sustainable this tourism development will be (Swain 1990). It has been argued that tourism perpetuates inequalities between indigenous groups and the dominating nation state, and also between rich and poor countries (Lea 1988: 11).

2.2.1 Ethnic Tourism

Indigenous or ethnic tourism refers to tourism activities in which indigenous people are directly involved, either through control and/or by having their culture served and preserved as the essence of the attraction (Butler and Hinch 1996). The driving force behind ethnic tourism has come from the demand side – from the motivations of tourists to see cultures that are often considered wild, primitive and exotic or, as a minimum, different from their own. At the moment, the sheer scale and

speed of growth of such tourism means that it is spreading into formerly ignored peripheral and remote areas, those that are the home to ethnic peoples who have not previously been exposed to such development (ibid.).

The subject of ethnicity in the tourism literature has typically emphasized the interaction between the industry and the re-creation of ethnic symbols and material culture (van den Berghe and Keyes 1984), the crisis of identity of the local peoples relative to their identity as the objects of touristic pursuits (MacCannell 1984), and the issue of authenticity and culture change as a result of contact with tourism (van den Berghe 1992)³.

The study of tourism is meaningful, because tourism is “the largest scale movement of goods, services and people that humanity has perhaps ever seen” (Greenwood 1989) and tourism is of fundamental importance to an increasing number of people. Among many kinds of tourism industry, ethnic tourism is a form of tourism in which the cultural exoticism of the host population and its “products”, such as clothing, music, dance and cultural activities are the main attractions for the tourists. Smith (1989:2) defines “ethnic tourism” as the “marketing of quaint customs of indigenous and often exotic peoples”.

Tourism is seen as a special form of ethnic relations, in which the cultural exoticism of the host population attracts the tourist. Ethnic tourism leads to the formation of three main actor roles: (1) the tourist, who travels to seek an experience that cannot be duplicated in his or her ordinary life, (2) the tourism object - the performer who modifies his or her behavior to suit the tastes of the tourists, for gain, and (3) the middleman, who mediates the two groups and profits by their interaction (van den Berghe and Keyes 1984). Ethnic tourism constitutes a complex kind of ethnic relations among the three actors, and is an integral feature of the economic infrastructure of ethnic relations. Ethnicity is a problematic concept because of its

³ Tourism and Ethnicity: The Brotherhood of Coconuts. Jamison David, *Annals of Tourism Research* 26(4): 2

variability and the complexity of its interrelations with the social structure. Anthropological perspectives show that ethnicity is flexible and negotiated. Tourism also contributes to the process of identity formation in new nations, and may encourage the majority population to re-evaluate its perception of the ‘minorities’.

Urry recognizes that the ability to gaze is afforded to tourists by a power relationship in which agents (middlemen and local authorities) produce power effects and create tourists (cited in Cheong and Miller 2000). While ethnic tourism forms three actors, the “tourist gaze” is actually evident in the actions and discourse of the three agents involved - the travel agent, the guide and the local – among whom power flows from the agent to the target, and not vice versa (ibid.). While observing the process of commoditization within the Padaung culture, I identified this phenomenon, as well as some problematic situations arising among the three actors: the tourists, the Padaung (objects), and the local authorities and tour operators (middlemen). For their part, the Padaung know they are being controlled by the local authorities more than other ethnic migrants, due to their own unique, exotic culture, while the authorities gain a profit at the regional and national level.

Being involved with the tourist industry, as Cohen mentions, one of the impacts on the ethnic people is a “loss of dignity”. Tourists treat them as the objects of photographs and curiosity; tourism has the power to subvert the self-image and sense of personal dignity of ethnic people (Cohen 2001).

The local authorities also encounter problems ‘managing’ the Long-Necked people for tourism purposes. If they favor the Padaung more than the other ethnic migrants, they might be blamed for showing favoritism, but if they do not ‘encourage’ the Padaung to stay in a certain place, they may scatter across refugee camps - and their focus as a tourist attraction would be lost. At the same time, the local authorities face criticism and blame from the mass media, human rights groups and NGOs. In the case of China’s ethnic tourism industry, Swain (1990) points out the role of authority;

whether tourism promotes the cultural continuity of ethnic groups, or whether ethnic group's assimilation depends on the state's control in terms of the process of ethnic commoditization. Greenwood (1977: 137) also notes that local culture can be commoditized by anyone, without the consent of the participants. As a solution and to allow sustainable tourism, Swain (1989) suggests that in stable natural and political environments, ethnic tourism can promote economic development for an indigenous group, if the group owns the process in terms of its own cultural continuity and power.

2.2.2 Commoditization of Culture

The term 'commoditization' means the transformation of what is normally not a commodity into a commodity, or, put another way, to assign value to it. Arjun Appadurai gives a provisional definition of commodities as "objects of economic value" (1986). In Marxism, commoditization means the transformation of relationships, formerly untainted by commerce, into commercial relationships, relationships of exchange; of buying and selling⁴. In Marxist political economy, commoditization takes place when economic value is assigned to something that traditionally would not be considered in economic terms; for example, an idea, identity or gender. In the case of the Padaung women, their modified bodies - a form of culture identity, are also a commodity in terms of tourist consumption.

In 'Das Capital', Marx sees commodity as, in the first place, an object outside us, a thing that by its properties satisfies human wants of some sort or another. The nature of such wants; whether, for instance, they spring from the stomach or from fancy, makes no difference. Neither is it of concern to know how the object satisfies these wants, whether directly as means of subsistence, or indirectly as means of production (Marx 1992). Commoditization is viewed as an all-pervasive characteristic of modern capitalism and involves commodity production and exchange, the mass

⁴ <http://www.marxists.org/glossary/terms/c/o.htm>

manipulation of commodity signs and the standardization of products, tastes and experiences. Such processes have important consequences for the reification of consciousness, and hence for the smooth reproduction and expansion of contemporary capitalism. Tourism, as a complex socio-cultural dimension of modernity, is subject to the same general principles of capitalist consumer culture.

“Colorful” local costumes and customs, rituals and feasts, and folk and ethnic arts become touristic services or commodities, as they come to be performed or produced for tourists’ consumption (Cohen 1988: 372). The commoditization of ethnic culture and identity; however, does not mean that the ethnic group exists only for economic gain. For those involved, the process of claiming their ethnic identity is constituted of contradictory moments. In his study, Schein argues that the construction of the Miao (Chinese ethnic group) identity cannot be understood without considering the state policy which has liberalized economic structures in an attempt to generate foreign cash flows. Schein points to the gendered dimension of this phenomenon, noting that the “image” of the Miao, coveted and sentimentalized by both the Chinese majority and by foreigners, is, in fact a feminine body (Schein 2000).

In the case of commoditizing Tibetan people, the Chinese State plays a critical role in defining China's ethnic tourism industry, through its regulation of tourism investment, production and consumption. The State in this case is the mediator of the relations between producers, marketers and consumers in terms of China's ethnic tourism, and in this case, it is the State which has defined the commodity, and who and what constitutes an ethnic group. Added to this, there are some ethnic groups with whom there are definite economic advantages in promoting their ethnicity for commoditization (Stoller 2001).

Official Chinese ideology protects national minority groups and at the same time promotes their ultimate assimilation. From this perspective, ethnic tourism is intended to be used economically as a temporary cultural phenomenon, not as a

vehicle for an ethnic group's sustainability (Swain 1989). For indigenous groups in China, ethnic tourism reinforces their level of separation from the majority, while integrating them into the State economy. Whether tourism promotes the cultural continuity of the ethnic groups in question or not, their level of assimilation depends on the State's allocation of control as part of the process of ethnicity commoditization (Stoller 2001).

Commoditization of a culture can change not only the meaning of cultural products, but also the human relations between the producer and the purchaser, the history of these relations and their ethnic identities (Howell 1994, Erisman 1983, Greenwood 1989).

2.3 Ethnic Women and the Tourism Industry

In this study, I believe that I should discuss gender, since the Padaung's exotic cultural practices represent and belong to the females of the group. The quest for authenticity within the tourist industry takes the form of the Long-Necked Padaung women's body modifications. Padaung women are part of an objectification process, one which assigns meaning to people who are treated as an object by other people. A Padaung woman's body is the object of the tourists' gaze and their photos. Urry points out that "the combination of relations of gender and ethnic subordination...help construct very young Asian women as objects of a tourist/sexual gaze" for visitors from other societies who are "in a sense ethnically dominant". So the resulting tourist pattern cannot be analyzed separately from gender relations and racial subordination (Urry 1991).

Since the 1950s, the term gender has been increasingly used to distinguish a social role (gender role) and/or personal identity (gender identity) from a person's biological sex. There is a debate as to what extent gender is a social construct and to what extent it is a biological construct. One point of view in the debate is social

constructionism, which suggests that gender is entirely a social construct, whilst, in contrast to social constructionism, essentialism suggests that it is entirely a biological construct. Some gender associations change as society changes, yet much controversy exists over the extent to which the gender role is simply a stereotype, an arbitrary social construction, or a natural innate difference.

Foucault's agents perform their power via the construction and exertion of knowledge, normalizing discourse (what is acceptable and not acceptable) and an "inspecting gaze". Among them, the gaze is especially relevant to the discussion of power within the tourism industry, because seeing is so much a part of the touristic experience, and because the manipulation of imagery is so important in terms of marketing (Cheong and Miller 2000).

Gender identity itself is seen by Christine Helliwell (1993) as ambiguous, as she finds that gender in Southeast Asia is dependent on a number of different cultural factors. Helliwell argues that no woman is simply a woman, but is also a mother, a wife, a member of a clan or tribe, rural or urban; therefore, although the category 'woman' is everywhere linked in some way to biology, the category varies greatly from context to context. Tourism needs to be considered as a powerful cultural form and process, one which both shapes and is shaped by a gendered construction of space, nation and culture (Aitchison 1999).

2.3.1 Women's Body Modification as Cultural Identity and Symbol

It is difficult to know the true story, history and meaning of the Long-Necked Padaung culture. Some Padaung women say that they believe beauty means having a long neck, which makes it as graceful as a swan's. This is the reason given by the Padaung women for their body modifications; some say that wearing brass rings reminds them of their myth of origin; that their ancestor is a *nagar* (a mythical dragon/snake). Body image is a person's perception of his or her own physical

appearance, and in the case of the Paduang's body modification, the custom should have strong implications of power, rather than signify exploitation.

The human body modifications that take place here may be considered a form of social symbolism, as the rings are portable family shrines and represent family treasures and miraculous power. The number and value of the rings show social status and respect to the wearer's family (P. Khoo Thwe 2002). That humans shape, change and control the material world is readily apparent and uncontroversial, but less obvious is the way in which objects in turn shape human existence. The idea of the social life of things addresses the interactions between human beings and the material world in a way that pays particular attention to the specific reactions elicited by objects (Appadurai [ed.] 1986).

In the case of the Kui elephant people⁵, Komatra (1998) points out that the province is proudly named "the Land of Elephants" and its insignia bears an image of a sacred elephant, while the little known Kui people keep elephants and perform elephant shows. The Kui prefer to recognize them as 'Kui', which means 'human' or 'people', and they call themselves *Kui Ajang*, or 'elephant people', but in Thailand they are known and referred to as *Suai* or 'tribute people'. Similarly, the Padaung's neck rings have become famous as an icon of Mae Hong Son Province, as the Province is trying to promote ethnic tourism. The Long-Necked Padaung want outsiders to see their cultural practices - as part of their identity, not as an object of the tourists' gaze, but most tourists seem to treat them as 'giraffe women'; something exotic in a human zoo. By persuading the tourists to visit the villages, the discourse of the tour agencies and local authorities creates new meaning, and their power helps shift the culture of the Padaung; their cultural practices are changed from having a social value to an economic value.

⁵ Indigenous groups living in Surin Province near the Thai-Cambodian border.

2.3.2 The Cultural and Social Impacts of Tourism and Commoditization

Tourism is a process and not an isolated event (Forster 1964: 217). Virtually defenseless against outside penetration, small ethnic groups run the danger of becoming “human zoos” (Mirante 1990), exposed to the “tourist gaze” (Urry 1990) without deriving any significant benefits from the tourists’ visits (Cohen 2001: 21).

As part of the study of commoditization of Ainu culture in Japan, Lisa Hiwasaki highlights how their involvement in tourism has had a variety of impacts upon them, economically, culturally and politically. Consequently, tourism has been, and continues to be, a route through which Ainu ethnic identities are represented, formulated and reinforced; therefore, examining tourism is crucial to an understanding of Ainu ethnic identity. Although the commoditization of Ainu culture through tourism has led to modifications and a reshaping of the culture, at the same time it has reinvigorated and reinvented their culture (Hiwasaki 2000).

Philip Feifan Xie (2003) explores the commoditization of the Li’s traditional bamboo-beating dance and its cultural and social impact on the Li community in Hainan, China. An aboriginal dance performance is widely viewed as a form of entertainment, and while tourism has commoditized many aspects of their culture, it has also provided financial resources, created jobs and assisted the preservation of the very cultural elements that, in turn, have made Li artifacts and cultural practices attractive to the tourist. But the Li communities are not well positioned to take advantage of the opportunities presented by cultural tourism - the development, marketing and delivery of the aboriginal products and performances, such as the bamboo-beating dance, are all undertaken by private non-Li enterprises, and the Li communities only play a minor role in the decision-making and are viewed as a marginalized people in Hainan.

All the above studies review the impact of tourism on cultural practices and communities, another problem is how tourism impacts upon the culture. Changing the meaning of culture may foster both value and ideological rifts between younger and older generations (Chang-Hung 2006). As I mentioned earlier, old and new generations have different views about earning a monthly salary from tourism and the desire to move to a third country. Young Padaung girls see their neck rings as having another value – as a weapon of exploitation by outsiders within the process of commodification. These differing views among the older and younger generations have led to a politics of body modification, one which has encouraged the women either to wear or to take off their neck rings.

In his study of tourism in northern Thailand, Cohen shows that some inhabitants have learned to play the role of “professional natives”, and to extract benefits from the tourists (Cohen 2001:124). Cohen observes that as objects of interest, the villagers tend to accept the role, obligingly; dressing themselves or their children in traditional garments (or for the Padaung, encouraging their daughters to wear neck rings), playing the native role, posing for pictures and quietly collecting their rewards. Greenwood also points out that local culture “...is altered and often destroyed by the treatment of it as a touristic attraction. It is made meaningless to the people who once believed in it...” (Greenwood 1977: 131).

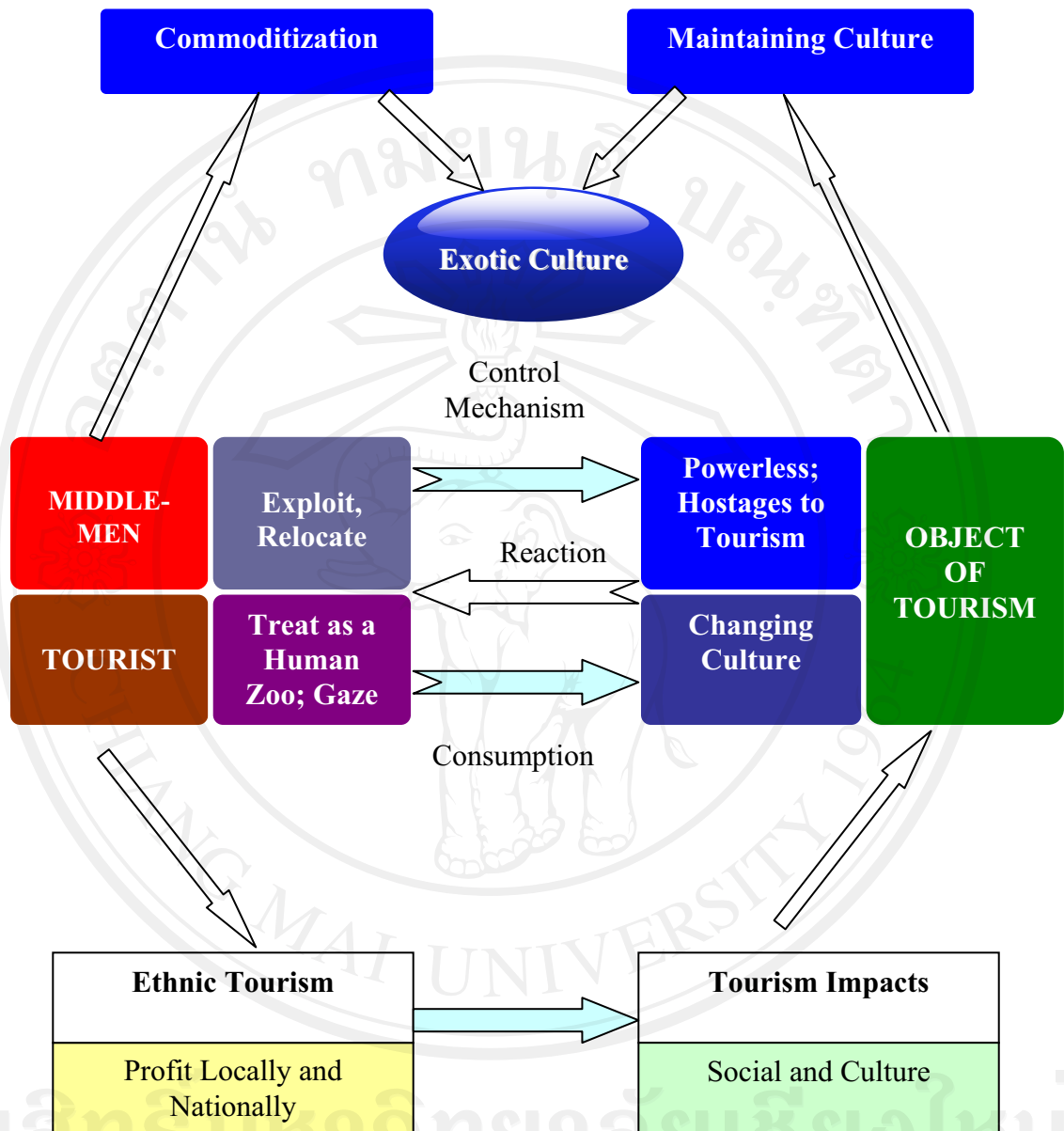
2.4 Research Conceptualization

In my paper, I will focus on the productive side - and the Padaung ethnic group in particular, and on the consumption side – the tourists, agents and middlemen in general. I will explore the socio-cultural effects of the ethnic tourism process on the Padaung people, and how they have reacted to that situation. In the contemporary literature on tourism, there are many studies of the commoditization of culture through tourism (for example, Greenwood, Appadurai and Cohen), and these mostly emphasize cultural goods (sculpture, art and other traditional articles), services (dance and music), activities (rituals and festivals) and the nature of the change process, but

few on the human body modification practices of ethnic people - as a commodity produced for consumption by tourists and its impacts, because all cultural commoditization in tourism is associated with the material and spiritual culture of ethnic people.

Although the practice of body modification is known among various ethnic groups, it is only partially known and less noticed. Within the Long-Necked Padaung's culture, a modified and decorated neck is a very distinctive feature and their cultural identity totally depends on this practice, more so than other material traditions. I will discuss the nature of commoditization, particularly cultural commoditization, and the social and cultural impacts of ethnic tourism on the Padaung, as well as the role of ethnic women in cultural tourism, since the significant cultural feature of the Padaung belongs to the women, as relevant concepts for my research.

For my conceptualization, I place the Padaung's exotic culture as the main theme. The Padaung people are actors - as the objects of tourism on the one side, and on the other hand there are the middlemen and tourists who are also actors, but powerful ones. The powerful actors exploit and consume the Padaung's exotic culture, meanwhile the Padaung themselves follow and retain their culture, on the one side gaining a profit from the ethnic tourism and on the other being socially and culturally impacted by it.



Middlemen – Local Authorities, Tour Agencies

Object of Tourism – The Long-Necked Padaung/Kayan

Figure 2.1: Conceptual Framework