

# **Communication and Culture, Conflict and Cohesion**

edited by

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UPLB College of Development Communication  
and  
The Foundation for Development and Communication

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*For Nora C. Quebral*

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## PART ONE. FRAMEWORK

### CHAPTER 1. CONVERGENCE

by

Alexander G. Flor

*Why are the peasants shouting,  
"Bread! Bread! Bread! "  
Are they tired of eating cakes?*

*Marie Antoinette, moments before  
revolting masses overran the royal palace.*

*USA. Love it or leave it!*

#### *Contents of Pro-America Placard following 9/11*

*Train military governments. Leverage Arab oil.  
Arm Israel. Exile refugees. Carpet bomb Baghdad.  
Seize the Persian Gulf. Sell arms to Iran. Pay off Pakistan.  
Install the Shah. Double-deal Lebanon.  
Help Saddam. Blame Islam. Deploy the CIA. Bomb Kabul again.  
Bully everyone. Then ask, "Why?"*

#### *Contents of an Anti-War Placard following 9/11*

In the last quarter of 1979, a tall lanky American quietly completed two months of post-doctoral work at the UPLB College of Development Communication. D. Lawrence Kincaid left as unobtrusively as he came leaving different impressions to different people. Among the junior staff of the College, he seemed to be a youngish nerd with a keen sense of humor. Little did they know then that his work would leave a profound imprint in their academic undertakings.

Before his Los Baños sojourn, Larry, as Dr. Kincaid prefers to be called, just completed the manuscript for a monograph entitled ***The Convergence Model of Communication***. It was published the following year by the East-West Communication Institute where he served as Research Associate. The technical abstract read:

*This paper develops a general model of the communication process based upon the principle of convergence as derived from basic information theory and cybernetics. The author is critical of the linear, one-way models of*

*communication, which have dominated past research. The hidden biases of these models, especially toward individual psychology and mechanistic explanation, are identified. The advantages of cybernetic explanation are discussed in that context. Finally, the definition of information and meaning leads to a paradigm that presents communication as a cyclical process of convergence and divergence over time.*

The monograph, being quite as technical in style as the abstract, was not very widely circulated. However, it soon became somewhat of a cult paper among graduate students and young faculty members of communication. Kincaid's Model was the only communication model that was based on both Eastern and Western worldviews, not only paying lip service to cultural influences in communication but actually incorporating these into its most basic assumptions.

The Convergence Model depicts communication as cyclical and interactive. No distinctions are made between the source and the receiver, between message and feedback. In other words, the participants in the communication process are regarded as co-equals. Additionally, the model unequivocally states that the primary purpose or function of the communication process is *mutual understanding*.

Allow us to relate Kincaid's model to what is perhaps the most pressing issue of our times.

### **The Clash of Cultures**

Contemporary wars are not being waged by countries but by cultures.

The conflicts in Rwanda, Basque, Bosnia, Kosovo, Chechnya, Afghanistan, Aceh, Maluku, East Timor, and Mindanao were/are not national political struggles but are cases of cultural strife. Contemporary political scientist Samuel P. Huntington refers to these conflicts as the beginnings of the *clash of civilizations*. More appropriate perhaps is the phrase, the *clash of cultures*.

A simplistic interpretation would be to regard these as conflicts between Islam and Christianity, religious wars reminiscent of the Crusades. But the faithful in both religions are not protagonists in these conflicts. These wars are neither sanctioned by Mecca nor Rome.

In the Philippines, for instance, the media has portrayed the Mindanao conflict as a religious war, in spite of firm denials from the Catholic bishops and the Islamic Ulama, both of whom are actively working together in the pursuit of peace. They submit that the Mindanao conflict is a clash between opposing value systems, social structures, and worldviews: exploitative versus communal value systems on natural resources utilization; feudal against oligarchic social structures; and materialistic as opposed to idealistic worldviews. Value systems, social structures, and worldviews are all components of culture.

This book forwards that in this age of globalization and informatization, societal conflict is a function of culture, caused by a dysfunction of societal communication. Perhaps as cultures are exposed more and more to others, conflict becomes inevitable. The quality and degree of exposure is determined by the quality and degree of societal communication, operationalized as mass media and education.

A case in point was CNN's coverage of the spontaneous celebrations in Palestine immediately following 9/11. The West watched dumbfounded as West Bank men, women, and children rejoiced with news that both World Trade Center towers collapsed soon after jumbo planes crashed into them. An unbelieving culture just had to ask the question, "Why?"

When they witnessed interviews of Palestinian children whose primary ambition in life was to become suicide bombers, again they asked, "Why?" Unfortunately, many of them found it convenient to blame one person, Yassir Arafat, not thinking that he was merely a product of that culture --- a symptom, not a cause.

The 9/11 tragedy and its seemingly endless economic backlash may have exacerbated the clash of cultures. If anything, it has jolted the world to the indefensibility of disregarding other peoples' values and worldviews, bringing this reality to the consciousness of the 21<sup>st</sup> century global citizen. The question now is, "What do we do about it?"

A placard held by a female Middle Eastern American participating in an anti-war rally in Dallas during the aftermath of 9/11 read: "We defend and destroy people we don't understand." Internalizing this message may prove to be a good start. The protagonists should begin with tolerance as a short-term solution and understanding as a long-term solution. Both tolerance and understanding, however, require good communication. And the initiative for this should be taken by both sides, not by one.

How absurd it would be if we shift the blame for 9/11 to its victims. On the other hand, it would be simplistic to think that its cause may be traced to one man, one organization, or even one movement, no matter how tempting. If indeed, we succumb to this temptation and deal with the symptom rather than the cause, then this unfortunate tragedy will recur.

Perhaps the solution to the clash of cultures is *mutual understanding*, the stated goal of communication in D. Lawrence Kincaid's Convergence Theory. Convergence forms the framework for this book.

Apart from the framework, this volume has two other parts: Cases and Themes.

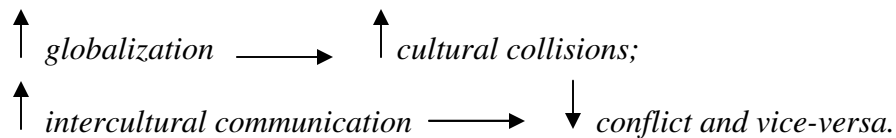
Part Two presents four cases of societal conflict in various parts of the world. It begins with an analysis of the struggle for land in Zimbabwe and its cultural roots. Chapter 3 moves to another part of the world - Malaysia, its conflicts and cultures.

Chapter 4 explores the dimensions of conflict in Aceh, Indonesia. Chapter 5 treats the Mindanao conflict from a critical perspective. Chapter 6, in contrast, presents a communication and advocacy plan to achieve peace in the troubled island.

Part Three depicts three thematic considerations associated with societal conflict. Chapter 7 deals with environmental conflict, a recurring contemporary phenomenon in developing as well as developed societies. Chapter 8 describes the plight and struggles of indigenous peoples. Finally, Chapter 9 prods us to rethink official development assistance and describes how current ODA practices are perceived to contribute rather than assuage societal conflict.

These chapters reflect the book's main thesis that conflict is a function of culture and communication. To reiterate, globalization, informatization and, to a certain extent, digitization have accelerated the meeting of cultures. When cultures meet and collide, conflict is inevitable. However, the higher the degree of intercultural communication, the lesser the possibility of conflict as Chapters 3 and 6 argue. The lesser the degree of intercultural communication, the higher the possibility of conflict as Chapter 2 and 7 illustrate. In other words, intercultural communication and conflict are inversely related.

Thus,  $\text{conflict} = f(\text{communication}, \text{culture})$ ;



We should emphasize the term *intercultural* as differentiated from *cross-cultural*. The former is cyclical rather than linear, two-way rather than one-way. The latter is unilinear and vertical, pointing downwards. In other words, a relation of dominance or dependence exists in cross-cultural communication flows, a situation which characterizes the cases described in Chapters 4 and 8. An imbalance in the flow of information and communication between two cultures cannot be considered intercultural.

We should likewise note that increased communication per se does not unmake conflict. Chapters 5 and 9 argue, in fact, that communication has been, is being, and will be used as a tool to further conflict. The goal of this type of communication, however, is influence and persuasion rather than mutual understanding.

Communication and culture are inextricably linked. Conflict need not necessarily be an attendant phenomenon. However, if conflict does rear its ugly head, we should remember that with convergence comes cohesion.

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