

Beyond Preservation: Relocation and Cultural Change Among the Dayak Kenyah

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ABSTRACT

The Dayak Kenyah of East Kalimantan have experienced significant changes in their lifestyles over the past six decades. This paper follows the change through two of their communities, Pampang and Sungai Bawang, both having migrated down from the Apinkayan interior in the 1960s. Interested in their shifting understanding of sustainability, the study examines ecological, economic, and cultural aspects. Before the migration, living sustainably meant keeping a balance with the forest, where rituals, animist belief and communal life all contributed to survival. After the move, sustainability shifted from an emphasis on ecological to economic and cultural. Furthermore, interviews with village leaders, elders, academics, and NGO workers reveal a gap between the future these communities were reaching for and the one they actually live in. Some of the gap comes from tradeoffs the community accepted willingly, in exchange for schooling, medical care, and paid work. The rest represents a misalignment between expectation and reality, including but not limited to conflicts over customary land, poor infrastructures, and an alienation from modern technologies like digital media.

INTRODUCTION

When discussions about indigenous groups and sustainability arise, there always seems to be an assumption that sustainability means keeping the community and its culture exactly as they always were. While it is true that many groups like the Baduy of West Java attempt to preserve their culture from crumbling under external pressures by rejecting nearly every outside cultural change (Wessing, 1977, p. 294), the same cannot be said for the Dayak people. The Dayak have done the opposite, evolving their culture and actively engaging with the outside world by leaving the forests they have always inhabited, in an attempt to move toward a better life. Better education, healthcare, infrastructure, and economic opportunities drew them away from their ancestral settlements and forced them to adapt to modern life, a tradeoff they were willing to accept. For many families, remaining in the interior increasingly meant accepting limited access to formal schooling, medical care, markets, and government services that had become central to life in modern Indonesia. Relocating closer to Samarinda, therefore, represented more than a physical move; it was a shift toward a different model of wellbeing, one in which long-term security depended less on ecological self-sufficiency and more on education, wage employment,

infrastructure, and participation in the national economy. The forest no longer represented the only path to a sustainable future. Instead, many believed that achieving a better life required engaging with the institutions of the modern Indonesian state while finding new ways to preserve the cultural values that had long defined them. Today, however, the community exists within the gap between that aspiration and reality. While many of the opportunities they sought have become accessible, new vulnerabilities have emerged alongside them. In order to understand the rationale behind their decision-making processes and why some of the struggles they currently face exist, we need to understand who the Dayak are as a people.

The Dayak people are an indigenous community of roughly 3 to 4 million people and comprise nearly 400 distinct ethnolinguistic groups, each with its own language, customs, and systems of governance (“Dayak People,” n.d.). They mainly inhabit the island of Kalimantan in Indonesia and the East Malaysian states of Sarawak and Sabah. This paper focuses on the Dayak Kenyah, one of the major Dayak groups traditionally originating from the Apokayan Highlands in the interior of northern Borneo (Yuniarsih et al., 2024, p. 71). The Kenyah themselves comprise roughly two dozen subgroups, many of which are named after their historical longhouse communities (Sellato, 1994, pp. 12–13). My fieldwork centred on the Kenyah Lepo’ Tau, the predominant subgroup in both Pampang Cultural Village on the outskirts of Samarinda and Sungai Bawang Cultural Village in Kutai Kartanegara Regency. Both are officially recognised cultural villages (*desa budaya*), meaning they are permanent settlements in which people continue to live ordinary lives while also actively preserving and showcasing their cultural heritage. Unlike open-air museums or reconstructed heritage sites, these villages are home to families whose daily livelihoods combine agriculture, wage labour, tourism, and traditional practices. Dance performances, music, handicrafts, and communal ceremonies, therefore, function not simply as attractions for visitors but as living expressions of a culture that continues to evolve alongside contemporary life. The two villages were founded by families who migrated from the interior in the 1960s in search of greater access to education, healthcare, and economic opportunities while continuing to maintain important aspects of their cultural identity (Harsanto & Sampurno, 2019, pp. 49–50). Today, agriculture remains an important part of everyday life in both villages, complemented by cultural tourism, traditional crafts, and performances that provide additional sources of income. Studying these two communities offered insight into how the Dayak Kenyah have sought to balance economic development with the preservation of their cultural traditions, making them valuable case studies for understanding how the meaning of sustainability has evolved over time.

To understand this transition, this paper adopts the Brundtland Commission’s definition of sustainability as “development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs” (World Commission on Environment and Development [WCED], 1987, p. 43). While sustainability is often associated primarily with environmental protection, the Brundtland framework recognizes that it also depends on economic and social well-being. Other scholars have also approached sustainability in a similar way. Ben Purvis and colleagues (2019), for instance, systematically reviewed the traditional three-pillar model that analyzed sustainable development, namely social, economic, and environmental. This paper focuses on the cultural pillar in place of the social. As

Hawkes (2001) mentioned, “Culture is the basic need – it is the bedrock of society” (p. 3), and he provided a definition for the cultural pillar, namely “social production and transmission of identities, meanings, knowledge, beliefs, values, aspirations” (p. 3). Katriina Soini and Inger Birkeland (2014) also define culture as the symbolic content of a community, including its norms, values, identity, traditions, and ways of making sense of the world, and argue that this is a distinct concern that social sustainability alone does not capture (p. 214).

Throughout this paper, three interconnected pillars are used to analyze the transition: ecological sustainability, which concerns the responsible management of natural resources; economic sustainability, which focuses on secure and resilient livelihoods; and cultural sustainability, which encompasses the traditions, institutions, and social relationships that enable communities to maintain their identity across generations. These pillars have not carried equal weight throughout; their relative importance shifted alongside the Dayak Kenyah’s changing circumstances. Before relocation, sustainability was grounded primarily in maintaining a balanced relationship with the forest, where ecological practices and spiritual beliefs were deeply intertwined. Following relocation, however, sustainability increasingly came to mean creating stable livelihoods while ensuring that cultural identity could continue despite rapid social and economic change. As the Dayak Kenyah’s relationship with their environment and economy changed, so too did the balance between these three pillars, reflecting an evolving understanding of what it meant to live sustainably.

Describing this shift, however, does not explain why the community has not reached its imagined future. This paper asks what accounts for the gap between what relocation promised and what it has delivered. It argues that the gap comes partly from tradeoffs the community accepted willingly, and partly from conditions imposed on it, most significantly the insecurity of customary land rights, poor infrastructure, and limited digital access.

METHODOLOGY

Research was conducted by interview and on-the-ground observation. Ten members of the communities were interviewed. There was an intention for the interviewees to be split between the two focus communities. In addition, I tried to spread the range of the interviewed members of each community by age and role. A number of interviewees were pre-selected and were contacted before the expedition. These contacts were established through contacts who had connections in the communities. Given that each of these communities is remote and it is difficult to reach out to them, I had to trust the integrity of my contacts in identifying appropriate interviewees. Having said that, I indicated the preferential spread of my research and to my knowledge, this range was respected and achieved. In addition, when on site, I interviewed a number of people I observed during my stay – children, families and elders who might have something worthwhile to say. The interview process in each case was meticulous, involving careful translation, recording (audio and visual), and transcription. An open-minded approach was taken when analysing the data; i.e., there was no attempt to shape it within a pre-existent argument. Contradictions,

agreements and miscellaneous comments by interviewees were discussed and analysed, so that a point-of-view evolved from the ‘data’.

SUSTAINABILITY BEFORE RELOCATION: LIVING WITH THE FOREST

Before relocating closer to Samarinda, the Dayak Kenyah’s understanding of a sustainable life was rooted almost entirely in their relationship with the forest, an indigenous management system through which local people used, altered, regulated, and restored the land and resources around them (Eghenter & Sellato, 2003, p. 8). Sustainability was not something that needed to be defined or consciously pursued because it was simply the way everyday life functioned. The forest provided food, water, medicine, building materials, and protection, while the rivers connected communities and made movement possible. Livelihoods, spiritual beliefs, and social organisation were all built around this environment, meaning that caring for the forest was inseparable from caring for the community itself. Looking back, it becomes clear that sustainability before relocation was grounded primarily in the ecological pillar. Maintaining the health of the environment was the foundation that allowed families and future generations to continue living well.

This relationship was most visible through the Dayak Kenyah’s subsistence economy. Farming, hunting, fishing, and gathering were parts of the same interconnected system that placed an emphasis on sustainability and reusing natural resources. Families cultivated rice and other crops using rotational, or swidden, agriculture, a practice that has often been misunderstood as environmentally destructive, even though research across the interior has found that such practices are not intrinsically destructive of the environment but instead draw on a detailed understanding of forest dynamics (Eghenter & Sellato, 2003, p. 8). During my interview with Professor NDan and the head of tourism at Sungai Bawang, they also explained that traditional Kenyah cultivation followed a much longer cycle than is commonly assumed. Bernard Sellato, a geologist possessed by the human sciences, spent around 6 years living in the interior of Borneo island and confirms that fields were farmed for several years before being left fallow for ten to twenty years, allowing forests to regenerate naturally and soil fertility to recover over time (Sellato, 1994, p. 13). The interview further explains the reasoning behind such farming. Communities did not continually clear new land because they had exhausted the old; rather, movement was more often driven by changing trade networks or broader social circumstances. The land was understood as something that would continue supporting future generations only if it was given the time to recover. Instead of maximizing short-term yields, the farming system prioritized continuity, reflecting an understanding that today’s harvest should never come at the expense of tomorrow’s.

Agriculture was only one part of a much broader relationship with the environment. Throughout my interviews, the forest was repeatedly described not simply as a source of resources but as the community’s provider. This framing is echoed across the interior of Borneo, where the forest’s role as a provider of goods to be eaten, used, and traded is socially and legally reinforced by the principle that it must be protected from overexploitation, especially by individuals from outside the community (Eghenter &

Sellato, 2003, p. 8). Professor NDan explained that nearly everything needed for daily life could be found within the surrounding landscape. Rivers supplied drinking water, fish, and transportation, while the forests offered wild animals, fruits, medicinal plants, timber for building longhouses, and rattan for weaving baskets and mats. Even security came from the forest. Living deep within the interior allowed communities to remain largely self-sufficient while providing a natural buffer from outside threats. This function of the forest extended beyond subsistence alone. Political scientist James C. Scott (2009) argues that throughout much of Southeast Asia, geographically inaccessible environments such as mountains often provided communities with protection from state control, allowing them to preserve a greater degree of political and cultural autonomy. Although the Dayak Kenyah inhabited dense tropical forests rather than highland regions, the forests of interior Borneo fulfilled a comparable role. Their remoteness limited outside intervention and enabled communities to maintain their own systems of governance, spiritual beliefs, and social organisation for centuries. In this sense, the forest was not only an ecological resource but also a political landscape that protected Indigenous autonomy.

Underlying this relationship with the forest was an equally important spiritual one. Before the widespread adoption of Christianity, the Dayak Kenyah practiced animism, believing that forests, rivers, mountains, and other parts of the natural world were inhabited by spirits that deserved respect (Aragon, 2000, p. 27; Bird-David, 1999, p. S67). Several elders recalled rituals that were performed before clearing new farmland, embarking on major hunting trips, or entering certain parts of the forest. Among the Badeng Kenyah of Sarawak, the *nyat tana*’ or “asking for land” rite made an offering to the deity Bungan to bless the coming agricultural work, and only once it was complete could the first stage of the cycle, the clearing of undergrowth, begin (Tan, 2016, pp. 259–260). These ceremonies were intended to maintain harmony between people and the spiritual world, acknowledging that nature was not something to be controlled but something with which humans lived in relationship (Bird-David, 1999, p. S77). As Professor NDan and the village elder at Pampang village explained how it was operated in practice. Certain places were left undisturbed, resources were used with restraint, and unnecessary exploitation was discouraged because doing so risked upsetting both the natural and spiritual balance. Rather than relying on written rules or government regulation, respect for the environment was enforced through belief itself. These accounts suggest that animism was a system that encouraged sustainable interaction with the environment by embedding ecological responsibility within everyday belief and practice.

The Dayak Kenyah’s traditional way of life was also expressed through customs and symbols that extended beyond their relationship with the environment. During interviews, several elders from both Sungai Bawang and Pampang village spoke about practices such as tattooing, elongated earlobes, and headhunting, all of which carried important cultural meanings within pre-Christian Kenyah society. Tattoos often reflected a person’s life experiences, achievements, or social standing, while elongated earlobes were traditionally associated with beauty, maturity, and status within the community. Headhunting, although often sensationalized in popular accounts, occupied a far more complex role than

violence for its own sake (Sellato, 1994, p. 54).¹ The priest from Sungai Bawang explained that taking an enemy's head was historically associated with bravery, protection, and the well-being of the community, and in some cases was believed to strengthen the spiritual power of the longhouse or accompany important communal events. These practices should therefore be understood within the historical and cultural context in which they developed rather than judged according to contemporary values. While they were not directly connected to ecological sustainability, they formed part of the broader worldview that shaped how the Dayak Kenyah understood identity and their place within the world before the widespread adoption of Christianity.

The same sense of interdependence could be seen in the organisation of the longhouse. Home to dozens of families under a single roof, the longhouse served as the central site for social and cultural life (Yuniarsih et al., 2024, p. 71). During interviews, several community members described the longhouse as being like "one large family," a phrase that reflected far more than simply living together. Elders explained that farming, harvesting, celebrations, and the transmission of cultural knowledge all took place collectively. Younger generations learned directly from elders, while labour was shared during demanding periods such as planting and harvesting. The longhouse was also where elders mediated disputes, customary law (*adat*) was upheld, and important decisions affecting farming, ceremonies, and community life were discussed collectively. Rather than relying on written rules or formal institutions, social order was maintained through shared responsibilities and reciprocal obligations that had developed over generations.

These accounts suggest that the longhouse reduced the need for duplicate resources and, more importantly, became an efficient and sustainable way of organising daily life. It aligned individual well-being with that of the wider community. Because families depended on one another for labour and relied upon the same forests and rivers, the consequences of overusing natural resources were experienced collectively rather than individually. Ecological sustainability was therefore reinforced by social cooperation: caring for the environment was not simply a personal choice, but a communal responsibility embedded within the very structure of everyday life. The community's relationship with the forest depended not only on the resources available but also on the institutions that enabled those resources to be managed responsibly.

Taken together, such practices reveal a very different understanding of sustainability from the one that dominates discussions today. Before relocation, a sustainable life meant maintaining a balanced relationship with the forest that had supported them for generations. Farming practices, spiritual beliefs, and communal institutions all reinforced one another, creating a way of life in which ecological balance allowed the community to remain secure and self-sufficient. Yet even then, the ultimate goal was not simply to protect the forest. Rather, the forest was protected because it made a good life possible. It provided the resources, stability, and security that allowed families to flourish.

¹ Sellato's account here concerns heads taken by nomadic groups such as the Bukitan and Bukat on behalf of their allies among the stratified farming societies, which he names as the Iban, Kayan, or Aoheng, and possibly the Taman, rather than the Kenyah. The Kayan and Kenyah are closely related neighbouring peoples of the Apo Kayan interior whose ritual and social institutions substantially overlap, so this evidence is indicative for Kenyah practice rather than direct.

This understanding of sustainability began to shift after Indonesia's political changes in 1965. As the state increasingly required citizens to identify with one of the officially recognised religions, many Dayak Kenyah communities gradually converted to Christianity because their traditional animistic beliefs were no longer formally recognised. While many cultural practices continued and respect for nature remained deeply embedded within community life, the spiritual worldview that had long connected environmental stewardship with religious belief began to weaken. This marked an important turning point. As opportunities beyond the forest expanded and communities voluntarily sought new ways to improve their lives, the meaning of sustainability itself gradually began to evolve.

RELOCATION AND THE REWORKING OF SUSTAINABILITY

The transition away from the forest did not happen suddenly, nor was it simply the result of outside pressure. During interviews in both Pampang and Sungai Bawang, community members consistently described the move as a decision made in search of a better life, which is also supported by previous scholars (Harsanto & Sampurno, 2019, pp. 49–50). While the forest had provided everything previous generations needed, it could no longer offer the same opportunities for the future. Education, healthcare, employment, and improved infrastructure became increasingly important, particularly as Indonesia continued to develop during the second half of the twentieth century. Families therefore chose to relocate closer to Samarinda, believing that doing so would create better opportunities for their children while still allowing them to remain connected to their cultural identity.

Although evidence from Pampang and Sungai Bawang supports treating relocation as voluntary, the community did not take the decision freely among equal options. Scott (2009) argues that people in Southeast Asia gradually came under the rule of states after the 1950s. He describes governments relocating populations, clearing frontier land for settled agriculture, and registering peoples who had not previously been counted, alongside a growing recognition that these apparently useless interior territories held resources of considerable value (Scott 2009, p. 11). Therefore, the forest was not simply becoming less attractive compared to the next locations they transitioned to; it came under the power of administration and acquired a value that it had not previously possessed. The families were therefore choosing among options that others were already reshaping.

Although much changed after relocation, the transition was gradual rather than immediate. Historically, many Dayak Kenyah communities lived deep in the upriver interior, where the surrounding forests not only sustained daily life but also limited contact with the outside world. As communities gradually moved downstream and settled closer to emerging towns and trade routes, interaction with government officials, missionaries, schools, and neighbouring populations became far more frequent. Several interviewees, including the religious head and chief of Pampang village, explained that this increased contact, together with the arrival of Christian missionaries, played an important role in reshaping religious life within the community (interviews with author; cf. Harsanto & Sampurno, 2019, pp. 51–52). Conversion to Christianity was therefore not simply the result of a single government policy or missionary effort, but part of a broader process of social change that accompanied migration. The political changes of 1965 to

1966 further accelerated this transition by requiring Indonesians to identify with one of the state's officially recognised religions, making traditional animistic beliefs increasingly difficult to maintain publicly (Human Rights Watch, 2024). Even so, many aspects of Dayak Kenyah cultural life continued alongside the new faith rather than being displaced by it.

The Dayak Kenyah have consistently adapted their practices to fit new circumstances while maintaining the meanings that lie behind them. During one performance in Pampang, dancers wore traditional costumes decorated with plastic fibres instead of hornbill feathers. Community members explained that the hornbill remains a sacred cultural symbol, but replacing its feathers with synthetic materials allows the tradition to continue without harming a protected species. In another example, a traditional blowpipe was used to shoot at a western bullseye instead of live animals like they traditionally did. Although the context had changed completely, the act itself reflected the community's willingness to incorporate traditional symbols into new settings rather than separating the two. Weddings provided another example of this balance. Several interviewees explained that marriage ceremonies today often combine both Christian and traditional customs, with neither viewed as replacing the other. Throughout my fieldwork, I was repeatedly reminded that cultural preservation was not about recreating the past exactly as it had been. Instead, traditions continued because they were flexible enough to evolve alongside the community.

Perhaps the clearest change since relocation is the way livelihoods have diversified. While agriculture remains an important part of everyday life, it is no longer the community's only source of income. Tourism has become an increasingly important part of the economy, with traditional dance performances, music, handicrafts, and guided visits providing economic opportunities while also creating incentives to preserve cultural practices. This shift has a documented history in Pampang. Village leaders, their Samarinda-based advisors, and the provincial tourism office began promoting the village as a "culture village" (*desa budaya*) in 1991, a designation Schiller notes was then the only one of its kind in East Kalimantan, and by 1998 residents had begun offering regularly scheduled dance performances, with twice-weekly practice built into students' required extracurricular activities (Schiller, 2001, pp. 417–418). The sums involved were modest but consequential: at the time of Schiller's research the average yearly income of a family in Pampang was about \$80, so what a household earned from a single show or a sold piece of craftwork was meaningful (Schiller, 2001, p. 419).

In both villages, community members described a mix of wage employment and subsistence farming, including cassava, corn, and sweet potatoes. Community leaders also spoke about developing products such as mocaf flour and other processed foods that could generate greater value than selling raw agricultural products alone. At the same time, some families supplement their incomes by working in nearby palm oil plantations or the mining industry. Unlike previous generations, whose livelihoods depended almost entirely on the surrounding forest, today's economy is built upon a combination of agriculture, tourism, wage labour, and small-scale enterprise. Economic sustainability has therefore become an increasingly important part of community life.

One carving in particular captured much of what I observed throughout my fieldwork: a tree trunk with branches extending in different directions, each ending in a different flower. Community members

explained that it symbolises the Dayak people spreading across different places and adapting to different circumstances while remaining connected through the same roots. The carving reflects how communities such as Pampang and Sungai Bawang continue to see themselves as part of a shared heritage despite following different paths since leaving the interior. Passing this heritage on to younger generations has therefore become one of the community's greatest priorities. Elders frequently expressed concern that younger people are increasingly speaking Indonesian instead of their local dialects and are more influenced by life outside the village. In response, both communities have made a conscious effort to keep their culture alive. Traditional dance and music are taught from a young age, not only to preserve cultural knowledge but also because these skills can provide an income through tourism. NGO representatives also described indigenous schools where elders voluntarily teach language, crafts, music, and cultural history outside the formal education system. Alongside these initiatives, cultural heads, village leaders, and elders continue to play an important role in organising ceremonies and passing knowledge between generations. Together, these institutions ensure that culture remains something that is actively practiced rather than simply remembered.

Taken together, these changes reveal that sustainability has come to mean something very different from what it once did. Before relocation, living sustainably depended primarily on maintaining a balanced relationship with the forest that supported the community physically and spiritually. Today, sustainability is increasingly understood through creating stable livelihoods while ensuring that Dayak Kenyah culture continues to thrive (Schiller, 2001, p. 421). Rather than preserving traditions exactly as they once were, the community has sustained them by allowing them to adapt alongside changing social and economic realities.

THE GAP BETWEEN ASPIRATION AND REALITY

The Dayak Kenyah's decision to relocate closer to urban centres was ultimately driven by hope. Families left the forest believing that greater access to education, healthcare, infrastructure, and economic opportunity would provide a more sustainable future for the next generation. In many respects, that hope has been realised. Children now attend school more easily, healthcare is more accessible than it once was, and tourism and agriculture provide new sources of income that did not exist in the past (Harsanto & Sampurno, 2019, pp. 56–57). Yet throughout my fieldwork, I was struck by a recurring tension. While community members rarely questioned the decision to leave the forest itself, many described a growing gap between the future they had imagined and the realities they now face. Understanding this gap requires distinguishing between two very different kinds of change. The first consists of the tradeoffs that communities knowingly accepted when they chose to relocate. The second consists of the challenges that were imposed upon them afterwards through decisions largely beyond their control. Treating these as the same obscures both the agency of the Dayak Kenyah and the structural inequalities that continue to shape their lives. Table 1 below summarizes the changes in three pillars of sustainability caused by the relocation, and analyses sources of changes respectively.

Table 1

The Three Pillars of Sustainability Before and After Relocation

Pillar	Before relocation (pre-1960s Apokayan)	After relocation (Pampang and Sungai Bawang today)	Predominant source of change
Ecological	Swidden cultivation with long fallow periods, hunting, fishing, and gathering. Restraints and regulations were enforced through animist belief and ritual permission.	No longer the primary basis because of reduced land access. Customary territory was allocated to mining and plantation concessions; ecological security now depends on legal recognition.	<i>Reduced self-sufficiency was accepted. Loss of customary land was not.</i>
Economic	The forest and rivers supplied food, medicine, and building materials; security derived from self-sufficiency instead of income.	Livelihoods combine agriculture, wage labour, cultural tourism, and small-scale enterprise, with dependence on markets, infrastructure, and state services. The current leading concern.	<i>Market dependence was accepted. Poor infrastructure was not expected.</i>
Cultural	The longhouse served as the centre of social and political organisation, with adat upheld by elders and knowledge transmitted across generations in the course of ordinary practice.	Dance, music, and craft are taught to the young; indigenous schools operate alongside formal education; Christian and customary practice coexist.	<i>Active adaptation was deliberately chosen. Limited recognition of customary institution was not.</i>

Note. The third column indicates whether the change described arose from a tradeoff the community knowingly accepted or from conditions imposed upon it. Several changes have both sources, and the paper treats them separately for that reason.

The first of these changes was an inevitable tradeoff. By leaving the forest, the Dayak Kenyah also left behind a degree of ecological self-sufficiency that had defined life for generations. Families who had once relied primarily on rivers, forests, and communal agriculture increasingly became connected to markets, wage labour, and government services. Food could no longer always be produced independently, and livelihoods became more closely tied to the broader economy. Rather than living almost entirely from the surrounding landscape, communities now depend upon roads, schools, hospitals, electricity, and other forms of public infrastructure. These changes also altered social life. The head of tourism in Pampang and Professor Ndan noted that communal labour, once essential to farming and everyday survival, has become

less common as employment patterns have diversified and individual households pursue different sources of income. Greater opportunity inevitably came with greater dependence on systems beyond the community's direct control. This was a compromise that many families consciously accepted in pursuit of what they believed would be a better future.

The second source of the gap, however, cannot be understood as a voluntary tradeoff. Throughout interviews with academics, community leaders, and NGO representatives, concerns about land repeatedly emerged as one of the most significant challenges facing the Dayak today. Professor NDan explained that large areas of customary land have been allocated to mining and palm oil companies through government-issued permits, often without the free, prior, and informed consent of the communities that have traditionally occupied them. The interview further mentions that in some areas, more than half of customary territory has already been incorporated into commercial concessions, while certain villages have seen their available land reduced to only a few hundred hectares, a pattern consistent with broader documentation of concessions granted over customary land without community consent (Berenschot & Dhiaulhaq, 2023, p. 6). Community members described receiving little compensation despite losing access to land that had supported previous generations. Some also recounted instances where protests against these developments resulted in intimidation or arrests, an experience consistent with findings that community leaders were arrested in 42% of 150 documented palm oil conflicts (Berenschot & Dhiaulhaq, 2023, p. 13). Unlike the increased dependence that accompanied relocation, these outcomes were not choices made by the Dayak Kenyah. They represent external pressures imposed upon communities whose customary rights have often received limited legal recognition (Berenschot & Dhiaulhaq, 2023; Li, 2001).

Infrastructure presents a similar contradiction. One of the main reasons for relocating was to gain better access to services and economic opportunities, yet many of these improvements remain incomplete. Roads connecting villages are often poorly maintained and can become impassable during periods of heavy rain, limiting access to markets and reducing tourism. Community leaders also described unreliable internet access, noting that restrictions on telecommunications towers near Samarinda Airport have further limited digital connectivity in surrounding areas. As tourism and small businesses become increasingly important sources of income, these limitations reduce opportunities that relocation was intended to create. While healthcare and education are undoubtedly more accessible than in the remote interior, interviewees still described shortages of medical resources, and formal schooling often includes little Indigenous language or cultural knowledge, leaving communities to preserve these traditions through separate initiatives.

Not every community, however, experienced these challenges in the same way. While some interviewees spoke extensively about land dispossession and conflict with extractive industries, others reported relatively few direct impacts. Rather than contradicting one another, these differing perspectives reveal that development has affected Dayak communities unevenly. Factors such as customary land recognition, proximity to mining or plantation concessions, and relationships with local governments all shape how directly individual villages experience these pressures. The gap between expectation and reality, therefore, is not shared equally across all communities. Beyond these material challenges, interviewees also reflected on more gradual social and cultural change. Elders noted that younger people increasingly speak

Indonesian rather than the local language, and that communal labor has declined as employment opportunities have diversified. Although these changes were not always viewed negatively, many expressed concern that maintaining Dayak identity has become more difficult as young people spend more time outside the village. The challenge is not just about simply preserving traditions, but ensuring they continue to have a meaningful place in contemporary life.

Taken together, these findings reveal that the gap between the Dayak Kenyah's vision of a sustainable future and their present reality has two distinct sources. One resulted from choices the community willingly made in pursuit of greater opportunity, accepting increased dependence on the wider economy and state services. The other stems from challenges they never chose: insecure land rights, uneven infrastructure, limited recognition of customary institutions, and development decisions made without meaningful community participation. The Dayak Kenyah did not abandon one sustainable way of life only to fail at another. They are currently pursuing the future they envisioned while navigating both the compromises they accepted and the injustices imposed upon them.

CLOSING THE GAP: RIGHTS, CONSENT, AND LIVELIHOODS

If the gap between the Dayak Kenyah's vision of a sustainable future and their present reality has two distinct sources, then closing that gap requires more than a single solution. Some challenges arise from the compromises communities knowingly accepted when relocating closer to urban centres. Others stem from structural barriers that continue to limit their ability to shape their own future. Addressing both requires balancing the ecological, economic, and cultural pillars of sustainability rather than prioritising one at the expense of the others (Hawkes, 2001; Purvis et al., 2019; Soini & Birkeland, 2014).

Perhaps the most significant step is strengthening the community's rights over its customary land while also supporting the institutions that sustain Dayak identity. Throughout my interviews, land was repeatedly identified as the foundation upon which cultural, economic, and ecological sustainability ultimately depends. Professor NDan explained that obtaining customary forest (*hutan adat*) status provides one of the strongest legal protections against future encroachment by mining and plantation companies. The legal basis is the Constitutional Court Decision MK 35/PUU-X/2012, which removed the word "state" from the statutory definition of *hutan adat*. It repositioned the indigenous community from a permitted user of state land to the rights-holder over the forest itself (Mahkamah Konstitusi Republik Indonesia, 2013). Yet this protection comes with an important limitation. Before communities can claim customary forests, they must first receive formal recognition as Indigenous peoples by demonstrating customary institutions, traditional laws, historical territory, and other forms of cultural continuity. This paradox was noted by Tania Murray Li (2001), who observed that recognition both enables such claims and constrains them, since it situates them within existing structures of power. Ironically, the very adaptations that have allowed communities to survive in a changing world can sometimes make this process more difficult, as recognition often depends on proving traditions that governments expect to remain unchanged. While cultural village status has helped preserve heritage and support tourism, it does not provide the same legal protection over land as customary forest recognition. At the same time,

maintaining that cultural continuity depends upon the institutions already embedded within the community. Indigenous schools, language programmes, traditional music and dance groups, and the continued leadership of elders and cultural heads all help ensure that knowledge is passed to younger generations outside the formal education system. Together, securing customary land rights and strengthening these community-led institutions offers the strongest foundation for protecting both the Dayak Kenyah's cultural identity and their future livelihoods.

Greater community participation in decision-making is equally important. Strengthening the principle of Free, Prior, and Informed Consent (FPIC), a right affirmed in the 2007 United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, would allow communities to play a more active role in decisions affecting their customary lands and resources (Anderson, 2012, pp. 244–245). Local leaders repeatedly emphasised that those living within the communities often possess a far better understanding of local needs than distant decision-makers. While greater participation cannot eliminate every conflict between conservation, development, and economic growth, it can ensure that Indigenous voices are treated as partners rather than afterthoughts.

Economic sustainability also depends on expanding opportunities that communities themselves wish to pursue. Both Pampang and Sungai Bawang have demonstrated that tourism can generate income while encouraging younger generations to learn traditional music, dance, and crafts. Community leaders also spoke about developing products such as mocaf flour and other processed foods, allowing villages to capture more value from local agriculture instead of relying solely on raw produce. NGO representatives likewise highlighted the need for stronger marketing skills and digital platforms so communities can promote handicrafts and cultural tourism more effectively. At the same time, tourism presents its own tension. It creates incentives to preserve culture, yet it also risks reducing living traditions to performances for visitors (Schiller, 2001, pp. 420–421). Ensuring that communities retain control over how their culture is presented is therefore just as important as expanding tourism itself (Schiller, 2001, p. 421).

Ultimately, there is no single policy capable of closing the gap between the future the Dayak Kenyah envisioned and the one they experience today. Some of the compromises that accompanied relocation were inevitable, while others resulted from political and economic systems beyond the community's control. Closing that gap therefore requires more than protecting forests or promoting economic development alone. It requires recognising that ecological security, cultural continuity, and economic opportunity are interconnected parts of the sustainable future that the Dayak Kenyah have been striving toward all along.

LIMITATIONS

As with any ethnographic research, my own background inevitably shaped both the questions I asked and the way I interpreted what I observed. Although I am a fourth-generation Indonesian Taiwanese, I have spent my entire life living in Shanghai and the United States and had never previously visited Kalimantan or engaged closely with Indonesia's indigenous communities. Conducting this fieldwork therefore was an

opportunity to better understand a part of Indonesia's cultural diversity that I had previously known very little about and, in doing so, to reflect on my own connection to my Indonesian heritage. At the same time, I remained an outsider to the communities I studied. My understanding was developed over a relatively short period of fieldwork and was shaped through interviews with village leaders, elders, academics, NGO representatives, and other key informants, many of which were conducted with the assistance of translators. Consequently, this paper does not claim to present a complete account of Dayak Kenyah life or to speak on behalf of the community. Instead, it represents my attempt to understand how members of the Dayak Kenyah themselves explain their history, their changing understanding of sustainability, and the challenges they face today.

Although neither of the two focus communities is large (one was less than a thousand people, the other comprising around 1,500 members), the sample size is also comparatively slight (0.4% in one case and even less in the other). To develop the research in future, the sample size needs to be larger (thereby doubling down on the existing research) and, where possible, more varied (thereby expanding existing research). Future researchers should also reach out to those few members of the communities who were in direct contact with the government, members of the government and associated business owners.

CONCLUSION

This paper has argued that sustainability within the Dayak Kenyah community is not a fixed idea, but one that has changed alongside the community's own aspirations and circumstances. Before relocation, living sustainably meant maintaining a balanced relationship with the forest, where the environment, spiritual beliefs, and communal life were deeply interconnected. As communities such as Pampang and Sungai Bawang voluntarily moved closer to urban centres in search of better education, healthcare, and economic opportunities, that understanding gradually shifted toward creating secure livelihoods while ensuring that Dayak culture continues to be practiced and passed on to future generations. Yet this transition has also revealed an important gap between the future the community hoped to build and the realities they experience today. Some of that gap reflects compromises they knowingly accepted in pursuit of a better life, while the rest stems from challenges they never chose, including insecure land rights, uneven development, and limited recognition of their customary rights. Rather than telling a story of cultural loss or inevitable modernization, the experience of the Dayak Kenyah demonstrates that culture and sustainability are both dynamic. Their traditions have endured, because the community has continually found ways to adapt them to new social, economic, and political realities. Ultimately, perhaps the greatest lesson from this fieldwork is that sustainability is not about preserving a single way of life, but about giving communities the ability to shape their own futures without losing the values and identity that continue to define them.

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