

Shackled by the Neck

Antonio Graceffo , 07 May 2007 (www.travelmag.co.uk/article)

Burma's Long Neck Karen choose exploitation in a tourist village rather than returning to a civil war.

Two years ago an 18-year old Karen girl named Zember, living in a refugee village within sight of the Thai-Burma border, staged her own little personal revolution. She removed the rings she had been adding around her neck each year since she was seven or eight years old, the age the girls take the first ones that ultimately turn them into human giraffes.



The Padaung Karen, or long-neck Karen, so-called because of the multiple rings that elongate their necks by deforming their collarbones and pushing their shoulders down, have been described for decades as one of the closest things in Asia to a human zoo. But their condition points up just how much of a zoo it is. They have found dubious refuge in artificial tourist villages where visitors, both Thai and foreign, pay a heavy entrance fee to gawk at them.

The Padaung Karen are a tiny offshoot of the larger Karen people, natives of Burma who have long been caught up in a civil war against the government. The Karen – and other Burmese minorities – have never been fully integrated into the country and the current military rulers of the country have spent decades trying to suppress the various rebellions. Estimates claim that as many as 2 million refugees, many of them tribal peoples, have fled over the border into neighboring Thailand.

What Zember wants, as do most Karen on the Thai side of the border, are more comprehensive residency rights and the ability to move freely. But since removing the rings, she finds herself in double jeopardy. Now, not only is she a stateless Padaung Karen refugee living in a sideshow, but the elders in her village shun her as a traitor to the ring-wearing community.

The Padaung Karen are typically singled out by Thai entrepreneurs because of their appearance, scooped up and deposited in the tourism villages before reaching United Nations refugee camps. Allowing Padaung Karen to gain refugee status would be bad for business because the village owners

collect money from the tourists. Owning a group of long-necks is a lucrative business – lucrative enough, according to Som Sak Seta, a guide who takes tourists to the villages, that entrepreneurs come and take Padaung Karen to their own villages elsewhere in Thailand.

“Some Thai made a fake village in Chiang Rai and Chiang Mai and stole some Karen from here to live there,” Som Sak Seta said. “They charged 1,000 baht (US\$30.70) or more for the entrance fee.”

Huai Sua Tao is a Padaung Karen village located in Thailand’s Mae Hong Son Province, near the Burmese border. After paying their entry fee, tourists find an entire village that is one huge shop, with women and children selling goods and posing for photos. There are no men to be seen. Karen in Burma traditionally live by planting and cultivating rice, gathering forest products, raising animals, and hunting as their people have done for centuries. But in the tourism villages, the Padaung Karen work as trinket vendors. Normally, the Karen would be tied to the land, but now, as salespeople, they are losing their culture. In Huai Sua Tao there are no rice fields.

“It’s their choice,” Says Som Sak Seta. “The Karen can make money wearing their neck rings in the camp, or they can go back to the refugee camp. They don’t have a right to stay (in Thailand). This is the compromise of the governors of this place, so the Karen can stay inside the Thai border and make some money, and the governors can get some money as well.”

Prasit Leeprecha, a lecturer at Chiang Mai University, is himself an ethnic Hmong, a group persecuted in Laos for fighting alongside the Americans in the Indochina conflict. While millions of Hmong families have been resettled in the United States and others still languish in refugee camps awaiting resettlement in the USA, Prasit uses his education to study and help the region’s many tribal people.

“The Karen are faced with four options,” Prasit says. “Live in a tourist village, become official refugees, go back to the war in Burma, or, number four, some countries like New Zealand offer them a chance to go live in cultural tourism villages abroad.”

These are only options if the tribal people are made aware of their rights, which most are not. All legal residents of Thailand receive some type of ID card, with various rights attached. Obviously, citizens get the most rights. Legal aliens may be granted rights such as employment or residence. But because the Long Neck Karen in the tourist villages have no legal status, they have no rights of residence, employment, or freedom of movement in Thailand.

A Padaung Karen girl named Mali – who was born in Thailand – said she hadn’t been given any type of ID, although she had already lived in Thailand

for more than 12 years. Asked if she has residency papers, she responded: "No, I don't have anything. They just let me stay here."

She is allowed to go into nearby Mae Hong Son, but, she says, "I can't stay overnight. I can just go there and buy some food. Afterwards, I have to come back here. I have to stay here."

Other Karen have explained that the Thai government is willing to give ID cards to babies born in Thailand as long as the birth is registered. The same Karen said they were either unaware of the law at the time their children were born or that the owners of the villages actually prevented them from obtaining ID cards for fear of losing revenues.

Mali explained how the Karen business works. "If we stay here and wear the rings around our neck, they will give us 1,500 baht per month, each. But the men don't get money because they don't wear the rings." Each Karen receives another Bt180 for rice and food. "If we don't wear the rings, we don't get the money. So, the men won't get the Bt1,500. They only get Bt180 for rice, per month, per person."

Asked if she had ever thought of going to work in town, she answered: "No, I can't go. I just can't go." Someday, she said, "I would like to go to work in town. But we wear this metal around our neck, so I don't think we can go. I think we just can stay here and sell souvenirs."

The trinkets the women sell were identical in both villages. Many were sealed in plastic, obviously made in a factory. They essentially told us they get the souvenirs dropped off in the morning and the money is collected in the evening. They implied that the women didn't get to keep much, if any, of the souvenir income. Som Sak Seta said all of the income is put in a pool and divided up, with the owner getting the first and largest share. But it isn't clear if in some months the women earned more than 1,500 baht, for example if they had good sales.

As I spoke to the villagers, some Thais— probably off-duty soldiers or employees of the owner— hung around, taking pictures and eavesdropping. Finally, to avoid putting anyone in jeopardy, I asked Som Sak Seta take us to a "real" village, called Baan Nai Soi, where it was much easier to do interviews. It was there that we found Zember. Som Sak Seta explained the soldiers were only there to guard the border, a few kilometers away.

While the soldiers sat on a cooler, sipping Cokes, Zember told the story of her predicament. Her hair cut in Japanese pop fashion, she says she would prefer to have a normal life. Her skin is light and she is very slim and attractive, her neck is only slightly elongated and there is little sign of the rings she once wore. If she were wearing western clothing in Hong Kong or Bangkok, she would be a normal Asian teenager. In addition to taking off the neck rings, she no longer wears traditional clothing, dressing like any rural Thai, but she

is stuck here in a kind of limbo –no longer willing to wear the rings but not free to make a future for herself either.

In recent years, Thailand, like many Asian countries, has been rewriting its laws to increase human rights and freedoms. The issues facing the tribal people do not seem to result from a lack of legislation but rather a lack of enforcement. Too often, it seems the whim of the local authority prevents people, both Thai and tribal, from accessing rights granted them by the government. High rates of illiteracy among the tribal people also add to the problem. Add to this the ever present specter of deportation to a war where they are considered the enemy, and it is no wonder that the tribal people feel isolated.

For the Padaung Karen women, the rings around their neck may be seen as cultural shackles, but they are faced with a brutal choice: return to Burma and risk death or remain a stateless sideshow attraction in Thailand.

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