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Back to Faraway Upriver Territories:

Forest Products, Decentralization, and Aoheng Dayak's Return Migrations, Indonesian Borneo, 1960-2020

Bernard Sellato*

[*Abstract*]

In the 1960s, the Aoheng, a small tribal group with immense territories on the upper Mahakam River, began out-migrating to downstream settlements in search of better living conditions. A trickle of young men, then their families, and more sizable groups, they settled in various towns along the river. In Samarinda, the provincial capital, they came to form a community of several hundred. When the powerful forest product boom (c. 1990) for the P. R. China market opened up the hinterland to extractive ventures, many Aoheng returned home to protect their rich natural resources from forceful outsiders. After 1998, decentralization policies established scores of new provinces, regencies, and districts across the country. Soon, West-Kutai was created as the interior "Dayak" regency, upstream and autonomous from the Moslem-Malay coastal regions. Coal mining and oilpalm plantations massively intensified, while Sendawar, its capital, offered hundreds of civil-service jobs and business opportunities. In 2012, West-Kutai was split to create yet another regency, Upper-Mahakam, prompting robust Aoheng reflux/return moves toward its upstream capital, Ujoh-Bilang.

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Already open to wild-frontier-style inroads by outsiders, it will soon be flooded by industrial ventures. The Aoheng, bound to become a minority in their own district, are struggling to defer their inevitable final dissolution.

Keywords: isolated minorities, reflux/return migrations, balkanized decentralization, state-steered extractivism, endangered cultures.

Ⅰ. Introduction

I first got acquainted with Borneo, East-Kalimantan Province, Kutai (now Upper-Mahakam) Regency, Long-Apari District, and Aoheng Dayak communities in the early 1970s, as a field exploration geologist. Then, having convinced myself, for some reason, that humans must be more interesting than rocks, I turned to anthropology and history. Subsequent to an eighteen-month doctoral fieldwork (1979-81) in Long-Apari and the Müller Mts. region, I remained in touch with and often visited the Aoheng and my adopted family at their various places of residence through the following four decades (my latest visit to Long-Apari was in mid-2022).

In step with time sharing with other research projects, a spot urban fieldwork turned out to be carried on in several stages across more than twenty years, from the early-mid-1990s till the mid-late 2010s, after the reflux migration of Aoheng individuals and whole families toward upriver regions had powerfully picked up momentum in relation with the progressive unfolding of Indonesia's administrative decentralization policy. Through time, parts of this research were presented in lectures and conferences (in 1997, 2014, and 2015).

The present essay, after a necessary description (II) of the regional and local setting, summarizes Aoheng downstream migrations (III) from the 1960s to the 1980s, their reasons, processes, and resettlement modalities; the reflux process in three stages (IV) that brought substantial numbers of emigrated Aoheng back to their

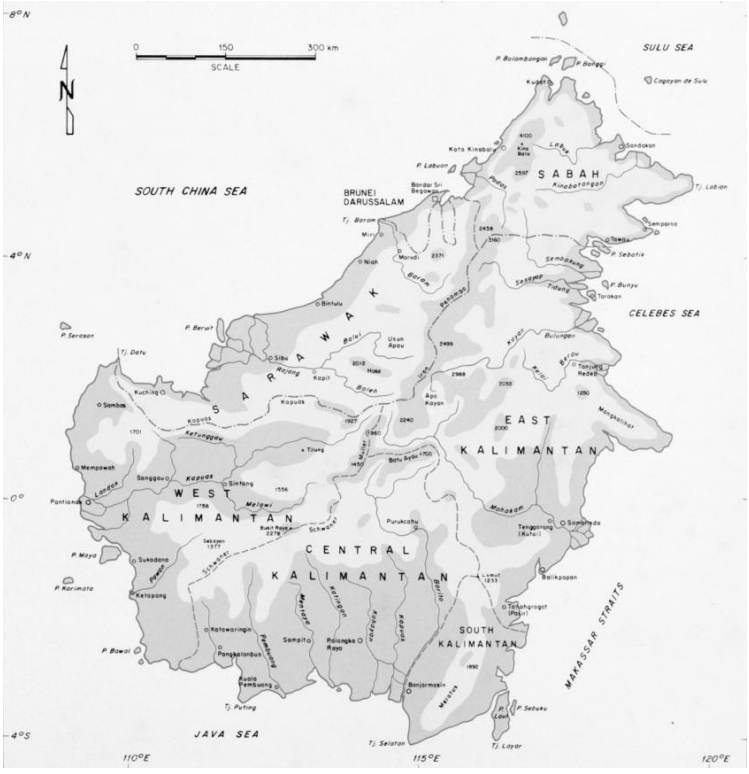
highland regions between c. 1990 and c. 2020; the ways in which the Aoheng settled and "inhabited" (V) the provincial capital, Samarinda, refashioned their social networks, and constructed new modes of sociality—although part of them chose to remain there when others returned upriver; and, finally, a tentatively quantified review (VI) of Aoheng communities now scattered along the 800 km of the Mahakam River between Samarinda and Long-Apari, with some comments on population statistics and demography.

Migration from highland regions to coastal towns is a common phenomenon in Southeast Asia and elsewhere. In Sarawak, some anthropological studies have documented it (e.g., Sutlive 1972, 1985-1986), especially the circumstances of ethnic-based communities (e.g., Amster 1998), split between highland and coastal urban residential sites (e.g., Boulanger 2002; Hew 2003), and the ways in which they are organized and communicate (see Poline Bala 2008; Barlocco 2017). So far as I am aware, little work of this kind has ever been done in Kalimantan, except on some Kenyah communities (Eghenter 1999), and (next to) nothing about cases of return migration, linked to the recent economic opening of highland areas.

The present study remains firmly grounded in the data I collected through hundreds of interviews over an extended period (by means of an admittedly unsophisticated quantitative methodology). In the half century between the late 1960s and c. 2020, the social conditions of a small community isolated in the island's center, as one may guess, have undergone powerful transformations. Its life was very, very quiet, it is now quite frantic, displaying the traumatic effects of what is known as (too) rapid social change (see, e.g., Appell 1988)—which often sounds like a societal disease—and showing chaotic, multifactorial (polygenic), fast-changing, and hard-to-grasp social reconfigurations, usually featuring individual initiatives, as well as family fragmentation and plural residence. No attempt has been made here to refer to the theoretical literature on this or related issues (see, e.g., King 2017).

Ⅱ. The Setting

Shared among three nation-states (Indonesia, the Federation of Malaysia, and the sultanate of Brunei Darussalam), the island of Borneo (Fig. 1) covers some 750,000 sq. km (for c. 25 million people), over 70 percent of which comprise five Indonesian provinces (West, South, Central, East, and North Kalimantan), for a population now reaching some 18 million. In each of them, varying numbers of Dayak groups and several Melayu (or "Malay") groups share the land, the former blanket term applying to chiefly non-Moslem hinterland peoples and the latter, making up over three quarters of the numbers, to Islamized lowland and coastal dwellers.



<Fig. 1> Borneo, physiographic and political (Sellato 1989)

2.1. The Kalimantan Background

Despite a historical-cultural continuum, this contrast based on cultural-religious values is quite relevant to the social-political field. The island's physiography has shaped economic routes, both across mountain ranges and along riverine axes, and the control of river-mouth Malay polities—Indianized kingdoms, later Islamized sultanates—over the trade between hinterland and maritime networks. Such polities, keeping Dayak peoples as tributaries or clients, influenced their cultures and societies.

For interior peoples, to this day, the river remains a lifeline, an umbilical cord. Along its axis, administrative directives reach the most secluded communities, from the provincial capital, via regency and district[1] relays. For most aspects of their lives—police, justice, health, education, trade goods, state subsidies and salaries, technological innovations, even ideological and other abstract concepts—people have their eyes and minds focused downstream.

Until c. 2000, the immense East-Kalimantan (Kaltim) province, established in 1959, comprised all the eastern river drainages (some 200,000 sq. km). With Samarinda, its capital, a large city in the coastal region, the whole political and economic authority was in the hands of the local urban elites—Javanese, Bugis-Makassar from southern Sulawesi, Banjar Malays from Banjarmasin, local Kutai Malays—and in those of the powerful extractive-business lobbies—logging, industrial timber plantations, shrimp farms, later coal mining and oilpalm estates—backed by the central government's economic policies on natural resources in the nation's so-called "outer islands" (see Cooke 2006; Davidson 2018: 10). The minority Dayak population (less than twenty percent) had little say in provincial affairs, due to high ethnic fragmentation, lack of supra-ethnic organization and political clout, and an overall lower level of education and skills, making it susceptible to relent to government pressure, and remain economically disadvantaged, territorially sidelined, and culturally vulnerable.

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[1] In the English-language literature in and on Indonesia, as in English translation, "district" and "sub-district" are sometimes used instead of, respectively, "regency" (*kabupaten*) and "district" (*kecamatan*).

Implementation (1999) of the Laws on Regional Government,[2] following President Soeharto's resignation (1998), soon led, all over the country, to the creation (Indonesian [henceforth, Ind.] *pemekaran*, "blossoming") of new provinces (formerly *propinsi*, now *provinsi*) and regencies, giving way to certain ethnic communities' yearning for more political and financial autonomy, in an attempt to allow for the overdue development of hitherto derelict isolated regions (see 3.3).

In East-Kalimantan, Kutai Regency, which had replaced the ancient sultanate of Kutai (abolished in 1960; see Wortmann 1971), centered at Tenggarong and extending over the whole Mahakam River drainage (and adjacent regions; c. 95,000 sq. km; Casson 2006), was split into three new regencies: Kutai-Kartanegara, East-Kutai, and West-Kutai (Law 47/1999). Contrasting with downriver regencies, settled mainly by Malays, Javanese, and other migrants, West-Kutai (Kutai Barat, or Kubar; see Massing 1986), with fourteen districts encompassing the upper section of the Mahakam River, was meant to stand as a primarily autochthonous Dayak regency.

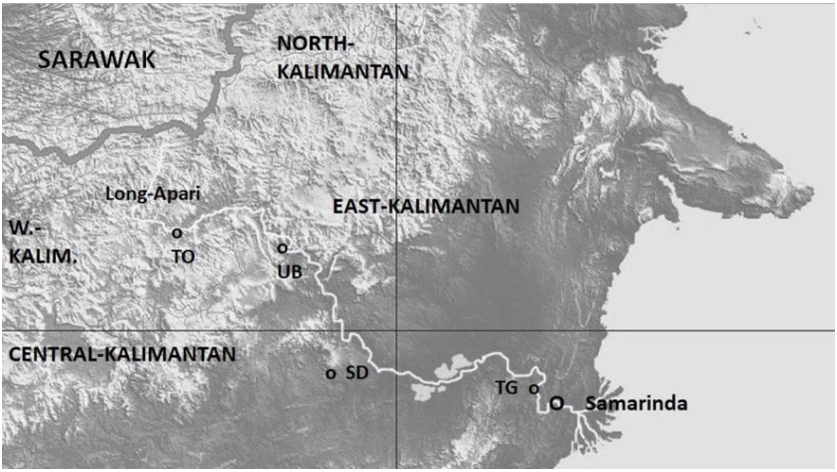
Later on (2012), West-Kutai itself underwent further fragmentation, yielding to the (formerly self-ruling) upper river ethnic groups' pressure, to make room for another regency, Upper-Mahakam (Mahakam-Ulu, or Mahulu). At about the same time (2012), East-Kalimantan was considerably reduced by the carving out of a new province, North-Kalimantan, and currently covers only 127,000 sq. km for a total of about 3.7 million people (*BPS* 2020).

2.2. The Mahakam, Long-Apari, and the Aoheng

The second longest waterway in Borneo (980 km), the Mahakam forms the major drainage system (77,000 sq. km) of the island's eastern half (Fig. 2). The region's topographic and hydrographic features have much bearing on settlement patterns and social and

[2] Laws 22 & 25/1999 on Regional Government (*Pemerintahan Daerah*) are often referred to as "Laws on Regional Autonomy" (*Otonomi Daerah*). Law 22/1999 was later revised (2004, 2014).

economic life. Barred by a hill range from a deep delta zone, extensive low plains with shallow lakes are densely populated by riparian "Malay" (historically, Islamized Dayak) communities, with the cities of Samarinda and Tenggarong at their eastern edge. Upstream, a hilly region is (nominally) Dayak country, with a number of smaller urbanized centers and Sendawar, the capital town of West-Kutai. Ujoh-Bilang (including Long-Bagun), the new capital of Upper-Mahakam, is the last small town, just below a long set of dangerous waterfalls, the gate to the uppermost region.



<Fig. 2> The Mahakam River, from Long-Apari District to the province's capital, Samarinda;
TG: Tenggarong, SD: Sendawar, UB: Ujoh-Bilang, TO: Tiong-Ohang (adapted from Wikipedia)

Landlocked above the waterfalls, a mountainous region with low population density remained *de facto* independent from the sultanate of Kutai, and was only reached by Dutch explorers as late as 1896.[3] The only route to coastal regions was by canoe down the river, though navigating the Mahakam was such a long and exacting journey that Long-Apari residents often chose to travel to Sarawak, a much shorter and easier trip, or to West- or Central-Kalimantan,

[3] See Nieuwenhuis 1900, 1904-1907; on the transitional period from "pre-colonial" to "colonial" in Borneo, see Healey 1985; Black 1985; Rousseau 1989; Sellato 1993, 2021, 2024.

to barter their forest products for manufactured goods.

In 1900, the upriver region was alienated from the sultanate of Kutai's formal domain by the Dutch colonial government and directly administered, under the name Boven (Upper) Mahakam, by a Dutch *controleur* (civil commissioner) posted at the Malay bazaar settlement of Long-Iram (see Sellato 1986). A Catholic mission was later established at Laham (1907), churches were built in most villages and, within a couple of decades, all upriver groups had converted to Christianity (Coomans 1980, 1987; also, Steenbrink 2008).

Independent Indonesia, busy with crucial nation-building matters, did not devote much attention to the hinterland districts (*kecamatan*) of the Mahakam, except during the "Confrontation" years (*Konfrontasi*, 1963-66), a guerilla war along the border against what was then being established as East Malaysia. The area above the rapids, then a single district, Long-Pahangai, was divided in 1963 to create Long-Apari, as the new border district, where a sizable garrison was posted.

The highland residents then returned to their quiet old-style life and economic pursuits, under the rather dispassionate supervision of three State representatives (Ind. *tiga unsur pimpinan*) at district level—the district head (*camat*), police chief (*Kepala Kepolisian Sektor*, *Kapolsek*), and army chief (*Komandan Rayon Militer*, *Koramil*). However, faced with taxing life conditions and conscious of upcoming developments, some residents began to make plans to resettle downriver.

While Long-Pahangai was populated by Busang, Kayan, and Long-Glat Dayak groups (Sellato 1980, 2002a: 45-53), the far-flung Long-Apari District, bordering with Sarawak, West-, and Central-Kalimantan, is one of Kalimantan's largest, extending over some 5,000 sq. km. As of 1970, it was home to nine small settlements (Ind. *desa*, village), totaling some 2,000 souls (0.4 per sq. km): the Aoheng (a.k.a. Penihing), Seputan, and Bukat (Bukot), three tiny marginal tribal peoples, most of them itinerant rice farmers living in longhouses, and some forest nomads.

Aoheng (and, to some extent, Seputan) societies, influenced by Kayan neighbors, traditionally based on an ideology of inequality, differentiate their members into three major strata (Sellato 1986: 401-404; also Rousseau 1990): the nobles (Aoheng *süpï*), commoners (*kovi*, lit., "the little [ones]"), and (formerly) slaves (*dïpon*). A person's strict and exclusive ascription to a given stem family and longhouse apartment, and thus to a given social category, is by birth, marriage, or residence (on stratification, stem family, and the "house" in Borneo: Sellato 2002a: 67-92; on social hierarchy and religious conversion: Ardhianto 2017). And the Bukat (see Sellato 1986, 1994), now settled hunter-gatherers, have long fiercely maintained an egalitarian type of society.

Slightly differing in their historical ethnic configuration and some cultural and ritual particulars, the five Aoheng sub-groups—the Cihan (at Tiong-Ohang), Kerioq, Huvung, Apari, and Tiong-Bu'u—remained politically self-ruling and autonomous from one another, each having its own precisely bounded territory, shifting their farming areas and moving longhouse village sites within it, with its hereditary ruling families—contrasting with the Kayan and other ethnic groups, they never had a paramount regional chief. This also applies to the three Seputan sub-groups.

These societal features[4] still bear on the social, economic, and ritual life of individuals, families, and communities, to some extent even in urban situations (see 5.1), although the nobility's social preeminence today has somewhat waned.

Ⅲ. Migrating Downriver (1960s-1980s)

Among the Aoheng, shifting rice cultivators, each household traditionally owns a large portfolio of rights of use over secondary forest plots,[5] originally felled by its forefathers, among which it selects and farms each year one or more according to distance, labor on hand, or other technical or social criteria. And the whole

[4] On the Aoheng, see Sellato 1986: 289-453, 2002a: 163-194.

[5] Migrating away from the home village may result in losing formal village affiliation and in exclusion from rights on farm land (see also Dimbab 2017).

village is moved to a new site whenever the longhouses become dilapidated or sit too far from new farming areas, or for external reasons like threats of enemy attack. For the Aoheng, sometimes called "nomadic farmers," mobility is ingrained in the individual and collective socio-economic habitus.

Moreover, they had a custom of staging, usually once a year during the lull between the rice harvest (February) and the opening of new fields (May), long-distance expeditions called *panu sake* (Aoheng [henceforth Ao.] "walk visit," "go travel"), gathering as many as fifty men, to market towns, often over the mountains. As they had been doing for centuries, as both marginal people and global trade agents (see Dove 2011), they carried the produce[6] they had collected along the year in the forest, returning with salt, tools, pots and pans, other manufactured goods, even hefty Singer® sewing machines, as well as prestige items like bronze gongs and large Chinese ceramic jars. These expeditions also served as initiation for teenage boys, opening their eyes to things, peoples, and the wide world beyond their village. This custom was common among many Dayak groups for men to acquire experience, wealth, and status (Sellato 2021) and, at times, offered opportunities for a hasty headhunting raid on the sly (e.g., Lumenta 2017).

3.1. Find Waged Work

In the 1950s, teams of young Aoheng men travelled across the border into Sarawak where jobs had become available at logging concessions' camps or, in season, to West-Kalimantan to collect illipe nuts (*Shorea* spp.) for sale. Some even went as far as Miri, on Sarawak's east coast, to work in the oil fields, and quite a few never returned (e.g., Lahajir 2013); in 1975, I met a gang of young "expatriate" Aoheng men in a settlement called Kampung Kayan, near Kapit, Sarawak, and I even heard of some who had enrolled for work on cargo ships and "gone to America." So, from 1930 on and

[6] Non-Timber Forest Products, NTFPs (Ind. *Hasil-hasil Hutan Non-Kayu*, HHNK); ranging from rattan canes and exudates (resins and latexes: camphor, aloe wood, copal, gutta percha) to animal products (beeswax, edible swiftlet [salangan] nests, deer antlers, bezoar stones, hornbill feathers), and gold dust or nuggets (Sellato 2002b). See also Note 10.

up into the 1960s, Long-Apari's population did not grow much (see Table 1).

Beginning with some delay in interior East-Kalimantan in c. 1967, the global timber boom took along the Mahakam the local form (see Manning 1971) of the famous Banjir Kap system ("log flood"), whereby village men felled large trees upriver and left it to high floods to convey them down through the rapids, after which logging companies retrieved them in log ponds, checking carved marks to remunerate the lumberjacks, who progressively shifted away from Sarawak jobs, although the pay there was higher. By 1970, the State started granting logging concessions—one of which opened at Long-Bagun, just below the great rapids—and finally, in 1974, it contracted with multinationals to take over the province's timber industry, and *banjir kap*-style activity was simply outlawed (Casson 2006; Wood 1985: 135).

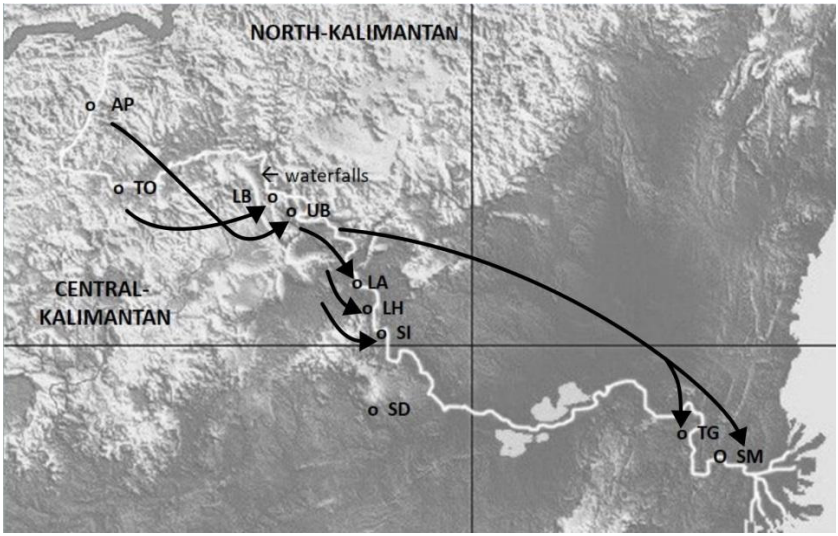
The local context of the late 1960s, strongly driven by global economic trends, was presenting new reasons for emigrating. The upriver regions were awakening from a long slumber, and the period around 1970 was one major turning point for many—e.g., Kenyah groups from Apo Kayan began emigrating, fanning out to lower-river regions (Liman Lawai 2003). The Aoheng took advantage of now available small outboard engines, which made navigating the Mahakam easier. Male teenagers and young adults began exploring the downriver potential for jobs (see Peluso 1980). At that juncture, when I first visited Long-Apari, the Aoheng were still quite a monolithic social entity (over 95 percent Catholic rice farmers, albeit with a striking deficit of young men).

It was not just jobs, and not just young men who moved, but whole families, too. After the brutal commotion of the Confrontation with Malaysia, Long-Apari people had become aware of how the situation was unfolding downriver and of their own isolation.[7] They longed for improved living conditions—education and health facilities, access to trade and consumer goods (see Battan 1976)—

[7] A number of Dayak men were drafted to participate in military expeditions across the border, most often as scouts or porters, but it was reported to me that fighting squads of blowpipe soldiers had been formed (Sellato 1986).

which called for salaried jobs and a cash-oriented economy. Emigration plans, however, were thwarted by the local police, as the Indonesian state, after the end of the conflict, tried to prevent people living near the Sarawak border from out-migrating.

The Aoheng, as a trickle or *en masse*, evading or discounting police leave, moved downstream. Eventually, some went as far as Tenggarong and Samarinda (Fig. 3). At first, these were mostly male teenagers, set on pursuing higher education, as advance parties; and their families soon joined them. The importance of education in Aoheng out-migration cannot be downplayed, nor can the role of the Dutch Catholic mission in this process.



<Fig. 3> Aoheng downriver migration, 1960s-1990s; AP: Long-Apari; TO: Tiong-Ohang; SM: Samarinda; TG: Tenggarong; SD: Sendawar; LB: Long-Bagun; UB: Ujoh-Bilang; LA: Laham; LH: Long-Hubung; SI: Sirau (background adapted from a Wikipedia map)

3.2. Education, Health, and the Church

When the colonial government allotted the Mahakam River basin to the Capuchin congregation, the village of Laham, some 500 km upstream from Samarinda (and now in Upper-Mahakam), was selected to start mission work in 1907. Soon, a school was opened

there for Dayak children (1911); later, three nuns came (1920) to open a modest *poliklinik* (1923). Another congregation, MSF (Missionaries of the Holy Family), took over (1926), and moved their activity to Tering, some distance downstream (1932; now in West-Kutai), where the nuns opened a small hospital (1933). Meanwhile, churches and schools were built everywhere by the villagers themselves, including in remote upstream places. By 1955, the Mission's hub was transferred to Samarinda, where an apostolic vicariate was established, later upgraded to a bishopric (1961; and to an archbishopric in 2003). In 1963 a nursing school opened, a maternity hospital (1964) and, under the bishopric's Setia Budi Foundation, all this became Samarinda's Dirgahayu General Catholic Hospital (1975; Coomans 1987; Yayasan Setia Budi 2023).

In Long-Apari's isolated villages, however, the health situation remained poor, with hardly any medicine beyond cotton wool and iodine available at the district's government health center (*Pusat Kesehatan Masyarakat, Puskesma*s), and various epidemics (measles, pneumonia) still, in the 1980s, taking a heavy toll on children and the elderly. People had no savings or cash to meet the cost of transporting the sick to downriver clinics, and medical personnel from downriver towns were often reluctant to be posted so far upriver (Sellato 1986).

Regarding education, in Long-Apari, things moved on with local empowerment. From 1922 on, small numbers of Aoheng children, particularly from the nobility, were sent to school (Laham or Tering; Coomans 1980: 92-93), where they boarded for five years, with a contribution in paddy for their keep being required from their families. Some went on for an extra two years at teacher training school, to later be posted upriver, like Guru Kaya, future leader of the Aoheng Kerioq, who returned in 1929 to run a primary school in Batu Ura, his home village (Kaja Ledjo 1973: 25). While three-grade primary schools were soon found in all Aoheng villages, complete six-grade schools (SD, *Sekolah Dasar*) were only set up in the three largest settlements, and full secondary schools (SMP + SMA) were only available far downriver. The district capital, Tiong-Ohang, had its junior high school (SMP) in 1983, then a foot bridge across the river (1988), a marketplace, and finally a senior

high school (SMA) in 2000.

In the 1970s, Long-Apari's five primary schools, subsidized and run by the Church, were taken over by the State and, by 1983, after resettlement (RESPEN; see 3.3), only the Tiong-Ohang schools were still in activity. However, Aoheng families with either some financial means or relatives residing in downstream towns eagerly sent their children to school in Laham, Tering, Long-Iram, or even Tenggarong or Samarinda, where the Mission was running schools and, through its Setia Budi Foundation, could support Dayak children's education.

In the early 1960s, Mgr. J. Romeijn MSF, the Catholic bishop, arranged for the best students from Mission schools along the Mahakam to be offered scholarships toward higher education in Samarinda. A first group of five young Aoheng arrived in Samarinda in 1962 and a second group in 1966. After graduation, they were liable for a four-year work service with the Church. Later, they became teachers, civil servants, nurses, or clerks and, in the course of time, most remained in Samarinda, some in Tenggarong (then Kutai Regency's capital). And most, acting as hosts and mentors, called on younger siblings to join them in town, and then their ageing parents. This is how an Aoheng community began developing in Samarinda.

3.3. Government Resettlement and Spontaneous Relocations

In the late 1960s and early 1970s, the Department of Social Affairs (DEPSOS) initiated in Long-Apari a population resettlement scheme, known as RESPEN (*Resetelmen Penduduk*): The people should remain in the district and be "developed" *in situ*. Indeed, the Aoheng had been classified as *suku terasing* and *desa tertinggal*,[8] and the program called "Development of Isolated People" (*Pembinaan Suku Terasing*) was designed to upgrade their condition —including the eradication of such reviled economic practices as swiddening,[9] to be replaced by wet-rice farming, although there are

[8] The State, not recognizing its "indigenous and tribal peoples" (as per ILO Convention 169), focused instead its assistance on certain "vulnerable" categories—*suku terasing* (Ind. "isolated tribe") and *desa tertinggal* ("backward village"); see Mubyarto 1994: Winzeler 1997; Persoon 1998; Joko Triwanto 2000; Li 2000.

not, by far, sufficient flat lands in Long-Apari.

The Long-Apari communities were instructed to relocate around the district's capital, Tiong-Ohang, where it would be easier to provide them with both the much needed services (health, education, communications, etc.) and the technical assistance, complete with extension workers, to speed up their economic development. They were not overly enthusiastic, mainly for reasons of limited farm land availability around Tiong-Ohang, and neither were the extension workers. Yet, by 1973, the Aoheng-Kerioq and all three Seputan communities had already relocated. A second RESPEN phase started in 1980 and, by 1985, some 1,000 people, about half the district's population, were gathered at Tiong-Ohang; however, not only were the defiant Aoheng Apari and their Bukat associates still declining to move—as a warning, their school teachers were pulled out—but dissension ensued among noble families in other villages, leading to secession and significant out-migration to downriver regions.

In 1969, ten pioneer breakaway Cihan families, daring the police ban, left Tiong-Ohang to resettle in Laham; in 1971, twelve Apari families moved to Ujoh-Bilang, with more families following suit in 1972-75; from Tiong-Ohang again, some 100 Cihan people resettled in Long-Bagun in two stages (1973, 1976); by 1980, this Cihan community was already as large as that remaining in Tiong-Ohang, while conflict among the Huvung led five families to move to Sirau (now in West-Kutai). Most of these migrants, as groups of households, were set on remaining farmers. In the standard, orally pledged Dayak way, they procured rights of use over farm land from the host villages, while young men could find jobs with logging yards now operating in the middle Mahakam area. Meanwhile, several Tiong-Bu'u families traveled all the way to Samarinda to settle at Bukuan (1974; see 5.2). A net population decrease ensued in Long-Apari (Table 1).

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[9] Swidden, slash-and-burn, shifting cultivation: opening a new dry field (Ind. *ladang berpindah*, *ladang ulir balik*; Ao. *ümo*) for paddy (rice) or other crops on a hill side by felling and burning the (most often secondary) forest (Chin 1985; Dove 1985; Inoue & Lahjie 1990; Thaler & Anandi 2017), here contrasted with the allegedly less primitive wet (inundated or irrigated) rice fields (Ind. *sawah*) system.

<Table 1> Long-Apari District Population

Long-Apari District (c. 5,000 sq. km)*

Anno	Pop.	Source	Pop. Density
1929	1645	von Kuehlewein 1930	c. 0.3 / sq. km
1970-1976	2240-2380	TAD 1977, 1978, Battan 1976, Voss 1983	
1978-1980	2050-2170	District Off. 1980, Voss 1983, Masing 1986	
1990	2305	Bappenas 2003	c. 0.4 / sq. km
2000	3459	Bappenas 2003	c. 0.7 / sq. km
2012	4230	*Kubar* 2013	
2018	3838 [?]	*Mahulu* 2022	
2022	4502	District Office 2022, *Kaltimprov* 2022	c. 0.9 / sq. km

§* [TAD 1983: 4,700 sq. km; Bappenas 2003: 5,500 sq. km]
[?] possibly unreliable figure

In the 1980s, the overall demographic situation became more complex, with families, separately or in small clusters, moving up and down the Mahakam. Contrasting with the previous decade's mass migration pattern under noble leaders, in line with Aoheng social organization, the messier 1980s attested, in a brave new world of expanding spatial and social autonomy, to both a relative perceived weakening of traditional chiefs' cognizant leadership (or a confidence crisis), and a general uneasiness about the future and indecision about choices.

More families from upriver villages joined their kin in downstream settlements, from Cihan to Long-Bagun, from Apari to Ujoh-Bilang; and many, also, went straight to Samarinda. During the 1980s, the Aoheng Huvung split and merged continuously, families circulating back and forth between their upstream village, Tiong-Ohang, Sirau, and Long-Hubung.

Indecision is also manifest in village moves within the district, regarding definitive settlement locations. As for the intractable Aoheng from Apari, a new secession (1982) took a group of thirteen families to a place half-way down to Tiong-Ohang, Noha Silat, which has since been upgraded to *desa* status. The Apari today still hold to their upstream territories, rich in valuable NTFPs, and keep suspecting the government of seeking to vacate their lands in order

to open the way to corporate (plantation) projects.

This summary of Aoheng history now takes us to its next major turning point, the period c. 1990, with the boom on forest products just starting, triggered by the recent opening of the mainland China (PRC) market, with its high demand for tropical (forest and marine) products (see De Beer & McDermott 1996; for a follow-up study, Sills, Shanley, Paumgarten, De Beer & Pierce 2011).

Ⅳ. Reflux/Return Migrations (1990 – 2020)

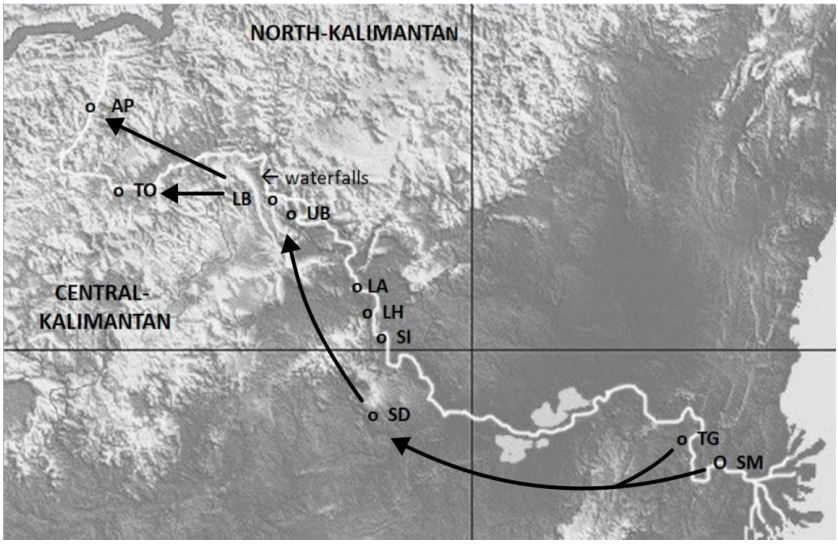
The 1990s saw no further significant downstream migration from Long-Apari; as stated above, small groups of individuals and families, not yet quite set on their intentions and priorities and still circulating between downriver villages; more trickling of individual households moving down to Ujoh-Bilang and Long-Bagun; and some readjustments of Aoheng communities within Long-Apari District. However, fairly abruptly, external factors prompted the start of a strong reversal trend, in three phases spanning three decades, which shifted Aoheng people by the hundreds from Samarinda and mid-river towns back to upriver regions.

Two independent key events in East-Kalimantan occurred during the 1990s: One was the global boom on forest products, beginning in about 1990; the other, the implementation of the nation-wide decentralization policy, starting in 1999. The latter led to the establishment of, first, West-Kutai Regency (1999; severed from the old Kutai Regency) and, later, Upper-Mahakam Regency (2012; carved out of West-Kutai). Though independent, these two events actually were not unrelated, as both indirectly were partaking in the global race for hitherto untapped natural resources, and definitely had convergent aftereffects on interior communities.

4.1. The Forest Product Boom

For centuries, the Aoheng had been deriving part of their livelihood from the collecting of valuable forest products for trade, catering to external markets' demands, always with some deferral, as these were

forwarded from coastal *entrepôts* (godown towns) to the hinterland. As products in demand varied with time (see Sellato 2001, 2002b), the Aoheng reacted to change with efficient versatility, e.g., switching focus from camphor and gutta percha in colonial times to *damar* resin and rattan in the post-Independence period, then returning (1990) to aloe wood and birds' nests, for which there had long been no demand.[10] Gold panning by hand in shallow streams during drought periods was a millennia-old activity.



<Fig. 4> Aoheng reflux migration upriver, post-2000, and present communities; SM: Samarinda; TG: Tenggarong; SD: Sendawar; LH, Long-Hubung; LA, Laham; UB: Ujoh-Bilang; LB: Long-Bagun; TO: Tiong-Ohang; AP: Long-Apari

When the boom hit, in this first of three phases, East-Kalimantan province already was one of the nation's richest, and a "frontier" region for poor unemployed migrants from other "outer" (eastern) islands. When prices took off, young Aoheng men, all expert forest collectors, regarded it as a great opportunity to procure an easy income, and they dashed straight to Long-Apari to

[10] On two major historic products (exudates): aloe wood (eaglewood, incense wood), see Persoon 2012; and gutta percha, see Pringle 1970; Godfrey 2018. More broadly, see Peluso 1983. On their impact on local societies: Maunati 2005, De Jong & Ken-ichi 2006. See also Note 6.

take advantage of it (Fig. 4). But they were not alone, and the district was already teeming with swarms of aggressive fortune hunters from all over the archipelago, probing its most secluded streams and mountains.

Registered population in Long-Apari—including, presumably, many Aoheng returnees, plus some newcomer settlers, such as traders and crafts persons—rose from c. 2,000 in 1980 to c. 3,500 in 2000 (Voss 1983; *Bappenas* 2003; see Table 1). This, however, still fails to account for large numbers of outsiders (Ind. *pendatang*)—possibly over 1,000, according to district officers—who, bypassing Tiong-Ohang and its police station, settled in scores of forest camps or gold washing spots of elusive and fast-changing whereabouts. In a muddled situation strikingly comparable, in its origins and its effects, to that prevailing in c. 1900 in the Bahau region of the middle Mahakam before its transfer to Dutch direct rule (*rechtstreeks bestuur*; see Note 3; and Nieuwenhuis 1901), Long-Apari soon became a Wild-West-type frontier zone, replete with thuggish gangs, firearms, murders, hard liquor, drugs (ecstasy, meth), prostitution, gambling, and a high criminality rate, which the token local police and army forces never could keep in check.

The Aoheng, unable to prevent or contain this rush on their territory, chose to take part in it, in order to at least get a share of the profits. They witnessed these resources being ransacked and destroyed—and, worst of all, themselves contributing to their depletion. Chronologically (and approximately, with some overlap), in the Long-Apari area, the rush came first on aloe wood, then birds' nests, and finally, gold (now with access to heavy equipment and some chemicals).

Inexpert newcomers indiscriminately felled aloe wood trees, whether or not holding the precious resin (Ind. *gaharu*), till the resource was wiped out. Because of unbridled competition, the edible nests of swiftlets (*sarang burung walet*), which the Aoheng used to collect once every three months from their family-owned caves, were systematically picked too early, with eggs discarded and nestlings killed—sometimes, the caves' guards, too, were killed by bandits— ineluctably leading to a sharp decline in bird population and nest production. Streams in which the Aoheng used to pan by

hand for gold dust were now rummaged through using powerful water pumps, damaging river banks, polluting watercourses, and killing the fish. Once forest resources had become depleted somewhere, the gangs moved on to new zones.

An important corollary of the presence of such numbers of outsiders was a palpable waning of the Aoheng *adet* (Ind. *adat*), the customary law, which village elders (Ao. *doang botiq*) were unable to enforce (see Fujiwara 2020; Li 2020). They had to cope with copious conflicts over damage to property or resources, land grab, sexual misconduct, and countless interethnic brawls away in the forest, as outsiders often disregarded and disparaged the *adet* and refused to pay the fines incurred for their offenses. The less antagonistic indigenous residents helplessly perceived the dwindling of their control over their lands as their impending social and economic demotion.

4.2. Establishing West-Kutai Regency

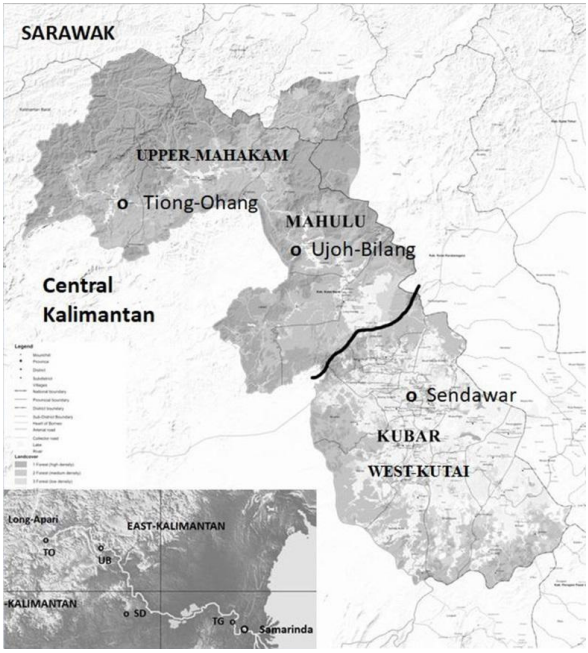
By c. 2000, new provinces and regencies began to be created all over the country (see Bardhan 2002). Decentralization laws devolved much control over revenue and budget from provincial to regency governments, hence the large numbers of regency creations nationwide and their potent appeal, especially to local elites, with high stakes in civil service jobs (*Pegawai Negeri Sipil,* PNS), government contracts, and various business opportunities. As noted above (see IV), these laws, meant to provide hinterland populations with easier access to the benefits of development, also facilitated extractive industries' access to the last landlocked regions' untapped natural resources.

Ethnic politics always loomed large in decisions behind new creations. At any administrative level, dominant ethnocultural groups are inclined to take control of government and appropriate the lion's share of development budgets, while one or more minority entities bitterly complain of suffering from unfair neglect.[11] Dayak

[11] On provincial politics, "prone to oligarchic domination and elite capture," see Fossati 2016: 1; on a brutal logging boom and "ad hoc arrangements" for access and benefits between local actors in a legal limbo, see Haug 2014: 108.

political lobbies, claiming that the Mahakam Dayak were badly treated—"like stepchildren" (Ind. *dianaktirikan*)—by provincial elites, had anticipated the implementation of these laws (see Davidson 2018: 11). Despite their small population, two major Dayak ethnolinguistic clusters, the Tunjung-Benuaq and Bahau-Busang, were able to jointly wield sufficient influence over provincial authorities and legislature to succeed.

So, in 1999, the old Kutai regency (capital at Tenggarong) was fragmented, and the new West-Kutai (Kutai-Barat) Regency (Fig. 5), dubbed a "Dayak territory," allowed the predominantly Christian upriver Dayak to stand politically and financially autonomous from Moslem-Malay-dominated Tenggarong. West-Kutai had an area of c. 30,000-35,000 sq. km and a population, then, of c. 135,000-145,000. Reasonably affluent, the regency hastily set out to build its capital, Sendawar, in grand style at a major road junction on the densely settled Tunjung plateau.



<Fig. 5> West-Kutai (Kubar, 1999) and Upper Mahakam (Mahulu, 2012) regencies; (adapted from Bappeda Kalimantan Timur)

In this second of three phases, as early as 1998, Dayak people having resettled at downriver places, such as Samarinda and Tenggarong, started moving upriver to the thus far virtual Sendawar city in order to position themselves, lobby their politicians or relatives for promises of jobs or business prospects, or buy land in anticipation. For the Aoheng, this reverse migration primarily consisted of young graduates in search of civil service positions, hundreds of which were open, and professionals seeking government contracts or technical jobs.

As a whole administrative town was to be built from scratch and literally thousands of jobs to be made available, droves of other people also moved in to seize new jobs or business opportunities, or buy land in the Barong-Tongkok and Melak areas, soon subject to strong property speculation. Unskilled jobs in construction and public works, the transport business, and countless services attracted lots of unskilled workers hailing from various Indonesian regions. So, such towns grow fast, and minority local groups would lobby hard and long to be granted a regency of their own.

Many Aoheng families long established in Samarinda stayed put for some time (see 5.2), with grand-parents looking after grand-children attending school, while young professionals alone moved to Sendawar. Then, eventually, whole families moved, too. Those who decided to settle there for good bought houses, or land to build a house, which often led to a dual residence pattern. Some extended families, which had maintained a formal residence in Long-Apari to uphold their local rights on village land and house (see Note 5), in due course redeployed their members over two or three residences, usually for practical purposes focused on education, health, or combined economic pursuits (e.g., farming, collecting, business, employment). Meanwhile, young men and teenagers, viewing office jobs as dull, went straight to Long-Apari to join the forest collecting crowd's fun.

4.3. Establishing Upper-Mahakam Regency

In 2012, the West-Kutai situation had not yet settled when Upper-Mahakam (Mahakam-Ulu, or Mahulu) was created. West-Kutai

Dayak consisted of two ethnolinguistic clusters, and the upriver groups (Bahau, Busang, Kayan, Aoheng, and associates), having long complained of the more numerous, more powerful Benuaq and Tunjung living around the downstream capital high-handedly hogging the regency's budget resources, and wanted their very own regency, finally managed to be detached from West-Kutai.

Albeit an impecunious regency—low population, poor infrastructures and facilities, no proper access by road, limited human resources, hardly any corporate revenue (yet)—Upper-Mahakam, then, was able to manage its natural resources by itself and benefit from whatever revenue there was. Moreover, special funds for border regions were made available[12] toward the "empowerment of border communities" (Ind. *pemberdayaan masyarakat perbatasan*).

Its capital, Ujoh-Bilang, still under construction along the river bank and suffering from its location's uneven terrain (see Fig. 5), had to expand its office area to the flats of Long-Melaham, at its downstream end, and to Long-Bagun, just upstream. Speculation flared up, as in Sendawar, and Ujoh-Bilang soon was flooded with newcomers seeking civil-service employment, construction jobs, government contracts, etc., in such numbers that lodging was insufficient, and large three-story boardinghouses and dormitories had to be built for them in Long-Bagun.

In this third phase, Ujoh-Bilang witnessed the same migratory pattern as Sendawar. As early as 2013, over twenty Aoheng families from Sendawar had already settled in Ujoh-Bilang, with more to follow, including families from Samarinda (see Fig. 4). Things were easier for all these settlers, since there already were vigorous Aoheng communities in Ujoh-Bilang (from Apari) and Long-Bagun-Ilir (from Cihan), both numbering in the hundreds, among which many had relatives.

A fair number of new Aoheng migrants chose to settle back in their home villages in Long-Apari. There, Aoheng residents now had

[12] Law No. 6 of 2014 on the Village (*Undang-undang No. 6 Tahun 2014 tentang Desa*); on development policies in border areas, see Chettri & Eilenberg 2021.

different economic strategies, with rice farming down to 26 percent of families (in 2021; *Kaltimprov* 2022). They expected a broader opening of their region to commercial and industrial projects, focused on forestry, oilpalm estates, or gold mining—to replace small-scale local undertakings—all exciting job opportunities. They also wished to secure or strengthen their customary land rights against mobs of outsiders in a context of conflict and misappropriation. Indeed, they found that the capital Tiong-Ohang was already home to a good number of newcomers, many now official residents, including Javanese and other crafts persons, shop keepers, or farmers, who had bought (or somehow procured) houses and land.

By 2022, the district's official population was about 4,500 (*Kaltimprov* 2022). This figure does not include, of course, unknown numbers of people living in far-off jungle camps. With such steadily increasing population, the district's social predicament, described above (see 4.1), had not much improved since the 1990s. During my 2022 visit to Tiong-Ohang, I noted that forest activity around aloe wood and (wild) salangan swiftlets' nests had considerably slackened, and that edible nests were now "grown" or produced, like they had been everywhere in Indonesia for many years already, in tall wooden or cement "bird houses" (Ind. *rumah walet*)—suggesting that wild populations might be growing again in remote mountain caves—while gold remained the top "forest concern" to both the gangs and the Aoheng, a destructive activity bound to intensify.

Industrial projects—hungry for land, water (*cf.* hydroelectric dams), and minerals—are looming large on Long-Apari's horizon. As oilpalm plantations have already reached Long-Bagun, the Aoheng are openly expressing mixed feelings, part hoping for more jobs, trade, and business, and part dreading the devastation of their natural environment and the destruction of their culture—a case study of a generational conflict, a Quarrel of the Ancients and the Moderns.[13]

[13] See, e.g., Reuters & Acciaioli 2011. Of course, the "Ancients" of 2020 were the "Moderns" of earlier decades, who had clashed with their elders refusing to move because they valued their lands and cherished their life ways, the "good life" (Ao. *urip cïan*), one of "bathing in crystal-clear streams and hunting lots of wild boars."

As of 2022, Upper-Mahakam still strongly contrasts with West-Kutai. Now with sixteen districts, the latter's population reaches 175,000, against the former's 37,000 in only five districts. In area, the latter is credited with 20,000 sq. km, the former with 15,000 sq. km (official sources).[14] The contrast in population density (over 11 per sq. km *vs.* 2 per sq. km) is quite striking, too (see Fig. 5), bearing in mind the limited land use and extensive natural resource potential.

How could the case of West-Kutai District's recent development allow a forecast for Upper-Mahakam? Massive open-pit coal mining is now ruining West-Kutai's landscape and, chiefly, its hydrographic network, obstructing river streams and creating dozens of black, toxic crater-like lakes. This has already strongly affected the local people's access to clean water, fish resources, and easy river transportation. Meanwhile, over twenty oilpalm estates are clear-felling its forests, progressively constraining the availability of farm lands and hunting and collecting grounds. A dozen of these estates are already operating in Upper-Mahakam, though not yet above the waterfalls, and the regency may soon expect industrial gold mining plants (complete with mercury for lixiviation?) and, within decades, a string of hydroelectric dams along the rapids,[15] which might, however, prove a challenge to build.

Leaving aside the environmental issue, the social setting stands as a serious matter for concern: According to government statistics (*Kaltimprov* 2022), in the purported "Dayak" West-Kutai Regency, the influx of outsiders had already brought the Moslem population up to about level with the local Christians (Protestants and Catholics), and Dayak social advocates were talking of *kolonisasi etnis* ("ethnic colonization").[16] Upper-Mahakam, as a whole, with

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On failed or "suspended" development in an adjacent border region, see Hargyono 2021.

[14] From rough visual estimates, based on maps, one would readily conclude to the opposite (e.g., Fig. 5).

[15] See Peterson 2023 and the abundant literature available on Sarawak's giant Bakun dam.

[16] "Moslem" here is taken to mean "outsider from downriver," whom the Dayak call *haloq*. Official statistics on *Agama* ("Cults") are often used to figure out, for a given district, the respective percentages of local Dayak (usually Christian) and

already about 25 percent of Moslem settlers in a fast-growing (official) population, may soon be facing the same issue, while in Long-Apari the Aoheng may already be a minority in their own district.

"Developing isolated peoples" here can be practically understood as opening new upriver territories rich in natural resources, including land and water, to industrial extractive ventures (see Knapen 2001; Wadley 2005; Davidson 2018: 18), for which indigenous minorities' cultural survival typically is a non-issue. The Mahakam River, for millennia a lifeline to upriver Dayak tribes, will apparently not deliver from downstream any better things than these industries in the future. In the contemporary national political setting, despite a few (bad) roads and a handful of (short) airstrips, the river remains the region's most salient structural feature.

In this downstream-upstream river paradigm, it clearly seems that the upper end can never gain the upper hand in politics and finance: The frustrated Dayak of the old Kutai Regency obtained their own West-Kutai (1999); then, the frustrated Dayak of upriver West-Kutai obtained their Upper-Mahakam (2012); and soon enough (2014), it was reported, all ten *desa* of the uppermost Long-Apari District, claiming that they were treated "like stepchildren" (see 4.2) by the more powerful Bahau-Busang, converged to threaten to emigrate to Sarawak, "where life was much easier"; they were promptly visited by the regency's highest officers, who made promises…

Ⅴ. Aoheng and the City

The sections above have attempted to provide an account of the recent history of the Aoheng through over a half century of rapid social and economic change, in terms of their residential moves and, primarily, through two migratory movements of major

newcomers (Ind. *pendatang*; in the past, Javanese transmigrants; now, usually Moslem visitors). The "matter for concern" is economic, political, and cultural, rather than religious, as frequent cross-religious marriages do attest. See also Note 24.

importance, first downriver, then back upriver, and to elucidate these moves' motivations and processes. The present section, after briefly describing the Samarinda settlement's historical background and development, examines the ways in which Aoheng individuals and families established themselves there, constructed anew their ethnic-based networks, rebuilt socio-cultural rights and obligations, learned new life ways, and came to "inhabit" the city; and finally, the reasons why a number of Aoheng families, having settled there, chose *not* to return to upriver regions.

Samarinda began as a small village set up above the upper tip of the Mahakam delta by Makassar refugees from the defeated kingdom of Gowa (1669) in southern Sulawesi. Samarinda gradually succeeded in wresting control of the Mahakam trade from the sultanate of Kutai, positioned farther upstream. In mid-nineteenth-century South-and-East-Borneo Residency (*Residentie Zuider en Oosterafdeeling van Borneo*), a Dutch assistant-resident was posted in Samarinda. For a long time, the town remained a fairly insignificant place—albeit steadily growing from 5,000 souls (1905) to 70,000 (1961)—until the timber boom of the late 1960s, when it suddenly turned "from a sleepy market town into a bustling intermediate city" (Wood 1985: 120), and when, in the mid-1970s, Japanese and other multinational timber companies flocked in (*Kotamadya* 1979; Peluso 1983; Wood 1985; Magenda 1991).

From this point onward, the Aoheng community residing in Samarinda developed apace with their city, whose population then doubled every decade, to reach 260,000 in 1980. In the late 1980s, the NTFP boom hit East-Kalimantan's interior and, with the early 2000s, coal mining plants and oilpalm plantation estates dominated the province's economy, by then already the nation's richest region after Jakarta and, as noted above, a new "frontier" for all sorts of poor migrants. The wider Samarinda is now Borneo's largest urban area, with almost one million people, among whom a trivial number of Dayak (less than ten percent, Fossati 2016: 8) hailing from all the province's interior regions[17]—including people from Long-Apari

[17] With the creation, in 2012, of North-Kalimantan (Kalimantan-Utara, or Kaltara), the northern Dayak groups turned away from Samarinda and toward Tanjung Selor, the new province's center of government, and Tarakan, its largest city, although

District, chiefly Aoheng, and some Seputan and Bukat.

5.1. Aoheng Urban Networks

According to the first Aoheng students landing at Samarinda in 1962, there was not yet a single Aoheng resident there. They boarded in a small wooden house on stilts with mixed thatched and shingled roofing in a downriver neighborhood, Tenggiri, right at the edge of the forest.

Aoheng individuals and families kept coming to Samarinda as a trickle from the mid-1960s and, as they came separately from different communities in Long-Apari, they ended up scattered in different neighborhoods (see also Guerreiro 1997). Students in boardinghouses aside, there never was any single residential cluster of Aoheng families, and hardly ever a single cluster of any of their sub-groups, though sub-groups were already linked through intermarriage. As the city grew in area and population, the means of transportation and communication developed as well; today, almost everyone owns a motorbike and handphone.

Focusing on the Aoheng urban community, the lines below endeavor to describe the networks (religious, social, political) through which the Aoheng constructed their sociality, from the mid-1960s to c. 1990, when the reflux move began—and to this day. Their closest relations have been with people hailing from the same village, among whom many were kin and affines.

The Catholic mission in eastern Borneo, since 1961 a bishopric, saw its compound (church, clinic, school) in Samarinda's Kampung Jawa neighborhood grow to include a junior seminary, several foundations managing, respectively, health, education, and catechesis, and a Social-Economic Council running development projects for hinterland villages. These networks played a critical role in early Mahakam Dayak moves to the capital (see 3.2) and in the emergence and growth of their networks, as their places of worship

Samarinda remains as eastern Borneo's major business center, along with Balikpapan, the oil-and-gas city with its oversized international airport—the government's recent move to build there a new national capital, called Nusantara, will not be discussed here.

there still do today.

Dayak communities in Samarinda in the mid-late 1970s were few and still weakly organized in informal associations (Tunjung-Benuaq 1974, Bahau 1980). An Aoheng student association (*Pemuda Pelajar Aoheng*, PPA) joined with alumni and their Aoheng parish priest to set up an ad hoc Christmas committee (*Panitia Natal*), which became (early 1980s) a permanent Aoheng Community Association (*Kerukunan Keluarga Aoheng*, KKA). Circulating information, dealing with funerals, the sick, and charity, and staging sports events, games, and tontine meetings, with funding from the Social-Economic Council, KKA acquired legal personality in 1990.

Meanwhile, the PPA (renamed P3MA to include *mahasiswa*, university students) set up and ran a boardinghouse (*asrama*, recently renovated) near the Catholic hospital, though in recent years most students lived with relatives or rented a room in town (*indekos*). As for KKA, it helped organize events such as weddings or funerals and large Christmas and Easter gatherings held at prominent members' houses or out-of-town farms, explicitly to strengthen community links— today, social networks (WhatsApp®, Facebook®) are essential devices to set up short-notice meetings. KKA has branches: Students, Culture, Folklore (*Perkumpulan Sanggar Seni*, performing dance shows on official or informal occasions), and a *Forum Komunikasi Aoheng*.

Although what may be called a "Dayak elite" had been in existence in Samarinda since the 1940s thanks to Mission schools, only in the 1970s did it express itself openly through ethnic-based associations. Dayak of all brands were becoming frustrated, finding themselves stalled in their hopes of getting a say in provincial politics and obstructed in their careers and businesses, hence the blossoming of associations formally focused on religious, social, cultural, or artistic concerns—and, later, social ones, hinting at the State's shortfall in its "development" duty to hinterland people—but always with a hidden political agenda. Indeed, till Soeharto's fall, political organizations remained outlawed. However, East-Kalimantan Dayak tried to uphold their presence on the political scene with, for

the upper Mahakam region, the outspoken Bahau on the front line.

An association, IKDKT (1986, renamed PDKT[18] in 1989), headed by Benuaq, Bahau, and Kenyah leaders and representing fourteen Dayak ethnolinguistic clusters, jumped into the political field as soon as it became possible (1998). The Aoheng KKA, affiliated to PDKT, was attentive to the economic stakes in Long-Apari, though much less to provincial politics. In 1995, a foundation, YAM,[19] was established to strengthen KKA, especially in the birds' nest business, but it soon disappeared due to ineffective management.

After the creation of West-Kutai (1999), one Sendawar Aoheng Association (IKAS),[20] the local equivalent to Samarinda's KKA, was established (2006), with about 150 members; by 2013, after the creation of Upper-Mahakam, IKAS membership declined, as many Aoheng moved to Ujoh-Bilang; and in c. 2014, a KMWMH[21] was established. The *Forum Komunikasi Aoheng*, which had lobbied in Samarinda for Upper-Mahakam, is now striving to secure a firm Aoheng presence in its government, against the more numerous and better organized Bahau and Busang.

5.2. Remaining in Samarinda

When the NTFP boom started, followed a decade later by the creation of West-Kutai and, after another decade, that of Upper-Mahakam, hundreds of Aoheng commenced a substantial and unbroken upriver migration move toward, first, their Long-Apari lands above the rapids; then, West-Kutai and Sendawar; then, again, Upper-Mahakam and Ujoh-Bilang; although, all along, some chose to travel straight from Samarinda to Long-Apari.

Yet many, too, of those who had settled in Samarinda decided

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[18] IKDKT, *Ikatan Keluarga Dayak Kalimantan Timur*, East-Kalimantan Dayak Association; PDKT, *Persatuan Dayak Kalimantan Timur*, East-Kalimantan Dayak Union.

[19] YAM, *Yayasan Aoheng Membangun*, Foundation for Aoheng Development.

[20] IKAS, *Ikatan Keluarga Aoheng Sendawar*.

[21] KMWMH, *Kerukunan Masyarakat Wilayah Mahakam Hulu* (= *Ulu*), Upper-Mahakam Region Community Association.

to stay put, and finally not move back upriver. Indeed, a fair percentage of the long-established Aoheng families in Samarinda already owned their houses, some large enough to accommodate their kin, e.g., high-school or university students, or relatives seeking medical attention, and even to serve as meeting places for festive events. Samarinda remained a choice pole of attraction, in terms of both education and health, and upriver schools and hospitals facilities, until recently, were thought of as second choice. Easy access to trade with cheap prices remains an important factor and, among many families with dual residence, much goes on in terms of orders and exchange of goods between city and villages.

The Samarinda families, in the course of time, had also managed to procure reasonably good jobs, or had started businesses. According to the data collected in a survey or rough census taken in 2011,[22] the Aoheng community's economic pursuits ranged widely from small numbers of medical doctors, lawyers, big entrepreneurs, university professors, or district heads to small numbers of humble small-scale farmers and hunters; very few were either "rich"—marked by, e.g., owning a car—or "poor"—as in "destitute"—and none was starving, most being low-to-mid-level civil servants, school teachers, office clerks or mining company employees, army and police personnel, small retailers or shopkeepers. While a large majority of married women (70 percent) were registered as "housewives" (Ind. *ibu rumah tangga*, IRT), even though a fair number held a higher education degree, the jobholders among married and unmarried women were listed as farmers, nurses, teachers, craftswomen, office clerks, or shopkeepers. Not surprisingly, in the city, marriage *cum* children was holding precedence over other options.

In terms of professional activity, these urban Aoheng generally

[22] This survey of Long-Apari people living in Samarinda covered 160 households. For practical reasons, I called them "residential units," *i.e.*, the physical houses, as I found residence in these structures to be strongly fluctuating, including visitors from upriver villages, not always genealogically related. They included 130 Aoheng, 23 Seputan, and 7 Bukat units, ranging from one (a student's room in town) to over a dozen residents, with an average of five persons.

seemed to depend on personal acquaintances and opportunities rather than community networks, which reflects increased individualism, loosening of the ethnic engagement, and integration in a multiethnic urban fabric. This statement, for obvious reasons, suffers a few exceptions: Out-of-town farming clusters tend to stick together; Samarinda-based entrepreneurs in NTFPs (aloe wood, now gold) in Long-Apari would rather recruit employees on an ethnic basis; female crafts workers (e.g., basket makers) are likely to cluster around one of them, acting as *tauke* (*towkay*, patron) to generate a revenue for the necessitous (single or widowed mothers, sick or handicapped persons, isolated seniors).

The younger generations indicated that Samarinda offers a quality of life not found upstream: The classical literary Malay-Indonesian concept of *ramai*, referring to economic ebullience and, *hic et nunc*, to shopping malls, department stores, restaurants, bars and night-clubs, or the sheer numbers of denizens, combined with the trend of using the Jakarta youth slang, gave them the feeling of being part of a post-Soeharto *movida*, at the cutting edge of modernity (e.g., Pizza Hut®, McDonald's®; Guerreiro 1997). Despite traffic jams, pollution, fires, and floods, life in Samarinda was (also) reported to be a "good life."

While enjoying their life in the capital and their "split" families' plural residences, which both bring them frequent visitors and allow them to easily pay visits to upriver relatives, Samarinda elders remarked on an adverse effect of the continuous reflux migration since the early 1990s: Those teenagers or young adults who migrated back upriver and got involved in the collecting of NTFPs—and now gold—seriously neglected education, first their own and now their children's. Despite scholarships offered by regencies and universities, there are too few Aoheng higher-education students today, which these elders regard as bad news for the community's future.

It is noteworthy that many Aoheng families, residing in Samarinda and living a city life, have long maintained a deep-seated agricultural component in their economic urban system, usually by buying land outside the city limits, which would be planted with

cash crops or fruit trees as an investment (with a share-cropper or tenant farmer in charge), with highland rice and vegetables to provide for the household or relatives, or just to keep busy as weekend farmers—*dasar petani!*

In the 1970s, the first Aoheng families migrated to the Samarinda area, expecting to take up rice farming, gardening, and cash-cropping there. Graduating in 1973, one of the young Mission scholarship holders bought land in Bukuan (Palaran District, south of Samarinda) from some Javanese transmigrants and brought his parents there from Tiong-Bu'u. They made a first swidden rice field in 1974 and, in 1976, another ten families, coming from different Aoheng upriver villages, joined in, to live as a farming community near the big city. Soon, they started a rubber (Para rubber, *Hevea brasiliensis*) plantation in order to secure their rights on the lands.

In the 1980s, Bukuan became a large Dayak village, chiefly Aoheng (twelve families of Apari and Kerioq in 1986). They registered their lands at the surveying office—something that could not be done in Long-Apari, where no land registry existed. Meanwhile, others sold their lands and settled in the city, while others yet, in 1988 and later, returned to their upriver villages, and only six families remained then in Bukuan. More families, again mainly from Apari, came to Bukuan in the 1990s, motivated by farming rather than collecting forest products, but they procured lands to the north of Samarinda, where they planted rubber trees.

By the late 2000s, there were, again, a dozen Aoheng families at Bukuan, and as many at Gelinggang, also in Palaran. As of 2022, all these families are in a dual residence situation, with houses and jobs in the city and farms (or small-scale cash-crop plantations) in the countryside, where they go on weekends or when work is needed, like many other Samarinda Dayak families.

My 2011 "snapshot census" of the Samarinda Aoheng galaxy—for what it is worth—showed some 130 units in which one or more Aoheng individuals lived, with the following breakdown regarding their affiliation to upriver sub-groups: Cihan 28 units, Apari 30, Huvung 16, Kerioq 33, Tiong-Bu'u 23. This survey did not allow for an instant assessment of actual numbers of Aoheng persons,[23] since

I recorded some 67 percent of 126 documented married couples to be ethnically mixed—as, of course, are their offspring. Although constraints of place preclude any further description of various aspects of intermarriage (but see Connolly 2009; Oesterheld 2016)—social (residence, social strata, see 2.2), religious (mixed, conversion patterns), and financial (bridewealth payments)—some Aoheng sub-groups were found to be more disposed to (ethnic) exogamy than others (e.g., Cihan 80 percent *vs.* Huvung 50 percent), with women altogether out-marrying (with non-Aoheng) twice oftener than men (70 percent *vs.* 30 percent).

Ⅵ. High River Drifters

Locating a few hundred Aoheng in such a big city as Samarinda proved a challenge. Moreover, interviews revealed that Aoheng were also found scattered along the Mahakam, and even in Jakarta. They are now, more often than ever, moving around. Tracking them down was an endless headache.

A preliminary note on official statistics is called for, especially about population figures for interior Kalimantan administrative divisions, and what can be expected of them in a study like this. Population figures have been found to diverge widely with sources, even between official documents, e.g., for a same year, first-hand local district tables *vs.* provincial or national compilations. Actually, some uncertainty also lingers regarding area figures for regencies and districts (see Note 14)—a problem not new to Kalimantan (e.g., Casson 2006: endnote iii). From the maps available—not all good or accurate—including Google Earth®, Upper-Mahakam appears larger than West-Kutai, a point not settled in government documents.

Standard population figures, usually at district level, listed individuals (Ind. *jiwa*, "souls"), split into three columns for males,

[23] Including persons viewed as Aoheng by the Aoheng community, even though they really were half-Aoheng. In traditional situations, ethnic affiliation follows from residence, which in town becomes irrelevant, unless customary law (*adet*) has ruled at the wedding about the new couple's residence, either virilocal or uxorilocal.

females, and total, and an extra column for "family heads" (*kepala keluarga*, KK), meant as heads of (nuclear) families, often several within a single household, as a village house (or longhouse apartment) was commonly home to a three-generational stem family.

In Samarinda, figures collected from 130 Aoheng residential units in my 2011 survey proved too shifting and unreliable to allow for more than a coarse appraisal. Some units were overcrowded with visiting family, while others were vacant, their residents temporarily staying in their upriver village. The issue of dual/plural residence has been raised above (see 4.2, 5.2). Most families had retained land rights and a house in their home village, attended to by an elderly family member or, later, younger men active in NTFPs. By 2011, these families may also have had one or more members settled in Sendawar and, after 2012, the same member or another staying in Ujoh-Bilang. The wide-ranging residential fluidity of these "split families" and the continual inter-generational circulation between two, three or more residential sites reflect situations in which it is next to impossible to keep track of individual persons and figure out accurate numbers.

Despite the difficulty in keeping track of Aoheng individuals in this century of fast-moving people, and in identifying them as Aoheng, in Long-Apari as in Samarinda, in this world of intense global cultural fusion, I attempted to estimate, based on informed guesswork when nothing better was available, their communities' distribution and numbers, as they were in 2022, along the Mahakam, between Samarinda and Long-Apari, their source region (Table 2).

In the wider Samarinda area, there still was, in 2022, a substantial Aoheng community with some 100 or more active residential units, albeit a reduced number of persons recognized as Aoheng by their community (about 300, down from over 400). As for the group of families that settled between the 1960s and the 1990s in Tenggarong, then the capital of the old Kutai Regency, it has now dwindled to a handful, as its members removed to the new center of power, Sendawar.

<Table 2> The Aoheng in East Kalimantan, c. 2020

COASTAL REGION	
Samarinda	100 units (300 persons)
Tenggarong	5 units (20 persons)
SENDAWAR, WEST-KUTAI REGENCY	
Sendawar	20 units (100 persons)
TOWNS AND VILLAGES "IN-BETWEEN"	
(Long-Iram, Long-Hubung, Laham, Long Bagun Districts)	
Tering, Kelian-Luar, Long-Hubung, Sirau, Laham, Long-Hurei, Long-Merah, Mamahak-Besar:	70 units (350 persons)
UJOH-BILANG, UPPER-MAHAKAM REGENCY	
Ujoh-Bilang	800 persons
Long-Bagun-Ilir	600 persons
LONG-APARI DISTRICT	
Six Aoheng villages	2,500 persons

In West-Kutai, the wider Sendawar area, including Barong-Tongkok, Melak, and surrounding suburban villages, in which I listed over forty Aoheng units in the early 2000s, saw this number drop when young Aoheng began to progressively relocate to Ujoh-Bilang (Upper-Mahakam) in the early to mid-2010s. Those (some 100 persons) who had secured a good job (e.g., in the civil service, PNS) in Sendawar and bought or built a house, however, were inclined to remain there.

Farther upriver, in-between Sendawar and Ujoh-Bilang, two significant Aoheng offshoots, from Cihan in 1969 and from Huvung in the 1980s (see 3.3), had settled in Laham and Long-Hubung, respectively—two Bahau settlements, both now district capitals in Upper-Mahakam Regency—and each now comprises between twenty and thirty units (and about 150 persons). Moreover, in the course of time, small groups of Aoheng families, hailing from different sub-groups in Long-Apari, have joined various villages—Tering, Kelian, Sirau, Long-Hurei, Long-Merah, Mamahak Besar—

settled by other Dayak (principally Bahau) groups. No recent information is available on these "in-between" groups' possible partial recent moves to either Sendawar or Ujoh-Bilang.

The two major Aoheng communities "at large" that have long resided in Ujoh-Bilang (from Apari, joined in 1971; see 3.3) and Long-Bagun-Ilir (from Cihan, established in the mid-1970s) are in a position to play host to scores of Aoheng newcomers (from upstream) or returnees (from downstream) at or near the new Upper-Mahakam Regency's capital. They have strongly developed in the last decade, apace with the regency's construction and expansion. As of 2022, Ujoh-Bilang had an official population of 5,100 (*Kaltimprov* 2022), which is small by regency capitals' standard, but twice the number it had before the regency's creation, and there must be hundreds of yet unlisted newcomers; Long-Bagun-Ilir has 1,120 official residents, more than doubled since 2000, the result of both new Aoheng settlers and the spillover from Ujoh-Bilang due to shortage of lodgings there (see 4.3). I evaluate Ujoh-Bilang's current Aoheng population to about 800 souls, and Long-Bagun-Ilir's to 600, including unregistered job seekers.

Finally, Long-Apari District's 2022 official population has now reached 4,500 (*Kaltimprov* 2022; with a M/F ratio of 1.125, a striking surplus of young men), up from some 2,300 (1990, before the NTFP boom; *Bappenas* 2003); six of its ten villages (*desa*) are clustered in the large capital settlement of Tiong-Ohang (with its much improved trade facilities; see 3.2), accounting together for 2,650 people, the rest of them settled farther upstream, and unknown numbers of outsiders still in the forest (see 4.3). An educated guess, based on "cults" (*agama*) statistics,[24] suggests that the number of registered indigenous residents in the district may now reach around 3,500 (see 2.2). As for the Aoheng proper, after discounting the population of three Seputan and one Bukat *desa*, they may reach about 2,500. Altogether, there would therefore appear to be now almost as many Aoheng outside the district (about 2,200, based on the rough computation above) as there are inside (see Table 2).

[24] Catholic 3,822, Moslem 516, Protestant (*Kristen*) 162 (*Kaltimprov* 2022). On "cults" statistics, see Note 16.

Ⅶ. Epilogue: Game Over?

Within a half-century, isolated hinterland communities' late awakening to the outside world and various aspects of modernity led part of their population, in the late 1960s, to initiate migration moves to downriver towns in search of education, health, and market facilities, as well as employment. Soon finding themselves caught up by too-rapid, globally-driven regional economic and political development, and anxious to not be passed and left behind by overdue opportunities, these out-migrated communities rushed back to their upriver region when it finally was touched by the powerful, concomitant thrust of extractive industries over land and natural resources and of the creation of political and administrative structures meant to facilitate these ventures' penetration.

The Aoheng's downstream (1960s-1980s) and upstream (1990-2020) migrations described in this essay strongly contrast in their motivations and in their procedures. The former, apart from the case of individual students, essentially saw large groups of families, following the lead of a traditional chieftain, often after village secession, in search of new farming areas in less isolated regions, although the somewhat chaotic moves of the 1980s showed fragmented and disoriented groups trying to find their way about. As for the latter, affected by intensified ethnic mixing and cash economy, the progressive fading of social stratification, traditional authority, customary law, and the council of elders, the emergence of new social-economic elites challenging an impoverished nobility, and increased individual and nuclear family (rather than stem family) autonomy, their relocations were based on smaller social units' priorities and pursuits, and on diverse types of non-farming strategies—with farming fast declining (in Long-Apari District).

As a people, the Aoheng of Long-Apari District, a small ethnic group by any standard, probably already outnumbered in their own traditional territory by savvier and more confrontational outsiders, are finding it difficult to retain some degree of control over their lands and resources, and to uphold their customs, traditions, and language. They are striving to slow down the process of their gradual political, economic, and cultural relegation, and ultimate

ethnic obliteration, although the smartest of them, jumping on the bandwagon of a suspicious brand of "modernity" designed for and tendered to all *suku terasing* nationwide (see Note 8), will probably be able to reap financial benefits from this situation.

Disclaimer

In anticipation of a time soon to come when the following statement is part of mandatory standard procedure in scientific publications, the author hereby declares that this essay was produced without the use of Artificial Intelligence devices in any way whatsoever.

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