

# Can Asian Communicators Think ? Asiacentricity as a Paradigm for Decolonizing the Asian Mind

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**Abstract:** Asiacentricity is the thought and practice of centering Asians as subjects and agents and Asian cultures as reflective resources in seeing and shaping the Asian world. This article contends that decolonizing the Asian mind is a key for the Asian future, and that the Asiacentric idea can play an important role in this decolonization process. The article divides the definition of Asiacentricity into three parts and then relates each part to the possible future developments of the *sadharanikaran* model of communication. The article especially sheds light on Asiacentricity as a decolonial paradigm for intercultural equality and mutuality, which demands that we know our own culture, have the mindset of embracing the best of our culture, and learn how to talk about our culture in relation to another. The present article concludes that to theorize communication is to theorize humanity, while to theorize humanity is to theorize culture.

**Keywords:** Afrocentricity, Asiacentricity, Asian communication theory, comparative Eurocentrism, decoloniality, intercultural dialogue, *Kawaida* philosophy, *sadharanikaran*

[T]he most painful thing that happened to Asia was not the physical but the mental colonization. Many Asians

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(including, I fear, many of my ancestors from South Asia) began to believe that Asians were inferior beings to the Europeans. Only this could explain how a few thousand British could control a few hundred million people in South Asia. If I am allowed to make a controversial point here, I would add that this mental colonization has not been completely eradicated in Asia, and many Asian societies are still struggling to break free from it.

- Kishore Mahbubani (1998, p. 29)

## **Introduction**

Namaste from Hilo, Hawai‘i! Mr. Chairperson, distinguished guests, and fellow participants, it is my great pleasure and rare privilege to join you in celebrating the two decades of the *sadharanikaran* model of human communication. I would like to thank Dr. Nirmala Mani Adhikary for inviting me to speak on this special occasion. Professor Jaswant S. Yadava (1987), Former Director of the Indian Institute of Mass Communication in New Delhi, initially presented a paper on the indigenous concept of *sadharanikaran* at the East-West Center Seminar on “Communication Theory from Eastern and Western Perspectives” in Honolulu, Hawai‘i in 1980 (see also Tewari, 1980).<sup>1</sup> I am delighted that Dr. Adhikary and his colleagues and students carried on Professor Yadava’s theoretical legacy and have advanced it for further refinement and sophistication. Dr. Adhikary is a visionary leader par excellence who not only constructed the *sadharanikaran* model of human communication (Adhikary, 2009, 2010, 2014), but also created the *sadharanikaran* intellectual movement in the Global South. I was excited to see a wide range of applications, from AI to Gandhi-ji, in this seminar’s program.

More than 25 years ago, Kishore Mahbubani (1998), Founding Dean of the Lee Kuan Yew School of Public Policy at the National University of Singapore, wrote a provocative article, “Can

Asians Think?,” in *The National Interest*. What he was really asking in that article was: Can Asians think independently of the West even though they have been mentally colonized by the West? His question remains extremely important and highly relevant today (see, for example, Supratman, 2024). Ziauddin Sardar (1999) was correct in pointing out that, as long as we let the West define our future, we will never catch up with the West. Indeed, we always live in the past of the West. We are at a crossroads where we will continue being mentally colonized by the West or we will decolonize our minds for our own humanity. Communication is an interactive and integrative process of self, others, nature, spirituality, and technology. As such, it is central and critical to humanity itself.<sup>2</sup> The time is ripe for us to think seriously about the values and ethics of human communication with our own voices and visions while rediscovering and recovering our cultural roots. My message today is that the Asiacentric idea can play a key role in the decolonization process for the Asian future.<sup>3</sup>

### **Asiacentricity and the *Sadharanikaran* Model**

What is Asiacentricity? *Asiacentricity is the thought and practice of centering Asians as subjects and agents and Asian cultures as reflective resources in seeing and shaping the Asian world.* For paradigmatic principles, Asiacentricity builds primarily on Professor Molefi Kete Asante’s Afrocentric metatheory, Professor Maulana Karenga’s *Kawaida* philosophy, Professor Robert Shuter’s intracultural imperative as well as Professor Virgilio G. Enriquez’s cross-indigenous methods. For paradigmatic exemplars, Asiacentricity draws largely on the field of Asian communication theory.<sup>4</sup> In the interest of time, I will divide the above definition into three parts and relate each part to the possible future developments of the *sadharanikaran* model. Please read my latest handbook chapter (Miike, 2024a) that I gave to the host of this seminar for an introductory outline of Asiacentricity.

The first part of my definition of Asiacentricity is “the thought and practice of centering.” In other words, *Asiacentricity is the idea and act of centering*. The most fundamental principle is that we must not marginalize Asian peoples and cultures when we talk about the Asian world. Asian traditional and experiential knowledge should not be a footnote or an appendix within the Asian context. How to center Asian ideas and insights, however, depends on a listener, a context, and a purpose because, in Brenda Dervin’s (2006) apt words, “communication to be communicative must build bridges between different interpretive/contextual worlds” (p. 21). Asante (2020) elaborated on this point while expounding on Afrocentricity (see also Asante, 2017):

To be human is to be impacted by circumstances.... There is no place that is not place, and there are no circumstances that humans are involved with that do not influence them.... Hence, the concentration of *where a person is coming from* as the beginning point of any analysis is central to a full-fledged Afrocentric understanding of situation. Nothing is without context and therefore the role of the Afrocentrist is to probe for perspective, location, attitude and direction in intricate crevices of historical, social, and economic contexts. (p. 152)

Asiacentricity is a paradigm of dynamic centering for intercultural equality and mutuality. As such, self-conscious centering requires us to detect and decipher the historical context of intercultural relations. For this reason, you cannot proactively center, say, Japanese culture in the same manner when you are communicating with the Chinese, Filipinos, Koreans, Malaysians, and Nepalese. The recognition of cultural hybridity is essential for mindful centering as well. Hajime Nakamura (1978, 1992), for instance, elucidated Hindu influences on various aspects of Japanese culture and urged the Japanese to become more aware of them in

order to forge positive and productive relationships with Indians. Arifin Bey (1992) suggested that we pay greater attention to different patterns of encounter with the West in different Asian countries and cultures. The reflective act of centering may also entail careful considerations regarding the historical impact of the West on each nation and region of Asia.

When it comes to the *sadharanikaran* model, then, you cannot explain it to West Asians, Southeast Asians, or Northeast Asians exactly in the same way as you do to South Asians. How would you explain it to Africans, Europeans, Latin Americans, Pacific Islanders, and Indigenous Peoples all over the world? All of them are coming from different cultural backgrounds and with different degrees of contextual understanding. For the development of the *sadharanikaran* model for mutual understanding and dialogue across cultures, it is imperative that you take into account who your listener is, where the context is, and what the purpose is, and clarify the model accordingly. *Rasa* is not an easy concept for Northeast Asians like me to grasp.

### *Positionality, Reaffirmation, and Renewal*

The second part of my definition of Asiacentricity is “Asians as subjects and agents and Asian cultures as reflective resources.” I wish to emphasize here that *Asiacentricity is a perspectivist approach and a dialogical engagement*. We must always view Asians as knowing subjects and active agents, not ignorant objects and passive participants, who have been capable of thinking and acting on their own and of making significant contributions to the world. We must also always treat Asian cultures not as peripheral targets for data analysis and rhetorical criticism, but as central resources for theoretical ideas and insights. This is the distinction between “culture as text and culture as theory” that I made (Miike, 2024b). We should ask ourselves, first of all, what Asians thought and how

Asians acted in the long history of Asia. We should seek answers from Asian cumulative wisdom for human freedom, flourishing, and fulfillment.

Karenga (2022) steadfastly held that “recognized and respected or unrecognized and disrespected tradition shapes how we understand and assert ourselves in the world” (p. 113). The basic premise of his *Kawaida* philosophy is that “every culture has, within it, knowledge, views, values, practices, and experiences, which can be usefully and fruitfully engaged to frame and inform reflective problematics” (Karenga, 2018, p. 581). He is also in agreement with W. E. B. Du Bois who eloquently argued for “the need of valuing the particular knowledge of one’s own people and culture and using these as a point of departure and pathway to engage and appreciate the universal” (Karenga, 2018, p. 594). Asiacentricity takes heed of these instructive points of contention.

As a perspectivist approach, Asiacentricity is particularly sensitive to from whose standpoint we are seeing the world. As a dialogical engagement, we ought not only to receive and reaffirm past Asian knowledge, but also to refine and renew it for the future. How does the seemingly same *sadharanikaran* process look like from various social locations such as gender, age, class, sexuality, nationality, religion, dialects, and mental or physical disabilities? How can we revitalize the model within the theoretical framework of Asiacentric womanism (Yin, 2024a, 2024b)? How can we revive the model according to new challenges such as the decline of civility, the rise of distrust, and the widening generation gap? In this regard, it is wonderful that some of you are going to reevaluate the model for the digital age this afternoon.

### *Comparisons and Applications*

The third part of my definition of Asiacentricity is “seeing and shaping the Asian world.” By this statement, I mean

that *Asiacentricity is an epistemological and ethical project*. Asiaticentricity strives to help people, both Asians and non-Asians, better understand Asia and, at the same time, to improve the quality of life in Asia through intracultural and intercultural dialogue. I would like to stress the importance of comparison for such a project. Comparison makes it possible for us to apprehend and appraise common humanity in Asian communication and Asian diversity in human communication. Adhikary (2017) wisely posited:

If different philosophical traditions open themselves to each other's differences, and if each examines itself in the light of that recognition, there would be better chances for the understanding of both the East and the West. The communication discipline and the field of communication theory can offer tremendous opportunities for such endeavors. The study of comparative communication theory should be encouraged and promoted as it paves [a] way for reconciliation among different perspectives. (p. 5)

Asiaticentricity does not ignore the West, but it engages in the West. Indeed, we need to know the West to overcome mental colonization. But we should not stop there. We have to go beyond what I called *comparative Eurocentrism* (Miike, 2016, 2022c, 2024b). We should compare the *sadharanikaran* model not only with Western models, but also with Buddhist, Confucian, Islamic, and Taoist models (see Craig & Xiong, 2022; Gunaratne, 2022; Ishii, 2007; Miike, 2017) or African, Latin American, Pacific Islanders' and Indigenous Peoples' models (see Asante, Miike, & Yin, 2014; Miike & Yin, 2022). A comparative study of the Hinduism-inspired *antyodaya* movement in India (Rahim, 1987) and the Buddhism-based *sarvodaya* movement in Sri Lanka (Dissanayake, 2014), for example, would be a fascinating research endeavor. We should also see its different practical applications in different specific contexts such as family, educational, organizational, and healthcare settings

(e.g., Kapadia-Kundu, 1994). In what ways is a classical theory of *sadharanikaran* limited to theatrical contexts? In what ways is it applicable beyond drama and performance?

It is important to note that East-West binarism is not a precondition of Asiaticity. Asian cultures can be centered so as to highlight similarities at one time and differences at another because Asiaticity is not predicated on the presumption of the incommensurability of Asianness and non-Asianness (Miike, 2019b, 2022b). It would be commendable, for instance, to explore similarities and differences between the *sadharanikaran* model and the convergence model (Kincaid, 1979; Rogers & Kincaid, 1981, 1982). The *sadharanikaran* model may underline emotional convergence, while the convergence model may underscore conceptual convergence. Nevertheless, both of the models postulated that the overriding aim of interpersonal communication is to achieve commonness cognitively and affectively.

In essence, Asiaticity is the idea of being inwardly deep and outwardly open. Asiaticity as a decolonial paradigm for intercultural equality and mutuality demands that we know our own culture, have the mindset of embracing the best of our culture, and learn how to talk about our culture in relation to another culture. We can either embrace or suppress our cultural heritage, and suppression is not working for a healthy cultural identity. Moreover, by embracing the positive aspects of all cultures, we will be able to learn from one another and find a more balanced approach to five fundamental themes of humanity, namely, individual liberty, social equality, civil order, benevolent community, and sacred earth. No cultural system keeps a perfect balance among these perennial concerns and intractable issues in the global society and the local community. Hence, mutual referencing and learning across cultures is a *sine qua non* for cultural ecology and sustainability (Miike, 2019a).



## **Conclusion**

Lee Thayer (1982) famously remarked that “communication is not just something that people do; it is that process in which we have our humanity—whatever and however that shall be” (p. 27). He maintained that “ways of talking, or understanding—of communication—are ways of being,” and that “a change in ways of talking, of understanding—of communication—is a change in ways of being” (p. 25). From the perspective of Chinese philosophy, furthermore, Chung-Ying Cheng (2022) astutely observed: “No reason or logic is abstracted from the concrete perception and understanding of affairs.... Reason is not simply logic as such. It is also to respect the practical and aesthetical norms and conventions accepted in the community” (p. 255). Rhetorical and communication studies thus must always focus on the intersection of culture and humanity (Miike, 2022a). To theorize communication is to theorize humanity. To theorize humanity is to theorize culture. For this reason, I concur with Robert L. Nwankwo (1979) who had the following to say about humanistic and philosophical approaches to communication inquiry:

[S]ome models and methodologies are mainly useful in empirical and quantitative research, while others can ground the more humanistic and philosophical approaches to... communication analysis. Humanistic approaches should not, therefore, be ignored or avoided. These approaches sometimes provide deeper insights into communication processes and events than do empirical methods and thus can help in the development of more adequate models of communication theory and research. (pp. 332-333)

I hope you will think seriously, and critically, about communication as the process of sharing and shaping humanity through the *sadharanikaran* model and have fruitful conversations on how we should relate to one another, nature, spirituality, and

technology during the rest of this seminar.<sup>5</sup> Professor Everett M. Rogers (1993), one of my treasured mentors at the University of New Mexico, reminded us that, in the Eurocentric paradigm of modernization, “cultural richness was not defined as development; it could not be measured in dollars and cents” (pp. 37-38). But, as I insisted before, looking at Asia only with a Eurocentric *critical* eye and looking at the West only with a Eurocentric *uncritical* eye poses a serious problem in understanding and appreciating the fullest potentials of humanity and communication (Miike, 2004, 2015). Let me conclude my keynote address by asking myself and everyone in the seminar once again: Can Asian communicators think independently of the West?

**Author’s Note:** This article is a revised version of the author’s keynote address delivered under the same title at the International Seminar on the “Two Decades of the *Sadharanikaran* Model of Communication” organized by the Department of Languages and Mass Communication at Kathmandu University in Lalitpur, Nepal on May 26, 2024. Yoshitaka Miike (Ph.D., University of New Mexico, USA) is Professor in the Department of Communication at the University of Hawai‘i at Hilo and Senior Fellow at the Molefi Kete Asante Institute for Afrocentric Studies.

## Notes

1. For Hindu philosophical perspectives on cognition and communication, see Adhikary and Shukla (2013), Babbili (2008), Jain and Matukumalli (2014), Saral (1983), and Sitaram (2004). Due acknowledgement must be given to Tulsi B. Saral’s pioneering contributions to Hindu communication theory. He was an early participant in one of the East-West Center projects on comparative communication theory. In Saral’s (1979) considered opinion, “*in-culture self-knowledge... is a necessary prerequisite to any effective communication*” (p. 79).

- For an introduction to intercultural communication in the Indian context, see Rao and Thombre (2015).
2. Intriguingly enough, in perfecting his philosophy of “spiritual humanism” through the Confucian lens, Tu Weiming (2024) advocated the thesis that humanity is communication. He succinctly submitted: “[Ideally,] humanity’s connectivity is positive engagement and active transformation. It communicates not as an outside observer but as an inside participant. Implicit in subjectivity, there is also intersubjectivity” (p. 158).
  3. For a concise summary of the theoretical and practical significance of “decoloniality” toward “cognitive justice,” see Sabelo J. Ndlovu-Gatsheni (2013). I, for one, disagree with the recent view that “decolonization” refers only to physical and political independence. In point of fact, earlier authors and activists such as Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o (1986) and Linda Tuhiwai Smith (1999) have expatiated on the indubitable necessity of “mental decolonization,” which encompasses the complex process of resurrecting and reconstructing different ways of being (ontology), knowing (epistemology), and valuing (axiology) in the world. Pōkā Laenui (2000) illuminated the Native Hawaiian quest for sovereignty and identified five stages of decolonization: (1) rediscovery and recovery; (2) mourning; (3) dreaming; (4) commitment; and (5) action.
  4. Wimal Dissanayake, a Sri Lankan pioneer at the East-West Communication Institute in Honolulu, Hawai‘i, assumed a leadership role in founding the field of Asian communication theory in the 1980s. In his groundbreaking article (Dissanayake, 1981), he made the following assertion: “At a time when Western communication scholars are themselves questioning the validity and utility of communication theories and models that have been developed so far, a study of Eastern communication theories might prove to be a useful venture” (p. 17). For his personal

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reflection on his 50-year academic journey, see Dissanayake (2022).

5. For my own reflections on humanity, culture, and communication, see Miike (2004, 2007, 2015). I applied the paradigmatic idea of Asiaticity and formulated five propositions on human communication from an Asiatic vantage point. It should be kept in mind, however, that these cross-cultural reflections are some applications of Asiaticity, not the tenets of Asiaticity itself. The five propositions are not the metatheoretical principles of Asiaticity. They were presented for a specific purpose of rethinking the dominant Eurocentric views and values of human communication.

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