Subversion, Conversion, Development

Cross-Cultural Knowledge Encounter and the Politics of Design

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6 Redeploying Technologies: ICT for Greater Agency and Capacity for Political Engagement in the Kelabit Highlands

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Introduction

This chapter turns its gaze on the Kelabit in Central Borneo to highlight their ongoing engagement with information and communications technologies through the electronic Bario (eBario) initiative. eBario was a frontier ICT-based community development project implemented in 1999 to bring not only the Internet and computers but also the telephone to physically remote communities. Initiated as a partnership between researchers from Universiti Malaysia Sarawak (UNIMAS) and the Kelabit people of Bario, the project's main objective is to examine in what ways the new information and communications technologies (ICTs) such as the Internet, computers, printers, and VSATs can bring social and economic development to rural communities in Sarawak. It was initiated within the context of the ICT hype (Keniston 2002) of 1990s in which the new forms of ICT are seen as economic and social drivers that can further boost the economic and social development of societies. This has been substantiated by arguments that better telecommunications will induce rapid economic development (Barr 1998; Abdul-Rahman 1993).

Nevertheless, as the new technologies extend their reach, it raises questions of how the Kelabit in the highlands use or appropriate ICTs. Can engagement with ICTs change the ways in which communities like the Kelabit view themselves? Do ICTs give communities like th Kelabit hope and tangible