

CHAPTER V

THE IMPACTS OF COMMODITIZATION ON CULTURE AND IDENTITY, AND THE PADAUNG'S NEGOTIATIONS

*“Beautiful goddess of creation,
help me find the source of spring.”*
(A Padaung Grandmother's mantra before
telling her stories)¹

5.1 Introduction

There have been many changes in terms of traditional practices, cultural values and the Padaung's view on their culture and identity since they have become involved in the process of commoditization. The daily life of the Padaung family has been intruded upon since the village made contact with the outside world. Some of the more ignorant tourists believe that the Long-Necked are part of Thailand or Thai culture, and do not know that they are refugees from Myanmar.

In this chapter, the tourists' intrusions into the daily lives of the Padaung will be highlighted. I will explore the causes and reasons for the increasing number of Padaung wearing neck coils and why more recently, Padaung girls have started to take them off again. I will analyze the ways in which Huay Pu Keng has been controlled by the local authorities and business people, and examine how local Thais view the Long-Necked Padaung. At the end of this chapter, I will study the contributions made by and influence of the fourth set of actors.

5.2 Tourists: Intrusion into the Daily Lives of the Padaung

When I visited the village, I noticed that the villagers wake up early in the morning. Women clean the area around and in front of their home and prepare

¹ From 'the Land of Green Ghosts: A Burmese Odyssey' by P. Khoo Thwe, p 7

souvenir stalls for daytime opening, after which they start their daily housework chores. During the day they try to get some information on the number of visitors who will reach the village by boat. Men never sit at the shops, because visitors are only interested in the shop where the Long-Necked women sit, and if a family has a neck ring-wearing daughter, she will take turns with her mother to sit at the shop.

The biggest intrusion into the Padaung's daily life is the photos taken by the visitors. Tourists who request to take a photo of the Padaung women pay a small fee, like twenty baht. This has become a habit for the Padaung women; they immediately stop their normal activities if they notice a camera pointing in their direction. They then keep smiling and pose until their picture is taken.

I am bored of sitting for photographs, but I am so happy when a visitor brings back a book (meaning a magazine or journal) in which my colorful photo is printed. I cannot read what it says but I will keep that book. (Interview with an old Long-Necked woman)

Most tourists do not understand what life is like for the Padaung in their village and what their feelings are, but when they do want to know about the Padaung, the tour guides explain for them. Tourists rarely have the chance to talk directly with the Padaung, due to the language barrier. Some of the young Padaung girls can speak Thai and English, but they do not talk to the tourists because the tour guides do not like it.

5.2.1 Creating a Natural Lifestyle

Padaung families need to maintain their traditional way of life in the village in order to attract tourists. Though the Padaung are very fond of electrical goods, they have to keep modern things out of the sight of tourists (see Section 5.4.3). In fact, they love to wear digital watches, and when I visited an old Padaung woman's home, she told me that she wanted a small cassette player. I then saw a new motorbike behind the wall of the hut and was curious about it, after which she told me she had bought it because she loved it. She showed me the scars on her knees (from her coils) and

explained how difficult it is to ride the motorbike with the coils on, adding that she always hides her motorbike behind the wall. She also owns a small television set and a radio.

Whenever the Padaung show an interest in the tourists' electronic items, most are happy to show them, whether an expensive watch, radio, cassette player or camera. Some visitors give books which contain photos of the outside world. A Padaung girl told me that the guides say the tourists do not want to see good roads, a clean village or a modern way of life, so they have to live in a very primitive way to please them.

The local authorities and the KNPP have produced rules prohibiting the Long-Necked women from riding motorcycles in public and ordering them to dress traditionally when tourists visit the village (Figure 5.1).



Figure 5.1: A Padaung Girl Riding a Motorbike

All huts in Huay Pu Keng are made of wood and leaves, which are not that durable. The local authorities encourage the Kayan to live in Kayan style houses, and do not allow the use of cement, galvanized roofs or any other non-removable materials when building the houses, because the Kayan have no rights to access the land. However, this is obviously designed to ensure that the Kayan's traditional lifestyle is maintained for the tourists' benefit.

They (the Authorities) do not allow the use of zinc roofs or cement when building a house; however, these can be used for schools and churches. Previously there was no rule like that. (Interview with an old Padaung man, July 2008)

5.3 Long-Necked Padaung: Wearing and Taking Off the Rings

I found that the number of Padaung girls wearing the neck rings increased for a number of years, but that more recently, many have begun to take them off, and I wanted to understand the reasons behind this phenomenon. These two differing practices show how the Padaung view their long necks and neck rings as a form of identity.

5.3.1 Reasons for Wearing the Neck Rings

There are three reasons for the initial increase in the number of girls wearing the rings - during the early period of tourism: encouragement from parents, peer pressure and the need for revenue.

The first comes from the conservative views of the parents - who wish to maintain tradition. For example, a neighbor of Ko Law, the village headman, is conservative and suggested that his daughter, a middle school student, should wear the full traditional dress. Her hairstyle is therefore made-up like the other older Padaung women – in the traditional style, whereas her friends prefer the modern hairstyle. Mu Yan explained to me that her mother did not allow her to change even her hairstyle when she was young, and that her family never considered applying for resettlement in another country. I found out that some of the young girls still keep on their neck rings due to the will of the parents.

Two days after arriving at the refugee camp, my mother arranged for me to wear the brass coil around my neck. I didn't like to wear it, but I didn't dare to refuse- I had to obey her. When I started to wear the coil I felt sick and couldn't sleep for two or three days because it was uncomfortable. After a period of time; however, I got used to the coil. (From a Padaung girl's essay)

The second reason is peer pressure and for beauty purposes. Some young girls see their friends with the bright brass rings and find them attractive, plus they come under pressure from their parents to put the rings around their necks. Mu Yan told me that she wore the brass rings when she was young due to peer pressure.

When I was young, I saw that my friends who had the brass rings were appreciated more by the senior Kayan and I thought they were pretty, so I asked my Mum if I could wear the brass coil around my neck. My Mum is Kayan Padaung but likes freedom of choice and did not wear the neck rings, plus she never forced me to wear them. (Interview with Mu Yan, July 2008)

The third reason for wearing the rings is for revenue purposes, an economic reason. Parents ask their daughters to wear the rings during the tourist season to gain revenue - collecting money by posing for photos, and then allow them to take them off during the low season. They also receive a salary for wearing the neck ring during these months. I witnessed some young women doing this; school girls who wear the neck rings then take them off when the tourists do not come. The shops in which beautiful young Padaung girls sit are also more attractive to male tourists.

5.3.2 Reasons for Taking Off the Neck Rings

I also tried to find out why young Padaung women have started to take off their rings in recent years, and established four reasons for this, education being the first, one that plays a critical role in changing the girls' views about their tradition and the brass rings. The second reason is that the Padaung girls themselves are not so serious about their traditional culture, the third is that they may wish to avoid being

different from others, and the last reason is that some of the Padaung see the neck rings as an object of control.

The first group take off their rings because they have hopes for the future; most take them off after they finish Post-Ten school, like Mu Yan. They want to apply for jobs with NGOs that work with refugees. Others decide to take them off after finding out that other classmates who have already taken them off have the chance to go on short training courses in Chiang Mai and Bangkok. Experience has taught them that the brass rings mean they will have to stay in the village, with no chance to see the outside world.

The young Padaung look at education as a way to escape from the tourism trap. Padaung parents' perception towards education for their children is interesting. Many parents, at least among those I interviewed, realize education is important for their children's future; they understand that for a Padaung girl with little education, wearing the rings will be the only means of survival.

I want to compare two Long-Necked girls; how education has differentiated between them. Ma Mu took off her rings and joined a teacher training course in one of the camps - she had decided to be a teacher rather than a girl earning a salary from wearing the neck rings. After the course she became a teacher at the village's Middle School, having finished her Post-Ten. She now receives a 1,000 baht salary and other support.

Mu Rai's story is different. She is the eldest daughter in her family and had to quit school after her mother died, despite being a clever student. This situation forced her to sit for the tourists, while her younger sister and brother went to school. By the time I met her, listening to her story as she weaved, her sister and brother were attending Post-Ten in the camp. In February 2009, I received a call from Mu Yan informing me that Mu Rai's sister was to get married that month. Her boyfriend had received permission to resettle in the United States and he wanted to take her with

him. In March, I saw Mu Rai in a Thai TV documentary² saying that she was glad for her sister, but as for herself, she must continue in the village as a tourist attraction. I saw some tears in her eyes.

The village teachers told me that the population of Padaung girl students has increased in recent years. In 2007, there were only 30 Long-Necked girls at the school in the refugee camp³. Some of these Padaung girls wanted to apply for resettlement to other countries, like other refugees, but their brass rings meant they continued to be a victim of the local authority's control.

The young generation Padaung girls see education as a way to liberate them from the refugee trap. In an essay written by a Post-Ten student, education offers her hope for a brighter future:

Education is important for the young Karenni, because if we look at the present situation the Karenni have an independent state but they do not administer their own state...because most of our leaders are illiterate. They did not gain an education, they do not know how to communicate effectively, they have not accepted responsibility and they do not have the skills to manage and lead their people...

Education is seen as freedom:

...we need to try hard, as much as we can. Now, we are like a bird locked in a cage, so we should prepare for our freedom; especially the youth, because young people have the power in our community. If we do not help ourselves, who will help us when we go back to our country.

Education is a bridge to the outside world, even if simply going on a short training course or working with an NGO. I saw two Padaung girls who have a job with an NGO and live in Mae Hong Son. They are married, have become mothers, earn a salary and have had the chance to visit other cities and go abroad as well; one

² In the interview they spoke Thai. My Thai friend kindly translated for me while watching TV.

³ BBC, January 29th 2008

of them is from Huay Pu Keng. She has already visited some Europe countries, supported by her NGO and a religious organization⁴. She even has a car. These kinds of experience encourage young Padaung people to work hard for an education. Mu Yan, the girl who helped me during my fieldwork, has a job as an interpreter in a resettlement application office.

The younger generation Padaung girls dream of studying computing, becoming nurses or studying at university in Chiang Mai or Bangkok, or even abroad, such as in the United States. About ten girls I met had taken off their rings because they want to study in the refugee camp.

The second group takes off their rings as they are not so serious about following tradition. Most of them originally wore their rings due to peer pressure when they were young. In some families, brothers or sisters get a job outside and earn an income, so they do not need to wear the rings to earn money. Some young Padaung go to Mae Hong Son and work in the restaurants there; some work as farm hands.

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⁴ This raises the question of her travelling documents. As far as I could understand, fake Thai passports can easily be obtained with the right amount of money. Some Kayan, including journalists, hold these passports and travel abroad.



Figure 5.2: Modern Kayan (Padaung) Girls who have Recently Taken Off their Neck Rings

The third reason to take off their rings is in order to avoid being looked down upon, and so as not to be so different from other people, as they know how some tour guides present them to the tourists. One girl told me that most tour guides represent them with a negative view, saying that the rings are worn ‘just to make them different from others’ or ‘for money’, or even just to make them look ‘primitive’. They are upset when some tourists show fear towards the Padaung with elongated necks:

I like the fact that people do not stare at me when I am on the street or at a market. My husband is also very happy because now people do not stare and he wants me to have more freedom. The rings are like a prison sometimes. (From a Padaung girl’s essay)

The last group who take off their rings understand that the rings imprison them. Being denied resettlement in another country has now become a reason for the Padaung girls to take off their rings, among both the older and younger Padaung women. During September 2008, many families moved into the refugee camp hoping

to apply for resettlement. They had already heard of Padaung families being denied, so they took off their rings before submitting their application. In total, thirty Padaung families from three Long-Necked villages, including ten families from Huay Pu Keng, moved to the camp and the women took off their rings. Mu Yan told me that her friends are still taking off their rings, and she even sent me some photos of some of the girls I had seen during my field trip who had taken off their rings. Ko Ka Lam's and Ma Pae's family have also moved to the camp, but with no contact I do not know whether they have taken off their rings or not. Mu Yan said her youngest half-sister would take them off soon.

Taking off the rings can be seen as a form of resistance to control. One Padaung girl who eventually received permission to resettle in New Zealand was at first denied by the local authorities. She was the first to take off her neck rings and later a dozen of educated girls followed in her footsteps. Having been denied resettlement, she became a teacher at Nai Soi refugee camp. She then appealed in writing to media and human rights groups, and at the beginning of 2009 she was given permission to resettle in New Zealand. Mu Yan was the third girl to have taken off her neck rings, in order to get a job at an NGO.

Table 5.1: Reasons for the Increased and Decreased Use of the Neck Rings

Reasons for Increasing Use of the Neck Rings	Encouragement from the parents	1990s to 2005
	Peer pressure	
	For revenue purposes	
Reasons for Decreasing Use of the Neck Rings	View changed by education	2006 to now
	Have lost feelings towards culture	
	To avoid being distinct from others	
	See the neck rings as a form of control	

5.4 Middlemen: Mechanisms of Control

5.4.1 Local Authorities' Mechanisms of Control

The authorities say that the Padaung are not refugees but have migrated to Thailand for economic reasons. However, a UNHCR spokesman said he was surprised that the Thai authorities criticize the Padaung people for living outside the refugee camps, when it is they themselves that want them to live there. The Long-Necked women, even those holding ethnic ID cards, cannot travel freely, even within Mae Hong Son Province. The local authorities have developed rules and regulations to control the behavior of the Padaung women, and these state that the Padaung cannot do anything that is unsuitable for their culture, nor accept guests overnight without informing the village committee.

When the rules were published, an announcement was made that any violators would be warned first, and that action would then be taken under Thai or Karenni law,

and the announcement was signed by the KNPP. Under the rules, a Long-Necked woman's salary is not paid if she goes out of village without asking permission first from the village head or one of the committee members. One Kayan journalist told me that this announcement had come after pressure from the local authorities and business people:

You can see in the announcement; some rules and regulations, like the Long-Necked Padaung having to dress traditionally during tourist visits, like them having to ask permission to wear or take off the brass rings, or before accepting an interview by the media; all these rules are intended to control the Padaung for tourism purposes. And you can guess who is involved in this - don't forget that the Karenni political group cooperate with the local authorities and business people in terms of running the Long-Necked villages because they get a share of the profit from these villages. (Interview with a Kayan journalist, June 2008)

(d) to marshal ethnic minority people along the border - to prevent contingency impacts and security concerns in Thailand.

In May 2007, the local authorities responded to these points in detail, some of which I will mention here. The local authorities said that if the Padaung were not willing to transfer to a new village (the new Huay Pu Keng), they must move to the refugee camp, referring to the National Citizenship Card 2526 Act, which says that the Hill Tribe Card (a Blue Card) and Highlander Card (Green with a red edge) are not National Citizenship Cards. The authorities contended that such cards are aimed only at identifying that a person has been given legal entry into the country. They also highlighted security concerns within their reply, as there is a security policy which aims to marshal ethnic minorities along the border; therefore, holders of such cards must cooperate with this.

At that time, the local authorities also informed them that if a Padaung wishes to live in the refugee camp, they must first register with UNHCR, and that any transfer to the camp must be carried out in accordance with the Ministry of Interior's (MOI) procedures. They also said that if they wish to apply for resettlement in another country, it must be done with the acceptance of the MOI. Uncle Eden Phan told me that this point was clear.

In accordance with objective (c), the authorities expressed their concern about deforestation; however, according to one interview I had with the Padaung men, the order to cut down trees normally comes from the Thai businessmen and police (see Chapter III, section 3.6.3); the Padaung men only act as wage labor - earning 200 or 300 baht per day. In line with their traditional Kayan belief regarding the Kan Htain Bo pole, they need to cut down one big tree each year, but a Kayan elder told me that they normally ask for permission from the authorities to do this, but that it has been many years since they have been able to follow their traditional ritual. The Eugenia tree, which is supposed to be the first tree in the world, is preferred for the Kan Htain Bo ritual, and must be at least ten feet long, with a girth of 30 inches. However, now they have to make do with other varieties of tree, those that can be found easily.

It was mentioned in the reply to the letter that the roads to the village would be improved and a bridge constructed. In the new village, housings were designed by the Department of Public Construction and City Planning. It was also mentioned that relocating the Padaung was a matter of security and to develop the Karen ethnic population's quality of life; however, they still mentioned that the Padaung need to ask for permission to travel, in accordance with the legal requirement. They said that the Thai Government has no policy to deport them to Burma and that if a Padaung wishes to return to their country of origin, the Thai Government will willingly allow them to return without any conditions. Finally, the reply said that the relocation to the new village near Huay Pu Keng was being carried out in order "to preserve the culture and tradition of the Padaung". The National Security Council, Ministry of Interior and the Third Battalion all approved the project, which shows that the Thai Government wishes to preserve the lifestyle, culture and traditions of the Padaung for its own ends.

5.4.2 Mechanisms of Control for Business Purpose

Why did the local authorities choose to merge the three Padaung villages into one? The first reason was to introduce a mechanism of control and due to competition among the powerful actors. Among the three villages, one was controlled by a Thai business person, one was jointly owned by a business person and the KNPP, and one was fully controlled by the KNPP. If all three villages moved to a new village, a Thai business person could control all the Padaung.

The second reason was that in terms of the transportation business in Huay Pu Keng. Huay Dua village is the only boat port which visits the village. With all three villages moved to a new location near Huay Pu Keng (old village), the Thai village Huay Dua would have a better transportation business. The Padaung call that village *hlay sate ywa* in Burmese (boat port village).

Once, a person visited Huay Pu Keng and compiled a list of those Padaung who wanted to resettle in a third country, saying he was from a local government agency; however, in reality he was just a villager from Huay Dua and not from an agency.

However, the Padaung gave their names without knowing who he was - business people had sent him to establish the future scale of their transportation business. If the Padaung leave Huay Pu Keng, their boats will become useless and there will be no transportation business. The boat fares are controlled by the Huay Dua villagers, and although some Padaung own boats, they are not allowed to take part in the transportation business.

The new Long-Necked village is just twenty meters from Huay Pu Keng, and was part of a US based NGO donation project which planned to build a road from Mae Hong Son to the village. If that project had been implemented, tourists would no longer have needed to cross the river by boat, but the project came to end. Senior Kayan people believe that the local authorities and business people were against the project, because the now isolated and separated Long-Necked villages are easy to control, plus they wished to protect the interests of the Huay Dua boat businesses, as the Huay Dua boat men receive 700 to 900 baht per tourist for one round trip.

I learned about the last reason from Uncle Khon Eden Phan. He said that if the Myanmar military regime begins a dam project in Kayah State, more Padaung are likely to flee to Thailand, and if that happens, the local authorities will be able to easily manage the fleeing Padaung families in the new village.

5.4.3 Perceptions of the Local Authorities and Thai People

While I was in Huay Pu Keng, the Padaung families did not receive a salary for three months, but the NGOs provided rice, salt and cooking oil. Basically, when there are no tourists, they are not paid.

Why do business people think that they should not give a regular salary?

- (1) Local Thai people, including the local authorities, think that the Padaung are richer than their neighbors and other ethnic people in the camps. Almost every family has their own motorbike; some families have a television and two even

have a car. As a result, the business people conclude that there is no need to give a regular salary, since they can already buy such luxurious items.

(2) Why do some Padaung families seem to be rich? As far as I could tell:

(a) Their eating style is very simple, they find bamboo shoots and other vegetables in the forest in order to produce their daily curries; meat is only eaten occasionally,

(b) They mostly wear traditional home made dress, and

(c) A free education system is provided by the NGOs, so they are able to save money in order to buy what they want. With their unchanging daily routine, these material items give them pleasure.



Figure 5.4: A Padaung Woman Using a Mobile Phone

Since becoming popular due to promotion by the TOT, the Padaung have received a good income from the tourists by posing for photos and selling souvenirs, and all Padaung families are economical in terms of their daily food intake, clothes and other expenses, preferring to buy modern items such as watches, mobile phones, televisions, cassettes, VCD players and motorbikes; if possible they will even buy a car, and every Padaung women wears a watch. When I talked with them they asked me about mobile phones and radios, and even a Padaung woman in her early fifties was trying to learn how to ride a motorbike. The young Padaung women are very

skilled at riding motorbikes in the jungle, but owning these modern items had led to the misconception that they are rich.



Figure 5.5: Padaung Girls Enjoy Watching a Movie

Tour operators and the authorities think that this may have led to the decline in interest among the visitors. In their announcements, they prohibit Padaung girls from riding bikes and order them not to wear modern clothes; saying that the Padaung women must wear traditional dress while visitors are in the village. The announcements also say that they have to get permission from the village head or from the authorities if they want to go to Mae Hong Son. The perceptions of the tour guides and their interactions with the Padaung are described the previous chapter (Chapter IV, Section 4.3).

5.5 The Fourth Actor: The Influence of Religious Organizations

NGOs and religious organizations play a key role in the Kayan community, from changing the culture to supplying the food. The NGOs that most effectively contribute to the village are United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees

(UNHCR), Thai-Burma Border Consortium (TBBC), Karenni Student Development Programme (KSDP), Jesuit Refugee Service) JRS and International Rescue Committee (IRC). They work to advocate villagers' rights, provide food and other items and persuade them to convert to their respective religion.

Although the older generations follow Animism and Buddhism, almost all the younger generations have converted to Christianity, and the Christian leaders discourage them from wearing the brass rings. Some Kayaw have given up their traditions entirely, including their dress. Although they do not receive any salary from the business people, they are able to survive through the actions of the religious organizations.

Some Padaung who become Baptists are encouraged to give up their traditional Ka Khwan beliefs. Roman Catholic Padaung join in with the traditional Kan Htaun Bo festival, while the Baptists stay away from this and other traditional events. The Kayan Christian scholars add Christian thoughts and beliefs to the Kayan history and stories, altering the traditional beliefs by later adding their religion.