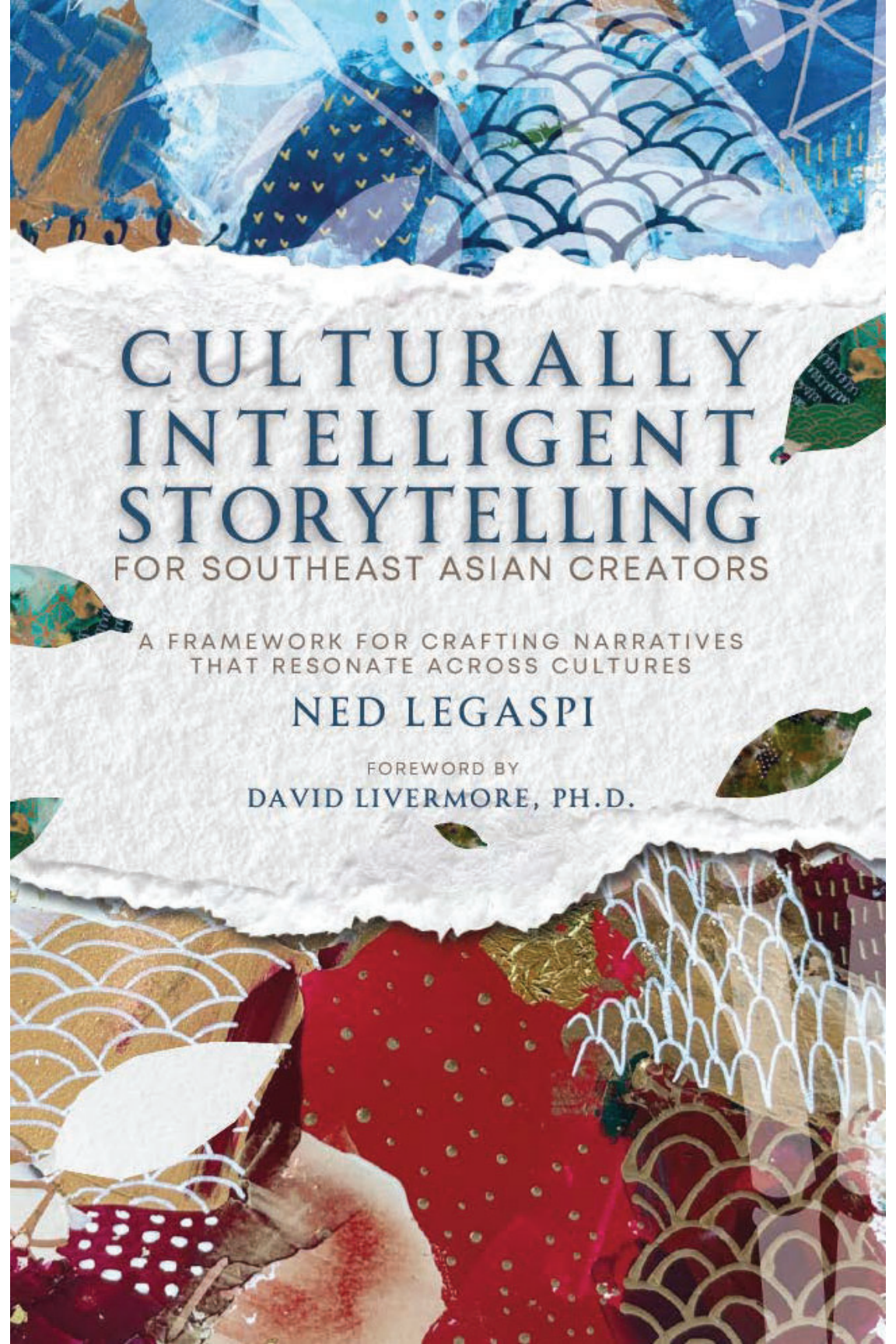


The book cover features a collage of various patterns and textures. The top section has a blue background with white and gold patterns, including a large green leaf on the right. The middle section is a white, torn-paper-like background with the title and author's name. The bottom section has a red background with white and gold patterns, including a large green leaf on the right. The title is in a large, blue, serif font, and the author's name is in a smaller, blue, serif font. The subtitle is in a smaller, brown, sans-serif font. The foreword author's name is in a smaller, blue, serif font. The overall design is artistic and culturally inspired.

CULTURALLY INTELLIGENT STORYTELLING

FOR SOUTHEAST ASIAN CREATORS

A FRAMEWORK FOR CRAFTING NARRATIVES
THAT RESONATE ACROSS CULTURES

NED LEGASPI

FOREWORD BY
DAVID LIVERMORE, PH.D.

Foreword

Everyone loves a good story. Whether you're a Filipino executive, a Canadian university student, a German nurse, or a Thai monk, stories are inspiring, educational, and entertaining. But what makes a good story for you might fall completely flat for me. A story that evokes tears in one culture may come across as insensitive in another. And what one audience sees as a moment of triumph, another may interpret as disloyalty or disrespect. That's what makes storytelling across cultures both powerful and perilous.

Navigating the cultural fault lines in storytelling is exactly what Ned Legaspi addresses in this book, and no one is more qualified to do so. For decades, Ned worked inside one of Southeast Asia's largest media companies. He hasn't just studied cultural differences, he's lived them. Ned watched what landed with audiences and what quietly disappeared. He saw how some stories got flattened to feel "global" and, in the process, lost the very soul that made them worth telling. All of this led Ned to ask a simple but profound question: *What if we could apply the science of cultural intelligence to the art of storytelling?*

Cultural Intelligence, or CQ, is the capability to work effectively with people from different cultural backgrounds. Over the last 20 years, it's been applied to global leadership, education, negotiation, diplomacy, and more. But until now, no one has deeply explored how CQ can be used to help storytellers create stories that travel across borders.

Enter *Culturally Intelligent Storytelling*.

Ned is one of our CQ Fellows, an elite community of cultural intelligence thought leaders committed to translating academically rigorous research on cultural intelligence into real-world applications. And that's exactly what he does in this book. He's developed a framework that helps creators ask better questions about audience, context, and culture.

This isn't a one-size-fits-all model that strips away the rich cultural nuance of stories rooted in a particular place. Instead, it's a proven framework that allows us to all experience more of the world's beautiful stories in a way that speaks to us.

In a world of streaming platforms, algorithms, and short attention spans, stories still have the power to transform hearts and minds. But only when they're told with care and cultural intelligence.

While written first and foremost to help storytellers in Southeast Asia take their work global, any creative will benefit from Ned's work. If you're a storyteller, strategist, producer, or anyone who wants your work to resonate beyond borders, this book is for you.

—David Livermore, PhD

Author of several best-selling books on cultural intelligence and
Founder of CQ Fellows

Preface | How a Question Turned into a Framework

For as long as I can remember, I've chased one question. It wasn't just professional. It was personal. *How do stories travel?*

It's something I kept returning to quietly through the years. But to be honest, it wasn't only my question. It was also a question that arose at the media company where I worked for 30 years, especially during the time I was involved in global content strategy. It was my first and only job, the place where I grew professionally and learned how stories move people across borders.

How do we tell Filipino stories that not only get shown abroad, but also land, linger, and move hearts across cultures?

I thought the answer would come with experience. But it didn't. Not completely.

In 2018, I came across a book by Dr. David Livermore titled "*Leading with Cultural Intelligence*." It was written for leaders in global business settings, not for storytellers like me. But something about it struck a chord. The concept of Cultural Intelligence, or CQ, gave shape to what I had been sensing for years. It confirmed what I had long felt: stories, and how they are received, are profoundly shaped by culture.

I remember thinking:

*What if this established body of knowledge, CQ,
could be applied to storytelling?*

However, I wasn't ready to explore it in depth. Life was full, and the question stayed quietly in the background.

Then, in 2023, I realized I had completed 30 years in corporate media. That number, thirty, prompted a quiet question: do I still want to stay,

or is it time to do something else? At first, it was just a whisper. But as the months passed, it grew louder. Eventually, I listened.

I decided to take early retirement, not because I was tired but because I wanted to reinvent myself. And just as I began to wonder what that next chapter might look like, something unexpected happened.

I got accepted into the **CQ Fellows Program**, a year-long fellowship personally led by Dr. David Livermore, co-founder of the US-based Cultural Intelligence Center. It's the highest-level credential for thought leaders applying CQ to a specific domain. In my case, storytelling.

I applied without expecting anything. I just wanted to try. Out of 377 applicants from around the world, only 20 were selected.

I was one of them.

And I have to say, when I saw the announcement, it felt like the Miss Universe pageant. The countries were being named one by one: Japan, South Africa, Senegal, Kenya, the Netherlands, Singapore, the U.S., Canada, the UAE, Denmark, the UK... and the Philippines.

I heard applause in my head, as if the whole country was rooting for me.

That moment gave me both clarity and courage. Maybe this is where I am meant to go next. Perhaps this is the question I am finally meant to explore.

Initially, I considered applying CQ only to Filipino creators. But the more I learned, the more I saw that this was not just a Filipino challenge. It is something many Southeast Asian storytellers face. We come from a region full of stories (rich, layered, and powerful), but we are still often underrepresented or misunderstood on the global stage. The CIS Bamboo Framework emerged as a possible bridge between that richness and international resonance.

So, I widened the lens. I started connecting the dots.

This book, *Culturally Intelligent Storytelling for Southeast Asian Creators: A Framework for Crafting Narratives That Resonate Across Cultures*, is the culmination of this effort. It became my official project as a CQ Fellow, which they refer to as a "CQ Solution." But beyond that, it became a personal journey. A year of reading, reflecting, mapping out patterns, and looking back at my own experiences in content creation.

This book does not claim to have all the answers. It is still a work in progress. But maybe it can offer something we have all been looking for: a way to tell stories that resonate beyond our borders without losing the cultural identity that makes them ours.

To my fellow Southeast Asian creators and media leaders: this book is for you. Not as a blueprint, but as a bridge. Not as a prescription, but as permission.

We all have the power to reinvent ourselves. And sometimes, that starts with a question.

Let us build stories that travel and still feel like home. Because when our stories cross borders without losing their soul, we do not just entertain; we connect. We transform.

— Ned Legaspi

Introduction | A Southeast Asian Storytelling Journey Across Cultures

Halo. Sawasdee. Mabuhay. Selamat datang.

Stories shape how the world understands itself. They build empathy, identity, and memory. Yet not all stories move with equal strength. Some cross oceans; others never leave their shores.

In today's streaming age, everyone can publish, but visibility does not always mean resonance. Algorithms favor what feels familiar. Stories from smaller regions, even when creative and original, often fade under the weight of dominant cultural patterns. This imbalance affects Southeast Asia in particular, an area rich in storytelling traditions but still learning how to navigate global systems built elsewhere.

During the years I spent working with creators, I noticed a recurring pattern. Many were adapting their stories for international appeal, often softening their own cultural rhythm in the process. Others were waiting for validation from outside before believing their own narratives could stand on their own. These patterns led to the same outcome: strong ideas that lost identity on their way to the world.

This book is written to help reverse that pattern.



What This Book Offers

It combines **cultural theory** and **story practice** into a guide that helps creators balance both. The ideas here do not replace your creative intuition; they strengthen it by adding cultural awareness and empathy.

The book unfolds in three parts:

1. **Part One: Understanding the Landscape**
Explores why Southeast Asian stories struggle to travel and

what barriers (invisibility, outside authorship, over-adaptation) stand in the way. It also examines what's working globally and what opportunities exist now.

2. **Part Two: Cultural Intelligence for Storytellers** Introduces CQ (Cultural Intelligence) and shows how it deepens creative understanding. You'll learn about the Iceberg of Culture, the ten cultural dimensions that shape how stories are received, and the cultural clusters that define global audiences.
3. **Part Three: The CIS Bamboo Framework** Demonstrates how to apply CQ to the storytelling process through four stages: **StoryRoot** (grounding your story culturally), **StoryCraft** (shaping it for resonance), **StoryPulse** (sensing what travels), and **StoryLeaf** (listening to how it's received).

Each part builds on the other. You can read sequentially or explore sections that match your current project.



A note on the epigraphs: Each chapter opens with a quote chosen to mirror the book's journey. Southeast Asian proverbs anchor the opening and closing chapters, a full circle that reflects the heart of this work. In between, the voices of cultural scholars, global storytellers, and wisdom traditions from every corner of the world remind us that culturally intelligent storytelling is both a local practice and a universal conversation.



Who This Book Is For

This book is for:

- **Storytellers** (writers, directors, producers) creating narratives rooted in Southeast Asian cultures
- **Media executives** shaping content strategy, acquisition, or distribution
- **Creative professionals** (editors, development teams, showrunners) helping stories reach audiences beyond their origin

Whether you're based in the region or part of the diaspora, if you're asking "*How do I tell my story in a way that travels without losing its soul?*", this book is for you.



The Goal

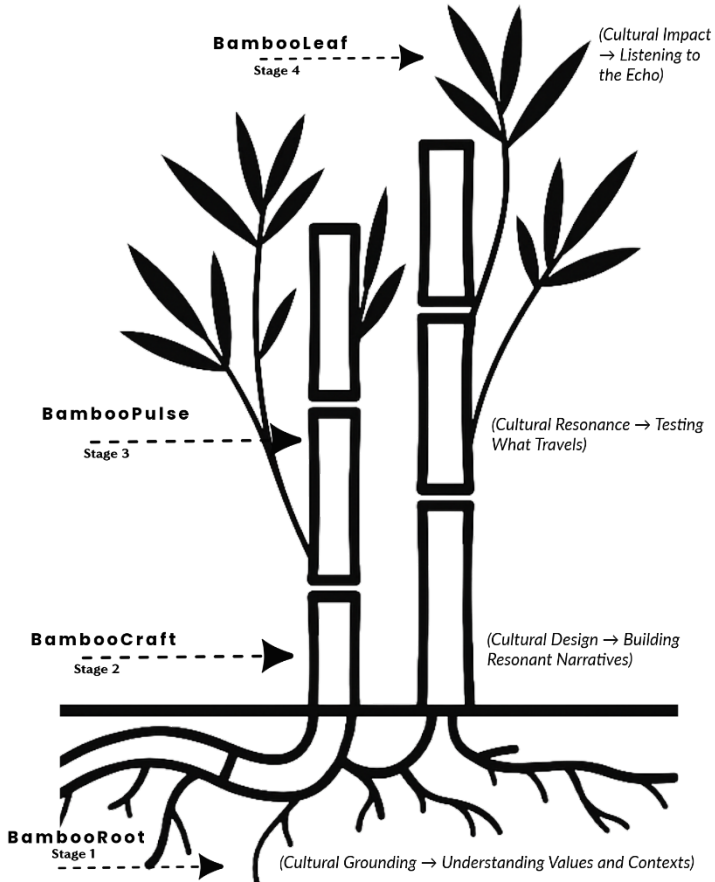
The goal is simple: **to tell stories that the world can feel without losing the truth of their origin.**

When creators understand culture as both anchor and bridge, their stories begin to travel naturally.

Now, let's turn the page and begin.

The CIS Bamboo Framework Overview

Each stage aligns with a CQ capability (Knowledge, Strategy, Action, Drive).
Cultural Values inform StoryRoot. Cultural Clusters inform StoryCraft and StoryPulse.



The CIS Bamboo Framework visualizes how stories grow from cultural grounding (StoryRoot) to cultural impact (StoryLeaf), guided by Cultural Intelligence and informed by Cultural Values and Cultural Clusters.

Chapter 31 | From Iceberg to Bamboo

A Southeast Asian Shift in Story Strategy

“We tell ourselves stories to live.”

— Joan Didion

In Part Two, we explored the foundational tools of Cultural Intelligence (CQ), a set of ideas and models that help us understand how culture shapes behavior, communication, and storytelling.

We delved deeply into the Iceberg of Culture, the ten cultural value dimensions, and the ten global cultural clusters. Together, these provided us with a solid CQ Knowledge base, an essential map of how different cultures perceive the world.

But CQ is more than knowledge. It’s more than theory. It’s more than observation. CQ is also a strategy.

And strategy asks a different set of questions:

What do I do with what I now understand?

How can I navigate culture intentionally, rather than accidentally?

How can I create in ways that resonate without erasing who I am?

This is where we now turn.



From Knowing to Creating

CQ Strategy is the third capability in the CQ model. It’s what bridges cultural understanding with culturally intelligent action. It’s the inner voice that reflects, recalibrates, and realigns before we engage.

And in storytelling, strategy means asking:

- How do I shape this narrative in a way that honors where it comes from?
- How do I choose what to emphasize, localize, or reframe?

- How do I design a story that can travel without losing its root?

That's what Part Three is all about.

It's the application of CQ, not from a corporate or diplomatic standpoint, but from the perspective of a creator, a storyteller, a culture-shaper.



Why the Iceberg Was Just the Beginning

The iceberg gave us something powerful: A way to look beneath behavior and see values. A metaphor that helped us understand why people act the way they do.

But icebergs are cold. They are silent. They are isolated. And they are not from here.

In Southeast Asia, we do not live near icebergs. We live among bamboo.



Why Bamboo Makes More Sense

Bamboo surrounds us, in our homes, kitchens, dances, instruments, even metaphors. It's not rare. It's not ornamental. It's ours.

It bends but doesn't break. It grows in clusters. It rises fast, but only after rooting deep. It is quiet, resilient, and communal.

And so, we offer a different metaphor. One that grows from the same CQ spirit, but is told in a voice that feels like home.

This is the CIS Bamboo Framework: A storytelling strategy cultivated in Southeast Asia.

A way to tell stories that are rooted, flexible, and resonant.



We don't need to fit our stories into foreign molds. We don't need to abandon what makes them local to make them travel.

Instead, we can grow where we're planted and let the story reach upward and outward from there.

This is the work of culturally intelligent storytelling. In the chapters ahead, we'll explore how.

Chapter 32 | The Bamboo Worldview

Rooted. Flexible. Grown Together.

“A writer must reflect and interpret his society, his world; he must also provide inspiration and guidance.”

— Chinua Achebe

If the CIS Bamboo Framework is the system, then this is its soul.

Before we jump into the stages of culturally intelligent storytelling, we pause here to anchor ourselves not in a set of tools or templates, but in a way of seeing. A way of being. A way of growing stories.

This is the Bamboo Worldview, a Southeast Asian perspective that shapes not just what we create, but also how we navigate the creative world.



We Live Among Bamboo

In Southeast Asia, bamboo is not exotic. It is not decoration. It is everywhere. It grows by our rivers, lines our roads, holds up our homes, cradles our infants, flavors our food, and echoes in our music. We sit on it. We cook in it. We build with it. We rest in its shade.

We don't marvel at it. We live with it.

And in that quiet familiarity lies a profound wisdom. Because bamboo doesn't just support our structures. It models a way of life that can shape how we tell stories.

Bamboo teaches us how to tell stories: quietly, powerfully, together.

Of course, bamboo may have different meanings across Southeast Asia. In some places, it may symbolize home; in others, ceremony, survival, or adaptability. That's the beauty of it. It flexes to meet the culture it grows in. As you explore this worldview, take what resonates. Let the metaphor bend with you.

A Philosophy in Four Rhythms

This worldview isn't prescriptive. It doesn't come with bullet points or formulas. But if we listen, bamboo teaches us four key rhythms for storytelling.

These rhythms don't come from theory. They come from lived experience. And like bamboo itself, they continue to grow.

1. Rootedness

Stories that matter grow from where you stand.

Bamboo shoots take time before they rise. For years, they grow unseen, downward until the roots are strong enough to support the height they will one day reach.

So must our stories.

They don't have to be loud first. Or universal first. Or marketable first. They must be true to our communities, our ancestors, and our lived realities.

Rootedness doesn't trap you. It grounds you.

2. Flexibility

Strength doesn't come from rigidity.

In typhoons and floods, bamboo bends. It sways. It survives. In contrast, the stiff and proud trees often fall.

Flexibility in storytelling means holding our truth firmly, but lightly. It means adapting how we frame, package, or communicate, without snapping the soul of the story.

This is how culturally intelligent storytelling works: strong at the center, responsive at the edges.

3. Interconnection

We grow in groves.

Bamboo never grows alone. It thrives in clusters, connected by a shared root system beneath the soil. What affects one shoot affects the others.

Southeast Asian stories are often communal. We speak in we. Family, community, country, and kin shape us. This is not a weakness. This is our pulse.

When we tell stories from this place, they don't just speak for one character. They echo a collective heartbeat.

4. Resonance Over Reach

Bamboo doesn't chase the sky. It climbs with rhythm.

Western paradigms often equate success with speed, scale, and spectacle. But bamboo grows in rhythm. It doesn't rush, but it multiplies. One stalk becomes many. Quietly. Persistently.

This is what we aim for, not just reach, but resonance.

Not just more views, but deeper impact.

Let the story travel in its own time, to the places it's meant to reach. And perhaps even beyond the places we imagined.

Bamboo Is a Worldview, Not Just a Metaphor

The CIS Bamboo Framework is more than a Southeast Asian spin on a Western model. It's a reclamation. A reframing. A reminder that we don't have to flatten our stories to make them global.

This is not a guarantee. It's a beginning. One rooted in the belief that we can grow from where we stand and see how far that might take us, together.

While this metaphor is rooted in Southeast Asia, its rhythms may echo elsewhere. We hope it inspires other regions to explore their

own grounded ways of creating. This is for Southeast Asia, but we offer it with open hands, not closed borders.

And when we storytell with the Bamboo Worldview, we do more than entertain. We restore. We resist. We remind.

We become culture-shapers, not just content-makers.

In the next chapter, we'll explore how this worldview takes shape as a practical framework.

But before we build with bamboo, we begin by honoring the wisdom within it.

Chapter 33 | The CIS Bamboo Framework

A New Way to Tell Stories That Travel Without Losing Their Roots

“All sorrows can be borne if you put them into a story.”
Isak Dinesen — Karen Blixen

Where Culture Meets Craft

After exploring the building blocks of Cultural Intelligence (CQ), from the Iceberg of Culture to the Ten Cultural Dimensions and Global Cultural Clusters, you might be wondering:

"How do I actually apply all of this to my own stories?"

This is where the CIS Bamboo Framework takes root. It’s not just a method. It’s a Southeast Asian approach to storytelling. But how does it connect to the broader Cultural Intelligence Strategy we explored earlier?

Let’s briefly map the connection:

CQ Strategy (General)	CIS Bamboo Strategy (Localized)
Strategic reflection	StoryRoot
Sensemaking/planning	StoryCraft
Anticipation & adaptation	StoryPulse
Action & influence	StoryPulse

This reinforces that the CIS Bamboo Framework is not a detour from CQ Strategy, but a localized path that lets Southeast Asian creators apply it in a way that’s natural, grounded, and culturally resonant.

What makes this framework different? It doesn’t ask you to flatten, erase, or dilute your culture. It offers a way to grow your stories upward and outward without uprooting who you are.



The CIS Bamboo Framework as a Bamboo Stalk

Think of your story as a bamboo stalk, simple, elegant, rooted in soil but reaching skyward. Each stage mirrors a part of the bamboo and a part of your creative process:

1. StoryRoot

Bamboo Part: The Rhizome (underground root system)

Function: Anchors the stalk, nourishes growth, invisible but essential



Story Message:

This is where everything begins. Your story's cultural DNA, core values, and lived experiences live here. Like rhizomes, they may be hidden, but they feed everything above the surface.

Ask yourself:

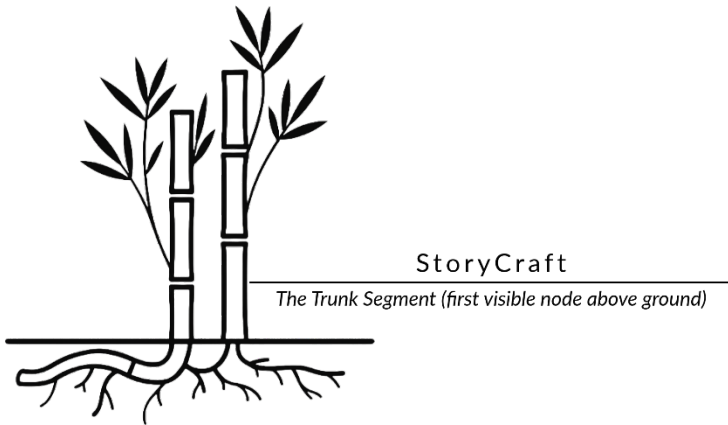
- "What truths do I carry?"
- "What shaped my voice before I shaped the story?"



2. StoryCraft

Bamboo Part: The Trunk Segment (first visible node above ground)

Function: Provides form and structure, connects the root to the rest



Story Message:

This is where cultural awareness meets storytelling skill. You shape your narrative, its arcs, characters, tension, and pace, while staying rooted in who you are.

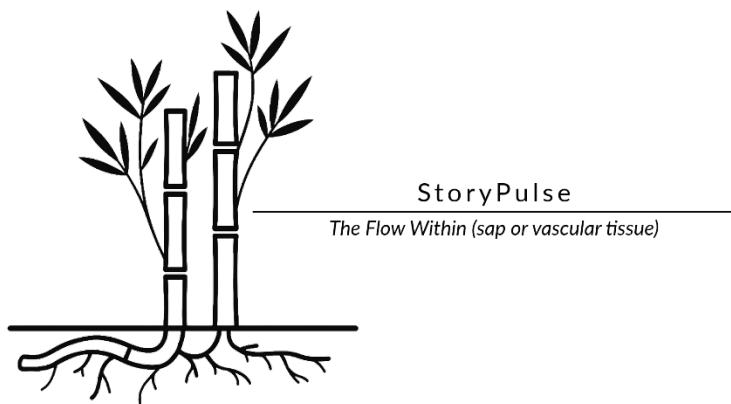
Ask yourself:

- “How do I build this story without flattening it?”
- “What choices reflect both my craft and my culture?”

3. StoryPulse

Bamboo Part: The Flow Within (sap or vascular tissue)

Function: Transports energy from the root to the tip, keeping everything alive



Story Message:

This is your story's emotional rhythm, its ability to resonate across cultures. You're not guessing. You're listening for where the story might pulse with life in unexpected places.

Ask yourself:

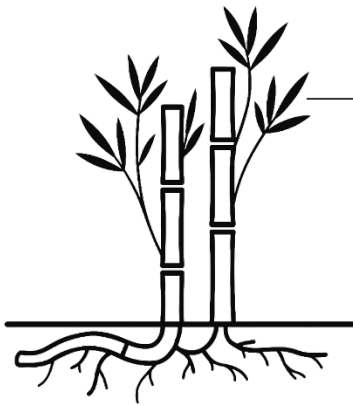
- "Who might feel this story first?"
- "Where could this pulse travel naturally, without explanation?"



4. StoryLeaf

Bamboo Part: The Leaves and Tips

Function: Where the story touches the world, catching light, releasing breath, and making meaning visible



StoryLeaf

The Leaves and Tips

Story Message:

This is your story in the wild, how it's seen, remembered, and shared.

The leaf is not just the end of growth; it's the part that breathes, reaches, and transforms light into life.

It tells you:

What stayed with people long after the credits rolled

What meanings were made that you didn't expect

How your story became part of someone else's world

Ask yourself:

- “What part of the story lingered in people's minds or hearts?”
- “What did audiences carry with them whether quote, post, or retell?”
- “What grew beyond the story I first imagined?”

We've now laid the groundwork. Not with rules, but with rhythms.
Not with templates, but with truths.

The CIS Bamboo Framework begins not with plotting or pitching, but with planting. Before any story can rise, it must first be rooted deeply, honestly, and intentionally.

And so, we begin where all stories should: underground.

Welcome to StoryRoot.

About the Author

Ned Legaspi is a Cultural Intelligence Consultant and creator of The Bamboo CQ Framework, a Southeast Asian approach to Cultural Intelligence for the Human + AI Era.

He spent three decades at ABS-CBN Global/The Filipino Channel (TFC), where he led international content strategy, programming, digital curation, and operations for audiences across five continents. His leadership in diaspora storytelling and cross-cultural media shaped his lifelong inquiry into what makes stories travel and truly resonate.

After retiring from corporate media, Ned founded Nedlegs Incorporated, a boutique consultancy that helps storytellers, educators, and organizations craft culturally intelligent narratives and communication strategies. His work bridges storytelling, cultural adaptation, and inclusive leadership through three pathways: Story, Culture, and Care.

In 2024, he was named a CQ® Fellow by the Cultural Intelligence Center, joining a global cohort of practitioners and thought leaders mentored by Dr. David Livermore.

Ned is pursuing his PhD in Philippine Studies (Socio-Cultural Track) at the University of the Philippines Diliman, where his dissertation centers on *Culturally Intelligent Storytelling* and the CIS Bamboo Framework. He has presented this work in academic conferences across Asia, Europe, and North America, including the University of Tokyo, National Vietnam University, SOAS London, Texas A&M University–San Antonio, and the University of Pittsburgh.

He speaks Filipino, English, French, Spanish, and a bit of Ilocano. He lives with four Cavalier King Charles Spaniels, each a different color of the breed, because he believes every story deserves a full spectrum.

Explore More Resources

Visit nedlegaspi.com for articles, talks, consulting, and the author's ongoing work in cultural intelligence.

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**HOW DO STORIES ROOTED IN SOUTHEAST ASIAN
CULTURE TRAVEL ACROSS GLOBAL AUDIENCES
WITHOUT LOSING THEIR AUTHENTICITY?**

Culturally Intelligent Storytelling equips Southeast Asian creators with a practical framework for crafting narratives that resonate across cultures. Drawing from lived experience, cultural intelligence research, and global case studies, this book bridges tradition and innovation to help authentic stories cross borders successfully.

Ned Legaspi is a Cultural Intelligence Fellow and consultant who has completed 30 years of experience in global media, cultural engagement, and narrative strategy. He helps creators, educators, and leaders in Southeast Asia and beyond craft stories that connect deeply with diverse audiences.



Learn more at
nedlegaspi.com

"Ned Legaspi brings the science of cultural intelligence to the art of storytelling. This isn't a one-size-fits-all model--it's a powerful framework that helps creators craft stories that travel across borders while staying true to their cultural roots."

—David Livermore, Ph.D., author of *Leading with Cultural Intelligence* and Founder of CQ Fellows



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