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London School of Liberal Arts

Customs of the old world, burden of the new generation

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Submitted by Jennifer Lai Leng Lam, a photographer from Singapore.



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“The Padaung, a sub-group of the Karen tribe is best known to the world as the “long neck” tribe, due to the misconception that their necks are elongated by the heavy brass rings, sometimes weighing up to 25 kilograms. The truth is, however, that these brass rings do not make the neck longer, but it does push the collar bones down, resulting in the optical illusion of a longer neck.

There are various reasons given for the existence of this custom such as preventing tiger bites, preventing the women being abducted by sex slave traders or even a symbol of beauty and wealth, resulting in a chance of attracting better husbands. These reasons are easily challenged by the modern, educated woman, but the women and young girls of the Padaung group who are plagued by poverty and lack a proper education, continue to live in the dark.

The Burmese refugee camp in Chiang Mai, Thailand that houses the Karen tribe (originally from Burma) has become controversial. Some refer to it as a “human zoo” where tourists are pouring in to see the women and young girls with heavy brass coils around their necks. They can be seen in shabby stalls where they weave clothing products which are on sale for tourists. Since there are no shops or schools in the camp, one would wonder what these women do with the money they make from the sales. The answer is simple. They save to pay for their children’s education outside the camp. Only a lucky few get to actually do this.

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These beautiful women and pretty girls, whom you know to be deformed by heavy coils around their necks, are a heart-wrenching sight. One is heartened, however, by their will to live; a will that overcomes the physical deformities and the harsh living conditions in the camp. They always wear a gentle smile for any stranger who approaches them. What I see is not their deformed bodies, but rather dignified women and girls who treasure the very little life has to offer them."

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John Giorno

Whatever happens it will seem the way it seems now, and it doesn't matter what you feel, how perfectly correct or amazing the clarity, everything you think is deluded...

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