The Ascent of Money and Social Transformation Among the Badeng of Sarawak

Tan Chee-Beng
Sun Yat-sen University, Guangzhou, China

This article examines the Badeng Kenyah, a people in Sarawak’s interior who are experiencing the shift from subsistence living to a money economy. Ethnographic description and oral history are used to examine the inside factors (such as the individual search for livelihood) and outside forces (government and the market) that brought about this shift. Some philosophical reflection addresses the impact of money on individuality and social life, with inspiration drawn from the classic works of Karl Polanyi and Georg Simmel. When the myth of money becomes accepted as a norm, human self-interest naturally guides individual behavior toward commodification, a path negotiated through those moral values that a community has maintained intact and those it has redefined to suit a monetary economy. For better and for worse, commodification works vast changes on social relations and the environment. What the Badeng experienced is what all modern peoples have gone through at one point or another. By looking at what happened to these particular people, we see again the experience that has shaped us all.

Keywords: Badeng Kenyah, indigenous people, monetization, social transformation, ecology, commodification

In modern society, being alive usually means earning money or living off money somebody else has earned. The need for money is a ground rule, and once accepted it transforms people’s existence. This transformation, so basic to modern society, is still being undergone by indigenous peoples scattered in the world’s remote regions. Hunters and gatherers in the wild have always traded directly or indirectly with outside peoples to acquire basic commodities such as salt and (more recently) sugar. When further commodities are desired after that, the need to make money grows sharper. Improved transportation effectively brings urban centers closer, drawing a given people deeper and deeper into national life and the modern economy. The government will help things along; for example, it may pay for a community’s school or clinic or a nearby road, easing the people into state society.

Indigenous peoples’ increasing dependence on money and the effects of this dependence have been noted by a few researchers (e.g., Bohanan, 1959; Nagata, 1997). In Sarawak, Malaysia, nomads would trade with the outside world through settled swidden cultivators (cf. Rousseau, 1990, pp. 233-235; King, 1993, pp. 167-170; Sellato, 1994; Sellato & Serombe, 2007, p. 22). Since the 1970s, nomads and cultivators have seen their lives transformed. The government has encroached on their territory, seizing land and moving people aside for highways, hydroelectric projects, and development in general. With their land and jungle resources taken away, indigenous people are forced to scrape for money by means of petty commercial farming, odd jobs, or work as hired labor. For example, researchers have noted the proletarianization of the Orang Asli (an aboriginal people...
of West Malaysia), with some expressing worry that the people would become “lumpenproletarians”, or “powerless, unskilled, occasional workers scrounging a livelihood on the fringes of Malaysian society” (Denton, Endicott, Gomes, & Hooker, 1997, p. 115).

While scholars have looked at indigenous people experiencing commercialization and modernity (e.g., AIPP, 2004; Gomes, 2004), there has been little focus on the process of this shift. This article describes the case of the Long Geng Badeng in the Belaga District in Sarawak. We look at how and why they have come to earn money, and at the hold the money economy now has on them. The link between social transformation and the ascent of money1 depends both on local initiatives and on externally imposed projects, a balance that recalls Sidney Mintz’s “inside meaning” and “outside meaning” (with the latter referring to “forces expressed in particular subsystems” and the role played by the state; Mintz, 1996, p. 21). A people’s life is constantly influenced by the changing political economy. As will be seen, the two most significant external projects to have affected the Belaga District’s Badeng are logging and the Bakun Hydroelectric Project.

The desire for new commodities and modern facilities necessitates earning cash. As more cash is available, there is also more desire for modernity, and so the people become dependent on money. Modernity is defined as engagement with new things and facilities, and with new forms of leisure that transform one’s lifestyle and generally make living more convenient and varied, as the indigenous people found when they first acquired flashlights and generators. The word the Badeng use for their new life is “moden”. They borrowed it from the Malays, who got it from the English “modern.” Access to modernity depends on access to the local and global capitalist market. For instance, the global demand for hardwood makes itself felt among the indigenous people of Borneo by means of logging; this activity is linked to the local politics of development, a politics that benefits particular business people and politicians. And we shall see, even as the indigenous people resist logging, it provides them with the opportunity to earn more money.

The article is based on participant observation (including collection of life history) of anthropological field trips conducted since 1994 in both the old and relocated settlements of Long Geng in interior Sarawak.2 While the research was based on field trips during university vacations, the visits over the years allowed the researcher to be familiar with the community and to see changes which otherwise cannot be observed in one long-term field trip. In each filed trip the researcher talked to many individuals of different ages, with a focus on knowledgeable individuals for selected topics like migration (old people), religious life (young and old), economic life (young and old), social relations (young and old), and education (parents, students, and teachers), etc. While I have learned simple Badeng, the conversion was mostly conducted in Malay which the people could speak.

This article will begin with a brief ethnographic description of the Badeng migration and settlement, followed by a discussion of earning cash and the initial engagement with modernity. Logging brought about

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1 This is the main title of the book by Ferguson (2009), which describes the financial history of the world.
2 Ethnographic research on the Long Geng Badeng was conducted during various university vacations. The choice of Long Geng for further research was made after the author’s field trips in June and July 1992 to the various Badeng communities in the Belaga District: namely, Data Kakus, Long Dungan, Long Busang, Long Menjawah, and Long Geng. There followed a brief visit to Long Geng in August 1994, and a month of field research conducted there in April-May 1998. The visits to the relocated settlement in Sg. Asap were conducted in July 2000, June 2002, August 2008, and June 2014. The author thanks Roy Kulong for introducing him to Mr. Kulong’s community at Data Kakus, and Ayuk of Long Dungan for accompanying the author on his first trip to Long Busang and Long Geng. The author is also grateful to the boatmen Lahang Laing, Ngang Tinggang, and Ajak Bato, all from Long Dungan, for driving the longboat so skillfully over so many rapids up the Baliu River all the way to Long Jawe’ and up the Linau River (tributary of Baliu) to Long Geng.
more opportunity for earning cash, with a social transformation as the result. The Bakun Hydroelectric Project and the people’s consequent relocation sped up the changes, especially with regard to access to electricity. In the conclusion, we shall further discuss the three-way relationship between money earning, dependence on money, and social transformation. The ethnographic description of the ascent of money among the Badeng permits some philosophical reflection regarding the impact of money on individuality and social life, drawing inspiration from the classic works of Karl Polanyi (1944/1971) and Georg Simmel (1978/2011). The former’s “currency consciousness”, a term meaning that “men and women everywhere appeared to regard stable money as the supreme need of human society” (Polanyi, 1944/1971, p. 24), is especially relevant. This article uses the case of the Badeng to show how money consciousness develops and takes center stage to define human social relations. I assume that human nature is self-centered and that people focus on their particular needs and those of their immediate circle (such as the immediate family). When access to the market is limited, social relations (including economic exchange) are primarily defined by moral relation. In a subsistence economy, reciprocity is a prominent virtue. But the Badeng demonstrate that people who can sell meat are less inclined to share it. When the myth of money becomes accepted as a norm, when everything including labor can be valued and exchanged in terms of money (cf. Polanyi’s explanation of commodity fiction [Polanyi, 1944/1971, p. 73]), human self-interest naturally guides individual behavior toward commodification, a path negotiated through those moral values that a community has maintained intact and those it has redefined to suit a monetary economy. The impact of the ascent of money is not just economic and social; it also has serious implication on environment and sustainability, as the data on the Badeng will show.

**Brief History of Migration and Relocation**

The Badeng (pronounced Badǝng) belong to the Kenyah category of indigenous people in Central Borneo. Colonial administrators and writers referred to them as “Madang” and “Badang”. In present-day Sarawak, the Badeng are distributed in the hinterlands of Belaga District, Bintulu District, and the Baram basin. Badeng oral history traces their original homeland to Usun Apau in the interior of Sarawak, from where they migrated to present-day Kalimantan in Indonesia after resisting attacks by the Brooke regime (cf. Tan, 1993, pp. xix-xxxiii). The migration to Kalimantan took place around the first decade of the 20th century, with the people eventually settling down in Long Batang. Beginning in the 1930s, remigration to Sarawak got underway (Tan, 1993, p. xxxiv). According to the oral history recorded by a native Badeng, Vom Roy (1993, p. 48), most but not all the people took part. Of those that did, the majority migrated to Long Betao. (Around 1970, this Badeng community left Long Betao for Long Busang in Sarawak; thus, the Badeng of Long Geng are historically related to those at Long Busang, who had migrated earlier.) A second group, led by Miat Ncau (Miat Encau) and Temekolleh, went upstream along the Pengiyan River (Pegian River) to Lolau, then traveled to Long Iran, and finally to Long Besungai of the Linau River (a tributary of the Baliu), deep within Sarawak.

After two years they moved upstream the Linau to Leka Pada; after three years there, they moved on to Tekulang.³ In this place they spent a decade or more. After World War II, the community moved to Long Geng; this was at the request of Sarawak’s government, a point agreed on by all informants. Vom Roy’s account (1993, p. 60) estimates that the Badeng arrived in Long Geng in 1951. Interviewed in April 1995, informant Lawai Laing mentioned that the Badeng left “Long Batang” (in Kalimantan) for Tekulang (in Sarawak) after

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³ Interview with Iban Merang, 8 May 1995. Tekulang is spelled Tegulang in maps but the Badeng call it Tekulang.
the peacemaking ceremony in Kapit. This was most likely the 1924 peacemaking ceremony (cf. Pringle, 1970, p. 239). If so, then the Badeng probably moved to Long Iran around 1927. After four years—that is, early in the 1930s—they moved to Besungai. Five years later (based on our account above), they moved to Tekulang; that would be the mid-1930s. If the people were at Tekulang for a dozen years, then they came to Long Geng toward the end of the 1940s and most certainly by 1950.

Long Geng offered plentiful land for their swidden cultivation. By 1992, when this author first visited, about 1,200 people lived in nine long houses built on either side of the Keluan River. The Keluan is the Gang River gone downstream, so the settlement’s name is Long Gang. But the Badeng pronounce this name “Long Geng” and that is the form used here. The people of Long Geng were and are divided between Roman Catholic Christians (RC) and Sidang Injil Borneo (SIB) Christians (belonging to the Borneo Evangelical Mission), with a few families of Bungan (followers of the traditional beliefs and practices, which are described in Tan, 2016). The SIB families lived on the Keluan’s left bank, the RC and Bungan families on the right bank.

In June 1992, when this author first visited, the Long Geng community was still remote. Arriving in Sibu, which is about 60 km from the South China Sea, one faced three more stages to the trip, traveling upriver the whole way. First came two or three hours by express boat up the Rajang River to Kapit, the administrative center of Kapit Division. The next stage, tackled after sleeping overnight, was the four-hour trip to Belaga, the division’s most remote bazaar town. This trip was by a smaller express boat and passed the Pelagu Rapids, which made for some difficulties. Belaga, deep within Sarawak, is home to a few coffee shops and sundry shops run mostly by Chinese shopkeepers, and that is where indigenous people of various ethnic origins meet. From Belaga, the journey continued to Long Geng itself. This stage was the hardest, given the rapids along the Balui River (the upper part of the Rajang), the worst of them being the notorious Bakun Rapid. The indigenous people traveled by longboat, with one man at the outboard motor and another up front to guide the boat away from rocks and floating debris. Soon after passing the Bakun Rapid, the boat turned left into the Linau tributary, encountering a few more rapids before finally reaching Long Geng.

Until relocation to Sungai Asap in 1998, the people of Long Geng practiced swidden cultivation. All families owned a small boat, using it for fishing and hunting and for travel to the family swidden patch. Most families relied on oil lamps for light. But change had already begun. The people, especially the men, visited Belaga quite often to shop and to meet friends, and students went to the secondary school there, staying at the school hostel. (Long Geng had a primary school but that’s all.) Most importantly, some villagers worked at logging camps. They earned money and with it they sent their children to school in Belaga and bought things to help their families—notably, electric generators to provide lighting. These villagers became the envy of their neighbors. Even as some of Long Geng’s people protested the logging, their relatives went off to the camps for work. Usually those making the trip were men, with the wife and other members of the household staying behind to continue swidden cultivation.

In November 1998, the people of Long Badeng were uprooted. The Bakun Hydroelectric Project caused them and other indigenous people (Kayan, Kenyah, Lahanan, Bhuket, and Penan) to be relocated to Sungai Asap in the Belaga District’s logging area, though a few Long Geng families instead chose Long Lawen, in

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4 This is a huge project that involves flooding 70,000 hectares of land, an area about the size of Singapore (Oh, Chua, & Goh, 2011, p. 1035).
5 Sg. Asap is named after the river there. As the Badeng were settled closer to another river called Sungai Koyan (Sg. Koyan), they often also refer to their location as Sg. Koyan.
their traditional homeland of Usun Apau. In all, the government moved 8,565 people, including 1,260 from Long Geng (Tan, 1994, p. 9); 15 settlements along the Balui River and the Linau tributary were affected. The new settlements are only a few kilometers from a recently built trunk road linking the town of Bakun with Bintulu, a trading hub. In the case of the Badeng, the unpaved road from their village meets the trunk road just 57 km from the first town and 122 from the second.

**Cash-Earning and Initial Engagement With Modernity**

Like other swidden cultivators deep within Borneo, the Badeng found that the first way for them to gain cash was the sale of jungle products. From the 1930s to the 1950s, Badeng sold *lesan*⁶ (called *damar* in Malay), a resin used for lighting (before the use of oil lamps) and especially for caulking boats. The resin was gathered from the jungle floor after dropping from the trees and hardening. Up to the 1970s, the Badeng still depended on collecting *engkabang* (nuts of a kind of illipe tree) and rattan for cash, selling them to the Chinese. The rattan was sent to Belaga by river, mostly in the form of rafts. By the mid-1970s, some people gathered an aromatic resin produced by the agarwood (also called gharuwood) tree. This resin, called *sekau* in Badeng and *gaharu* (also *garu*) in Malay, is used to produce a kind of expensive incense. Demand for palm oil eclipsed *engkabang* nuts by the early 1980s, the same decade that logging came to dominate Badeng territory and impose the old trade-off of jobs for resources.

Before the new era, a few people had already visited towns to earn cash and bring home commodities. One of the first was Aki. In 1959, at age 11, he went to Sibu, where he worked at a sawmill for nine years; his pay was 3.00 British Borneo dollars a day. On visits to his home village, Aki would bring salt and sugar, which he packed in tins to keep them dry through the rapids. On reaching the village, Aki would divide up the products among the households in his longhouse, plus residents of other longhouses who visited his *amin*. At the time, the people ate sugar on its own, as a new food, instead of using it to make drinks. Up to 1965, Sibu was the only place with sugar available in this part of Sarawak.

As more people had opportunity to earn cash, new items were introduced to the village. As recently as the 1960s, most people in Long Geng still got their light from burning *lesan*. An older Badeng, Ampang Siang, recalled that they then switched to a kind of oil called *nyak porau* (in Malay, *minyak kapur*). A rattan strip dipped into the oil at one end was lit at the other for a slow-burning, steady light. This device gave way to the gas lamp. Ampang Siang said that at Telukang some people already used a gas lamp, a kind called the *teronking*. But it was during the 1970s, some 30 years later, that the lamp caught on in Long Geng, producing the first major modern change in lighting. The lamp ran on kerosene, which was pumped to generate gas that heated a gauze bulb. The resulting light was enough for a room.

By the 1980s, a number of indigenous people in interior Belaga were employed by logging companies as jungle guides, log drivers, cooks, security guards, or general assistants. They included men from Long Geng, who brought home petrol-run generators. These were noisy but provided lighting for families and for church gatherings. The men bought the petrol at the camp, though some village leaders were given it by the camp for free.

The biggest change brought by logging was the chance to earn money and buy goods, which meant new technology. The chainsaw came to Long Geng in 1978 when men brought it home from the work that they had found at logging camps in Baram and Tubau, located in other river basins of Sarawak. In the decade that

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⁶ In this article, Badeng words with ə indicates that the vowel is pronounced ə, thus *lesan* is pronounced lasan.
followed, logging came to Belaga and so did lighting generators. Water transport underwent a major change with the introduction of the “setenting”, to use the name locals give the set-up where a small propeller is attached to the end of a long shaft with a small motor and then placed horizontally in water. Outboard motors are placed vertically in the water and can stick down too low for shallow areas, such as those between a person’s home and swidden. In English the horizontal arrangement is called “motor standing” because the motor “stands” on the water; from this derives “setenting”. My informants dated the device’s arrival in Long Geng to 1989, when Kebing Asan brought it home from shops he’d visited in the coastal town of Sarikei. But it became widespread in the community when Badeng from Long Busang went there. During the 1990s, the setenting began to be sold in Belaga, and it became popular for river transport in the interior.

With generators providing electricity to those who could pay for it, television and video players became features of life. The apartments of the favored were packed with neighbors, who sometimes paid a small fee. Martial arts movies from Hong Kong especially caught on. Children could be seen playing at sword fighting with sticks, even hopping like the Chinese ghosts in the movies. Two or three families invested in large freezers to keep fish, deer meat, and wild pig meat. Now and then they traveled to Belaga and sold the frozen meat at the bazaar. The travel was by river, calling for outboard engines and a fair amount of petrol. It made sense to undertake the trip only after a large quantity of meat had been stocked away for sale. This stocking away, made possible by freezers, was motivated by cash. People used to catch as much game as they needed; now they began catching as much they could sell, which was a far greater amount.

Most people who traveled to Belaga, the nearest bazaar town, got there by tagging along with the local upriver agent. He charged a fee for passage aboard the government longboat that he used for his visits to the district office. Most people would make the trip at one time or another: to visit children being educated at the boarding school, to get better medical treatment, to meet friends.

Even before relocation to Sg. Asap, the Badeng in Long Geng had seen increased opportunities to use money, and some were able to install some modern facilities. But most had very little to spend, as shown in the Sunday service donations: hill rice and other in-kind donations, with only a few, small donations of money. This changed after the relocation to Sg. Asap, with money becoming widely used and no one donating in kind on Sundays.

An Oral History: OL

A Badeng friend of the author provides an example of his people’s transformation. Born in 1961 in Long Geng, OL (as we shall call him) attended primary school there. The school provided education from Standard 1 to Standard 4 only, so at age 10 he traveled to Linau for Standard 5 and Standard 6. The town was in a region where Kayan predominated, and the teaching was done in English. (Malaysia had attained independence in 1957, but English remained the language of the primary schools until the phasing in of Malay during the first half of the 1970s.) For his lower secondary education (Form 1 to Form 3), OL studied at the boarding school in Belaga. Then he moved to Kapit, the Kapit Division’s capital, for Form 4 and Form 5. He was 16 when he graduated and finished his schooling. Until moving to Kapit he had never seen a car; he saw even more cars when he visited Sibu, a town connected with the coast by the Rajang River. As OL encountered a district town, a division town, and a local trading hub, urbanism and modernity became bigger facts in his life. Outside Badeng territory, he also encountered new languages. During his school days in Linau, he learned Kayan. In Kapit, a town with many Iban, he learned Iban. As an adult he learned Penan when his search for garu brought
him in contact with the nomads. OL’s collection of languages has become part of his capital in a lifelong search for livelihood.

Throughout OL’s schooling, tuition was free, but textbooks, school uniform, and stationery cost money. His father had to search for rattan and other jungle products to sell. For board at Linau, a student contributed three gantang (14 milk tins of rice make up one gantang) of rice per term. The return trip from Linau to Long Geng took two days of walking, with the Badeng students going as a group. The first day was spent walking to Bersungai, a trip that took them past the Talang Rapids. They spent the night at a Kayan longhouse, pounding rice for their hosts in return for dinner and some rice to take on the second day’s journey.

OL’s work life began when he was eight or so and started helping in the family swidden. As he grew older, he often accompanied his father to search for jungle products. After graduation from high school, he went on his own and also planted hill rice. By then damar resin, one of his father’s standby products, was no longer in demand. The most profitable item that OL could gather from the forest was garu, which he said the Badeng learned about from Penan nomads who had come to Badeng territory to buy dogs. The visitors said their money came from selling garu to Chinese traders in Long Lama, a settlement in the Baram River basin. The Badeng began scouring the Plieran, their territory within the forest, for garu. Usually an expedition would last a week or so and involve a few people. OL recalled setting out with four other men and three dogs; each man carried three gantangs of rice. Rattan and birds (especially those used in birdsong contests) also became lucrative things to hunt for. Rattan brought 25 MYR by the gelong (a unit of measurement that denotes 25 rattans, each 16 feet long; the unit’s name is pronounced gǝlong). That was also the price fetched by a single singing bird; by 2014, the time of the interview, a bird would sell for 2,000 MYR.7

Before logging came to Long Geng’s immediate territory, a number of Badeng villagers, including OL, had protested by blocking logging roads in neighboring areas. A confrontation with the police ensued when villagers blockaded Long Anye, a place on the Linau River. But not even the protesters passed up later opportunities to earn money at the logging camps, or to get free petrol for their boats and their generators. They wanted brightly lit apartments and engine-driven transportation, things that belong to the world of money. Activists living in far-away cities could protest without limit. But the villagers thought of their livelihoods. Working at the camps as security guards or cooks brought a few hundred MYR a month. The higher-paid jobs brought income that, a little while before, had been beyond the villagers’ imagination. Manning a bulldozer at a logging site paid as much as 1,000 MYR a month. No wonder a primary school headmaster in an interior region of Sarawak reported that, when asked, many students said that was the life they wanted. But pay could go still higher. Driving a trailer brought as much as 4,000 MYR, health and weather permitting (pay was set around six MYR per ton, and a logged tree might be as heavy as 10 tons).

OL’s story provides an apt illustration. Known to be anti-logging, he was approached by anti-logging NGOs but also by logging companies. His activism made him stand out, and his multilingual ability and knowledge of the forests made him valuable. In 1985 and 1986, OL worked part-time with a Christian NGO from Sibu. From 1988 to 1997, he guided logging surveyors, though he often went back to Long Geng to take

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7 The Malaysian dollar (MYR) in the 1970s and 1980s was around US$1 to 2.3 MYR. From 1986 to 1996 the rate was US$1 to 2.6 MYR. During the financial crisis of 1997-1998 the rate averaged 3-4, and from 1999 to 2002 the Malaysian currency depreciated to 3.8 (Daquilla, 2004, p. 24). The rate was 3.33 in 2014. Unless otherwise specified, the $ sign in this paper refers to Malaysian dollars (MYR).
care of his swidden farm. His pay as guide ranged from 480 to 650 MYR a month. From 1993 to 1997, OL worked at the Semiling Timber Camp at Tekulang. In 1998 Long Geng and other communities were relocated to Sungai Asap. With his compensation money, OL bought a pickup truck and started taxiing villagers to and from the town of Belaga, home to a market, a clinic, government offices, and the boarding school where many of the villagers’ children attended. OL still taxies villagers, but Sg. Asap now has a school, clinic, and market of its own, and he’s fallen back on specially requested trips to the coastal town of Bintulu or elsewhere. In 2000, he charged the following: to Bakun, 20 MYR; Belaga, 30 MYR (student, 20 MYR); Bintulu, 40 MYR; Tubau, 20 MYR; and to the nearby Asap bazaar town, 2 MYR. He also works, along with his wife, at his swidden and oil-palm smallholding.

Money-Dependent Life in Sg. Asap

At Sg. Asap, the Long Geng community is still generally known as Long Geng Badeng or simply Lepo’ Badeng (Badeng Village). As in Long Geng, there are 13 longhouses divided into two long rows with separation between the longhouses, one for the SIB and the other for the RC; now, instead of a river, they have a stream between them. These houses, built by government contractor but paid for by the residents, were provided with bathrooms (including flush toilets), electricity, and a water supply. Every household in Lepo’ Badeng now owns a washing machine. In Long Geng people used the river when they wanted to wash their clothes or bathe.

Compensation money has accelerated the changes. Different households received different amounts, with most falling between $50,000 MYR and $60,000 MYR. OL received around $59,000 based on the following calculation (rounded figures): compensation for land and crops, $17,000; communal compensation, $12,000 (compensation given to the community as a whole and divided by households); cost of moving and transportation, $5,000; and value of house at old settlement, $25,000. The calculation of compensation for the loss of land and crops depended on how much loss one could convince the government agents to take into consideration. In addition, those who had graves at the old settlement received $1,700 per grave. Typically, a household’s compensation would be enough to buy a motorbike, but not a pickup or a Toyota Land Cruiser. Only a few people earned the cash to buy those vehicles, useful as they were for driving to the farm and to town. The compensation was obviously not enough for long-term survival.

The government wanted the people of Long Geng to give up subsistence cultivation; they were to become commercial cultivators or a proletariat for the oil palm estates. Transferred to Sg. Asap, they found a river and secondary forest unsuitable to provide them with food; around them crowded the oil palm estates, sitting atop what would have been forest. Each family was given three acres by the government, with the land to be used for growing oil palm. Some families held back, leery about the government’s meddling. But they joined in after seeing the money their neighbors made from the first harvests. People have been more reluctant to work on the big oil palm estates, which relied on employing workers from Indonesia.

OL, interviewed in 2014, said an acre of about a hundred oil palms can be harvested twice a month, with each harvest yielding about a ton of oil palm seeds. Each ton is sold at 500 MYR in Sg. Asap, and of that money the hired worker takes home 70 MYR per ton. Most daily needs, even rice, now cost money, so income has become crucial. The most popular way to get it is commercial agriculture. OL and his wife raise garu trees and fruit trees on a piece of land near the village. Others raise pepper or coffee. Some of the villagers have cleared logged secondary forest lands to plant hill rice and other crops. The plots had been allocated by the
government to oil palm estates, but daring individuals argued that, just before the allocation, they had bought this plot or another from somebody who claimed to be the owner. In the long run, the villagers know that farm produce will not fulfil their constant need for money. They seek other opportunities, such as game. According to an interview conducted in August 2008, a group of five hunters might capture 10 wild pigs a month. The pigs would come to about 300 kg. of meat, which would be sold in Sg. Asap for 10 MYR a kilogram. Based on this calculation, each hunter can get around 600 MYR a month. That’s a good income, but earning it means traveling to far-away traditional Badeng territory.

Anteaters (pangolins) are a legally protected species, and to hunt them is to break the law. But they bring in money. An informant confided that he bought himself a new Toyota Land Cruiser, paid off in installments, with the $100,000 MYR or so that he had earned in two years of catching anteaters. In 2014, he said, a Chinese collector paid him 170 MYR per kilo; this was a windfall, as each animal weighs at least a few kilos and some more than 10. (Sixteen kilos were the largest any informant reported.) My informants said they learned about hunting anteater (called *aam* by the Badeng) from Indonesian workers brought in by the oil palm companies. The hunt is done in the evening. Hunters and trained dogs drive slowly in pickups, the dogs scenting the forest on either side of the road. When the dogs barks, dogs and men pile into the forest and run the anteater down. A visit to Sg. Asap in 2014 found more hunting dogs among the villagers than six years before. But word had it there were far fewer anteaters. The man who bought a Land Cruiser had started in 2010. In 2014 he said supply was growing scarce. Also, he said, now the forest had too many ants.

People have come to rely more on fishing. The most expensive fish, *empurau* (in August 2008, it sold at 400 MYR per kilo in Kapit, 300 in Bintulu, and 250 in Belaga) has become hard to find. But the less expensive are still worth catching. OL has two freezers to store his catch. He does his fishing in the great mass of water that now covers his people’s old territory, which is visited by those of the Badeng who can afford pickups, boats, and the petrol for the outboard motors. First, they drive two hours or so to Long Bakun, where they keep their boats. By boat they travel to where they used to live, and there they fish in the shallow reaches (most often these are the locations of former mountain streams); for his part, OL generally uses throwing net (*pukat*) and line nets. Along the bank are huts kept by individual households or groups of households, and the fishing parties stay in them overnight or for a few days.

The fishers keep some of their catch and sell the rest. What they do not do that much is share. Older people lament that nowadays game meat and fish are shared with members of the immediate family and no one else. But the old people understand that money must be made. At Long Geng there were two village stores, but that was it. No traders visited, and nobody outside a store would buy or sell from one another. At Sg. Asap, traders are a feature of life, as is trade conducted by neighbor with neighbor. Visiting Sg. Asap in July 2000, this author saw a couple from Tubau (a town in the region) and even a few Indonesians from Kalimantan who had made the trip to sell clothing. By June 2002, when the author returned to the settlement, the following traders and their products were all part of the scene: a Long Bulan woman, *kuih* (pastries) sold in the morning; two Lepo’ Kulit women, clothes and *saong* (Kenyah sun hats); two Penan Talun women, *ingen* (a kind of basket made of rattan); a Bakong Kenyah man, *tapung* (Kenyah rattan hat); an Iban man from Kapit, bullets and oranges; two Malays from Indonesia, clothing; and a Malay from Bintulu, longan (an imported fruit). The Lepo’ Kulit (another group of Kenyah, this one from Long Jawe’ on the Balui River) and Penan Talung (from Long Belangan on the Balui) had also been relocated to Sg. Asap, where they had their own settlements. The Bakong was from a community in Belaga District.
By August 2008, when the author visited again, members of the Badeng community had begun to sell things to each other. For the most part, this was done by women and children. On Sundays women laid out vegetables and crafts in front of their apartments, some doing so before the 10 a.m. church services and some just after. On most days, there were children who went from door to door to sell kuih (pastry, rice cakes) or farm products (for example, raw peanuts and corn). Brian Foster mentions in his article on ethnicity and commerce that “some kinds of exchange are inherently stressful” (Foster, 1974, p. 447). In the transition to a full commercial economy, individuals feel embarrassed to sell to people of their own community, who are relatives. There are temporary workarounds to this problem. One can sell in another community or one can have the children do the selling.

Feelings about the new life are mixed. Women like the washing machines, but men miss being able to get around. Back in the old territory every family had a boat, and usually it was the man who steered the family on its way to the swidden patch. Here getting around means having a motorized vehicle and a license to drive. Members of the older generation have no license and are not likely to get one. Most cannot read, and they know little of driving school or tests, let alone written tests. If a family does have something with an engine, most likely somebody young is driving it, and an older person must tag along as convenience permits. Not only that, but usually the vehicle is a motor bike and not a car. Most families prefer to buy a washing machine, a television, and then a vehicle, at which point there’s less to spend. The reasoning is that the TV and washing machine cannot help but benefit the whole family, whereas a vehicle is at the disposal only of a person who knows how to drive it. Back home the family boat was for everyone; if it went to the swidden patch or on a hunting trip, some or all the family were inside. In Sg. Asap that’s changed.

Older people also complained of the lack of areca nut. In Long Geng families planted areca trees, but in the new settlement no one ever bothered. As a result, it was hard to find betel nuts and betel leaves to chew. More broadly, both older men and women voiced nostalgia for the rich jungle and river resources in Long Geng. They feel the passing of a sense of place vital to their “tribal past” and their “vibrant sense of themselves” (cf. Basso, 1996, p. 35). They have lost the world they knew, the particular landscape that shaped their livelihood (gathering and hunting in the jungles, swidden cultivation, and so on) and dominated their thoughts and talk (hunting experiences, navigation over rapids, reference of direction in terms of upstream or downstream, and so on). Teenagers do not know many of the words that used to go with river travel. Younger yet, the children remember nothing from before television and video games.

Not that all nostalgia is among the old. Other adults voiced nostalgia too, remembering the days when they could go hunting and when no one paid for water (it came from unpolluted rivers and streams). But they like having electricity and roads, and they must get to nearby towns to sell their goods. They look back on a way of life that sometimes seems better and freer, but also more difficult. Today most hopes for a rewarding life seem to lie beyond the longhouse, in the modern world. Small-scale commercial farming will provide income to live by, but a young person is best off doing well in school (the government has built a huge school complex for Sg. Asap) and then finding a job in town. Counting off the five routes to a future for people living in Sg. Asap, a Badeng friend listed that one first followed by business (though opportunities are scarce beyond selling farm products in the bazaar), commercial farming (planting oil palm in one’s allotted few acres, possibly along with coffee or pepper), marriage (have a beautiful daughter who marries rich), and lastly, worked as a guard at a logging camp (boring and low-paid, a job that people usually quit after a few months). This researcher concurs: To do well means leaving Sg. Asap and the longhouse community for the modern world.
Conclusion

The people of Sg. Asap now give each other fewer presents. Gifts are for a small circle of family members; with everyone else, money changes hands. Ethnographic study and the use of life history enable us to trace how the community reached this point. Taking a step back, we see how Marshall Sahlins’ *Stone Age Economics* demonstrates that hunters and gatherers are affluent because their “modesty of material requirements” makes for no great disparity between means and ends (Sahlins, 1972, p. 12). But this disparity grows as contacts with urban centers become easier and more frequent. Having encountered modern commodities and facilities, indigenous people will find that market forces now take some small part in their lives. People have become more likely to seek money and spend it; at the same time, their world may continue much as before. The big change comes when outside forces—government and corporations—take a hand. The people of Sg. Asap live there because a hydroelectric project buried their homes under water. The government built the relocated settlers a clinic and a large school, but it chose for them an area poorly suited to subsistence living: The river and forest are inadequate to begin with, and the oil palm estates crowd everywhere. The choice was deliberate. The Badeng could hide deeper in their forest—a domain being eaten away by logging companies—or they could choose a life designed to make them need money. The Badeng have always valued being autonomous in their search for livelihood. But, in the event, most went along. Pushed by circumstances, they were pulled by modernity and a life where convenience is favored.

Electricity has to be paid for, and so do school books and supplies. One thing people know about each other is that they all need money. Extra game meat means cash, so sharing is not expected. The Badeng are now “money conscious” and commodification has taken hold. In modern societies “all transactions are turned into money transactions” (Polanyi, 1944/1971, p. 41). So it has proved in Sg. Asap. The process has been gradual, but today even the old people, while lamenting the lack of sharing, say they understand that lack. Money has become an acceptable value in regulating most human exchanges and services, and the scope for self-centered interest has been expanded. This is related to Georg Simmel’s observation that as connection between people becomes expressed in terms of money, there is an increase in individuality, i.e., people become free of obligation, causing relations between people to become more impersonal (Simmel, 2011, pp. 321-327). In other words, money “renders the relations of individuals to the group as a whole more independent” (Simmel, 2011, p. 371).

Older informants, looking back on the 1940s and 1950s, remembered when having two pairs of shorts or trousers was about as much as most people could expect. Somebody who owned just one pair had a tricky time on washday and would modestly stay in the river while the sole item dried on a rock. Today even nomads in the Malaysian jungle wear modern clothes. Those seen in loin cloth usually reserve the garb for court, where they pit their “primitive” helplessness against the logging companies. Among the indigenous peoples of the region, clothing (shirts, shorts, and sarong) has become an important thing to buy. It follows a number of other modern products that they found they wanted. J. P. Brosius, who conducted research among the Penan in the 1980s, writes that “Penan trade various forest products for items such as tobacco, metal, cloth, salt and flashlight batteries” (Brosius, 1991, p. 136). We can recapitulate the rise of money among the indigenous this way.

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8 In May 1990, I visited a band of semi-nomadic Penan at Pa’ Tik, which was about 10 hours of walking time from Bario, the plateau homeland of the Kelabit, then accessible only by small airplanes that flew from the coastal town of Miri. The Penan all wore modern clothes, and the women wore sarong. They sold jungle products; this included logs of bellian hardwood that they carried on their shoulders over difficult jungle terrain to Bario to sell to the Kelabit.
Indigenous people in remote regions, including nomads, had historically bartered or traded with neighboring people and settled groups for food, utensils, or decorative items that they lacked. The people found they needed money for some items, so they sold jungle products. As they desired more modern products and services, and as visits to town became easier and cheaper, they became more money dependent. For the people of Sg. Asap, this gradual process was thrown into overdrive when outside forces pushed these people into the world of money, otherwise known as the global economy.

The people of Sg. Asap live in a new world. With freezers available, food can be stockpiled and sold. And if someone makes a basket or some other craft, she may choose to use plastic instead of rattan. Plastic bags are so cheap and efficient for wrapping that they are widely used; meanwhile, plastic waste crops up in remote regions. The environment is not there to be preserved. The man who complained about the overabundance of forest ants still went ahead and hunted anteaters. The money was too good, and under the new rules the people need money.

“Money is the most universal and most efficient system of mutual trust ever devised”, writes Harari (2011, p. 201). Access to the market has resulted in the Badeng being incorporated into this system. Their lives now center on getting money and then keeping it as best they can. And already, here as on Wall Street, the heedless pursuit of money has shown that it can cause harm. For the Badeng this harm is diminished game, not the social wreckage caused by financial turmoil. Nevertheless, the experiences of the Badeng show that the unrestrained pursuit of money (profit) and convenience do have negative impacts on the environment and its sustainability (such as overfishing and the use of plastics) as well as the protection of endangered species. In more advanced modern economy, the scale of these impacts is seen in the ruthless capitalist mode of production to minimize cost and attain maximum profit, as well as the threat of the global use of plastics on environment and on marine life. For good or ill, the Badeng experience in becoming money-conscious tells us the story of who we are today and the challenges that we encounter today.

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