

Words of Wisdom for Building to Eternity: An Interview with African-centered Psychologist Linda James Myers

by

Sekhmet Ra Em Kht Maat
(Cher Love McAllister)

Linda James Myers (myers.19@osu.edu) is Associate Professor in the Department of African American and African Studies at The Ohio State University. With her development of the theory of Optimal Psychology in her groundbreaking text, *Understanding an Afrocentric World View: Introduction to an Optimal Psychology* (Kendall Hunt Publishing, 1988) and as a past president of the Association of Black Psychologists (ABPsi), along with numerous publications in the areas of psychology and spiritual identity development, Dr. Myers is considered one of the leading scholars and a pioneer in the field of African-centered/ Africana Psychology. Her articles have been published in the *Journal of Black Psychology*, *Journal of Black Studies* and *Journal of Counseling and Development*. She is also author of *Our Health Matters* (Ohio Commission on Minority Health, 2003) and *Blessed Assurance: Deep Thought and Meditations in the Tradition and Wisdom of Our Ancestors* (Institute for Optimal Transformation and Leadership, 2004) and co-editor of *Re-Centering Culture and Knowledge in Conflict Resolution Practice* (Syracuse University Press, 2008). Dr. Myers received her Ph.D. in Clinical Psychology from The Ohio State University; she has earned several honors and awards for her contributions and service in the field including the honor of Distinguished Psychologist of the Association of Black Psychologists and the Bethune/Woodson Award for Outstanding Contributions in the Development and Promotion of Black Studies from the National Council of Black Studies. Dr. Myers' most recent research focus includes utilizing optimal theory to conduct an Afrogenic examination of cosmopolitanism as the legacy of the field of Black Studies and method for achieving universal tolerance, understanding, and appreciation. This interview seeks to honor her years of dedication to the field of African-centered/Africana Psychology and the discipline of African American Studies. The following questions were constructed April 29, 2010 by Sekhmet Ra Em Kht Maat and answered May 13, 2010 by Linda James Myers.

Sekhmet Ra Em Kht Maat (cmcallister@unomaha.edu) is an Assistant Professor of Black Studies at the University of Nebraska Omaha. Receiving a Ph.D. in African American Studies from Temple University, her major research areas include Asantean Afrocentric philosophy and African metaphysics as theory and research approach for Africology.



Words of Wisdom for Building to Eternity

Sekhmet Ra Em Kht Maat (SM): Thank you very much for taking time out of your busy schedule to participate in this interview. As one of our intellectual elders in the field of African-centered/ Africana Psychology and African American Studies, it is an honor to include your voice within this special edition of the *Journal of Pan African Studies (JPAS)* on African-centered/Africana Psychology.

Linda James Myers (LJM): It is my pleasure. Thank you so very much for your interest and for honoring my scholarly contributions with this interview.

SM: As you are indeed one of the early architects, theorists and practitioners in the field of African-centered psychology/Africana Psychology, what is your perspective on the definition, purpose and scope of African-centered/Africana psychology and in what ways has the field evolved since its early construction during the 1970s?

LJM: The evolution of the field has been amazing to watch and experience. In so many ways it is the unfolding history of those descendants of captured and enslaved Africans in the Americas committed to self-determination and liberation, particularly liberation of the African mind. So in many ways I do not see significant change in purpose, but certainly an expansion in scope, primarily in terms of deeper understanding and insight, fuller, more comprehensive knowledge, and being more consciously guided by greater wisdom in the tradition of our ancestors.

As you know we began in the early 1970's speaking in terms of Black psychology. I was a graduate student in clinical psychology at the time and had the utmost respect for those Black psychologists who had the courage and confidence to stand up and speak out about the incapacity of mainstream western psychology to meet the mental health needs of people acknowledging African descent, and to withdraw from the American Psychological Association, which has historically controlled the professional field. The graduate program I had chosen had faculty with research interests in the insufficiencies of mainstream western psychology, so I was able to do my general examination research on African cultural ideology and helping systems. I was particularly interested in exploring how deviance was defined and treated across the continent, so I was able to travel to all regions except central Africa to learn two characteristics of shared African cultural ideology. When deviance or unacceptable behavior was identified, it was the group, not the individual per se who was identified as having a problem. The marker of a successful response to deviance was the reintegration of the so-called deviant back into the group with a sense of obligation and responsibility to the greater good of the whole, the opposite of the approach of mainstream western psychology.

Early on, much time was spent critiquing mainstream western psychology, analyzing its deficiencies, its (in)capacity to meet the mental health needs of people acknowledging African descent, and the negative consequences of mis-education. Having made that analysis and aware of our own cultural realities and experiences, for many of us bringing forward a psychology grounded in African cultural realities, experiences, and tradition was essential. By the late seventies I had developed a Black model of psychological functioning called a "Oneness model," which sought to analyze and build upon the unity of the sacred and the secular in African cultural traditions throughout the Diaspora and on the continent. I understood that it was spiritual acuity that allowed for a unified veracity and fostered the transcendence necessary to endure over four centuries of a dehumanizing, disenfranchising social context. The Black for me in Black psychology meant more than a racial designation, but also self-determination and the suitable name for a psychology that represented all that black symbolized, the absorption of all of the energies and colors of the spectrum into One, all of humanity into One. It is from this backdrop that I developed the theory of Optimal Psychology (OP).

There is literature that has referenced Afro-American psychology, and today, African American psychology. So the evolution of Black psychology over the past forty years has been consistent with ethnic identity development in the larger population, as might be expected. Defining African-centered psychology/ Africana psychology is pretty straight forward for me, although African-centered psychology/ Africana psychology is not homogenous. I like the definition adopted by The Association of Black Psychologists; it suits my work well, as a system of thought and action that examines the processes allowing for the illumination and liberation of the Spirit. African-centered psychology as put forward by ABPsi recognizes the Spirit that permeates everything that is and the notion that everything in the universe is interconnected.

Optimal theory contributes to African psychology an analysis of and insights into the higher stages of human development based on ancestral understandings of what it means to be human in the wisdom tradition of African deep thought. So as a field, Black psychology has evolved quite steadily from deconstructing mainstream western psychology to providing an Afrogenic understanding of humanity that theorizes divine consciousness. The goal must be people acknowledging African descent wielding human agency and experiencing themselves as the sacred authorities that they are and must be for the creation of a just, sacred, sustainable world.

SM: You are currently an Associate Professor in African American and African Studies at The Ohio State University. What would you suggest has been the relationship between the field of African-centered /Africana Psychology and the discipline of African American Studies, and what future direction do you see for the field within the discipline?

LJM: Interesting question; I have had the opportunity to do a longitudinal study of Africana Studies over the past thirty plus years at one of the largest public universities in the country. I must tell you that the path of the discipline has not been easy, but it has been relatively predictable given the social context, nature of the institutional structures within which we are seeking to establish the discipline, and the impact of such environments on the African psyche. Being of the generation of Black students who fought for space within the academy in which our cultural realities and experiences, and those of our ancestors could be given voice, I recognize and appreciate the aim of developing a discipline in which the analysis would not be made as through the eyes of the other, but rather through our own Africana eyes. Although Africana Studies on most campuses was born of protest and demand, Africana Studies scholars have taken different approaches to the field, its mission, and methods of negotiating institutional structures for collective good and/or personal gain. African-centered/Africana psychology is dedicated to the liberation of the African mind and illumination of the African spirit; it encourages critical self-reflection and introspection, social activism, and examination of all aspects of human functioning and the human psyche. None of these thrusts have been the agenda of the western academy, and given the academy's disciplinary structure and the nature of its system of rewards, scholars in most fields are typically given to focus on the disciplines in which they were trained and their specific research endeavors, rather than development of the discipline of Africana Studies in their area of training. It has been and will continue to be interesting to observe the trends in the discipline as more and more scholars are produced from doctoral programs in Africana Studies.

Most of the African world is very skeptical of psychology as a discipline, for example you will not find it being taught in most universities in Africa, save in South Africa. Mistrust of mainstream western psychology is justified given its mental health professionals have a history of labeling as pathological the healthy, efficacious behaviors of African descent people (e.g. suffering from draptemania if as a captured and enslaved African you tried to escape). Similarly, some pathological, self destructive behaviors on the part of African descent people have been sanctioned as exemplary.

However, this history makes more urgent the need to devote some time and attention to what it means to be mentally healthy as people acknowledging African descent, the consequences of living in a social context in which you and your group are systematically devalued and disenfranchised, as well as account for the enduring resilience and spiritual vibrancy of African descent people. Recognizing the significance of psychological knowledge and its relevance for insight, empowerment, liberation, and self-determination among African people throughout the Diaspora and Africa, some Africana Studies programs have been quite receptive to African-centered/Africana psychology.

Given that we might anticipate continued assault on people acknowledging African descent, now in a color blind form which is even more psychologically damaging, I anticipate the field of Africana psychology within the discipline will stay the course. In addition, with the trend in the academy toward trans-disciplinary and issues focused study, Africana psychology is well positioned to provide much needed insights and perspectives on understanding the human psyche, fostering human development, and improving the human condition by overcoming the psychological impact of phenomena such as mis-education, internalized oppression, intellectual imperialism, and the continued trauma imposed by social injustice and inequity. If the discipline is to be sustainable, it must maintain relevance. Africana psychology positions the discipline to offer African descent people the analysis, knowledge, understandings, insights and processes, needed for them to heal and take their rightful place in human history, as well as, places the discipline at the cutting edge of the neo-subjective science called for by quantum theorists. Thus, the future looks quite promising, as we continue to produce knowledge, practices, processes, and structures to meet our own needs.

SM: Within your major writings you often use the term Afrocentric worldview. Can you explain the significance of the term Afrocentric worldview, and if this term differs from the African worldview?

LJM: Yes, in my earlier writing I do use the term Afrocentric worldview instead of African worldview. It reflects the evolution of my thinking as my research and the literature has evolved in Africana psychology. Afrocentric was for me the acknowledgement that the frame of reference was rooted in the cultural deep structure of African tradition, as well as the sacrifices and contributions of non-immigrant Africans in the Americas who endured the Maafa so that we might be. As research into the characteristics of an African worldview has revealed congruence across time and space, I have been able to adopt that language in the appropriate contexts as well. The term Afrocentric as used by Africana psychologist bespeaks a scholarly orientation that is dynamic, and as knowledge grows so does its languaging and applications in different relevant contexts.

SM: Within your major text, *Understanding an Afrocentric World View: Introduction to an Optimal Psychology*, you introduce readers to an optimal conceptual system and optimal psychology. Can you discuss for us the parameters and purpose of this system and psychological theory?

LJM: With pleasure; I can give you a condensed form of the grand theory. After critiquing mainstream western psychology it was evident what was missing was an understanding of human functioning comprehensive enough to include the earliest historical records of our ancestors' ancient teachings as well as the understandings now being confirmed by quantum and neuroscience. Further, an analysis and framework was needed to increase our understanding of not only the problems of human development, but also what health, well being and the higher stages of human, moral and spiritual development are in a coherent, cohesive formulation. Consistent with an African cultural worldview, Optimal Psychology (OP) concedes that everything, including humans, is spirit, that incorporeal, animating principle and vibratory energy that is the essence and sustenance of all that is. Thus in OP the question of who we are as humans has been answered by the awareness we are Spirit; one of the questions OP seeks to inform and answer is how are we Divine Spirit, since that was our ancestors' understanding, and the understanding around which the heights of knowledge across cultural groups seem to be converging, irrespective of the route taken to get there. The requirement of OP is to build upon the teachings and insights of previous generations to find the best for creating and sustaining a just and sacred world here in now. Theorizing divine consciousness, OP seeks insight into how the consciousness of human beings might function as one with Supreme Being, as our African ancestors taught, how African metaphysics can be understood and applied in contemporary context.

OP posits that if the purpose of human beingness is realizing union with Supreme Being, and what the heart feels, mind thinks, and tongue speaks causes all perceptions to come forth as the ancient sacred texts teach, realization can be facilitated by adopting a holistic, integrative conceptual system as the optimal (if one values peace, harmony, justice, truth, reciprocity, righteousness, and natural order) medium for structuring reality and viewing the world. Juxtaposed against the fragmented, discontinuous suboptimal conceptual system and worldview into which most people have been and are being socialized and acculturated, the increased sense of peace, well being, and capacity for resilience can be readily discerned. As the capacity for both optimal and suboptimal functioning exists within each human being, I have developed an optimization process and strategy whereby progress toward unity consciousness can be achieved.

Optimal psychology teaches how we create reality and can wield the power within us through many forces not recognized in the fragmented materialist worldview to achieve our purpose and destiny. Oppression and control of the African mind is maintained by the intellectual imperialism and conceptual incarceration imposed by a suboptimal cultural worldview widely adopted by the captors of African people and their progeny. Optimal psychology does not fear to examine the lapses in and weaknesses of African cultural traditions that contributed to the Maafa and the role of other Africans as collaborators.

The purpose of negativity in human experience based on optimal theory is to serve as a mechanism for growth and edification toward realization of unity consciousness, that is Oneness with Supreme Being. Serving that purpose, human beings may not always have control over what happens to them, but they always have control over the meaning they make of it and how they feel about it. Thus OP seeks to interrogate how to maximize positivity in human experience.

SM: In your texts *Blessed Assurance* and *Our Health Matters*, it seems that you present a very practical approach to healing the self and our communities. Can you describe for us how Africana peoples can use these texts as source methodology for healing in this age of hyper-cyberspace, globalization and western outsourcing?

LJM: *Our Health Matters* is actually a training guide developed from a multi-level community participatory research/demonstration project designed to explore the creation of a climate and culture of optimal health in African descent communities. I prepared the guide so that it could be used individually or collectively in study groups. It provides a lot of background information and research on health and health disparities in our communities, but most importantly it provides a model and process for improving our ability to think for ourselves outside the confines of the youngest cultural tradition in the trajectory of human history and embrace a more effective and sustainable way of being in the world. Many people are unaware of the social engineering underway shaping our perceptions, thinking and experience, leaving people vulnerable and at risk to oppression, manipulation, and disease. Medical history has shown that African Americans were at their best in terms of health indicators when we were fighting for our civil rights; *Our Health Matter* offers guidance and direction for getting back on track to good health.

Blessed Assurance was my response to the frequent request on the part of people interested in Optimal Psychology to help them in the area of their personal spiritual development. Pondering the best strategies in terms of an Afrogenic perspective and based on some research I had been doing on non-immigrant African Americans' spiritual traditions, I developed a book of fifty-two meditations to foster increased Self-knowledge based on the wisdom of our African ancestors and their sacred texts. I use Biblical scriptures in the text to help reinforce and make the principle ideas more accessible. Realizing that although this kind of scholarship may step outside the bounds of mainstream western psychology, it fit perfectly within the cultural frame of African-centered psychology and was essential to meeting the needs people had expressed regarding their desires and attempts to move toward liberation, illumination, and self-determination.

SM: Edward Bruce Bynum, in his text, *African Unconscious: Roots of Ancient Mysticism and Modern Psychology*, relies extensively on your optimal conceptual systems theory to exemplify the contours and qualities of an ancient psychology, which for him ultimately informs modern western psychological theories and praxis. Discuss the extent to which you perceive that African-centered psychology has begun to inform other fields of psychology and if this should be one of the major objectives of the field?

LJM: Even though African-centered psychology has begun to inform many areas in psychology, as with other fields of study within the Africana Studies discipline, the contributions of our scholars are often not acknowledged, nor our work cited in mainstream literature. It is not unlike what happens with the proverbial example of sexism in the board meeting. A woman makes a point and no one seems to hear. A few minutes later, a man says exactly the same thing and everyone marvels at the great idea that has been shared, as if heard for the first time. This marginalization of African-centered psychology is problematic, but I am not sure if one of the major objectives should be to inform other fields in mainstream psychology. That fertilization will continue to happen, and in time we will be given our due recognition, but we cannot be distracted from our moral imperative to liberate and illuminate the African mind.

SM: One of your recent articles written with Ezemenari M. Obasi and Lisa Y. Flores is entitled “Construction and Initial Validation of the Worldview Analysis Scale (WAS)”. Can you give us an overview of the purpose of this article, and second, discuss with us the significance of this work in relationship to not only the field of African-centered/Africana psychology, but what you have referred to in previous writings as “humanities fullest potential”?

LJM: One of the challenges to African psychology in the context of mainstream western psychology in the academy and research funding opportunities are the limitations imposed by the prevailing cultural episteme. The requirement to quantify and make evident through counting, measuring and manipulating the constructs about which we speak, usually through paper and pencil measures, is the only path to ‘knowing’ the dominant culture recognizes. Obasi’s Worldview Analysis Scale was designed to fill a major void in the research literature for an instrument to measure African cultural worldview, which WAS has the potential to do. However, the utility of the WAS begs the larger question, which is the problematic nature of the primary episteme of the western social science academy. It would not be so problematic if it yielded valid answers to important questions that could be applied as solutions to the plethora of problems facing humanity. Rather, the typical yield of most social science research is that more research is needed. In my opinion humanity’s fullest potential cannot and will not be reached in this manner. As the field of African-centered/ Africana psychology expands to follow its own epistemological designs, it will promote its own system of knowing using its own tools.

SM: As past president of the Association of Black Psychologists, can you explain for us the objectives of the organization and the positive relationship the members of this organization have with the overall development of the field of African-centered psychology, as well as the challenges that the organization faces as it attempts to meet the developing psychological needs of Africana people?

LJM: The Association of Black Psychologists has adopted a definition of African-centered psychology that I endorse, which speaks to many of the points you have raised. Defining African-centered psychology as,

“a dynamic manifestation of unifying African principles, values, and traditions that are reflected within broader Pan-African or transcultural communities, it is seen as the self-conscious ‘centering’ of psychological analyses and applications in African realities, cultures, and epistemologies. African-centered psychology, as a system of thought and action, examines the processes that allow for the illumination and liberation of the Spirit. Relying on the principles of harmony within the universe as a natural order of existence, African-centered psychology recognizes: the Spirit that permeates everything that is; the notion that everything in the universe is interconnected; the value that the collective is the most salient element of existence; and the idea that communal self knowledge is the key to mental health. African psychology is ultimately concerned with understanding the systems of meaning of human Beingness, the features of human functioning, and the restoration of normal/natural order to human development. As such, it is used to resolve personal and social problems and to promote optimal functioning.”

Again the challenges facing African descent people all over the world tend to be the same when they seek self-determination. The Association of Black Psychologists are not a homogeneous group, but we are a collective of professionals committed to the health and well being of African people, however we understand it. From an optimal African-centered perspective we want each in their own way to contribute to the greater good of the whole.

SM: Although it is evident that your contributions and the work of Marcia Sutherland, Cheryl Grills, Afi Sutherland and several other Africana women psychologists continue to help shape the field, most of the major theorists cited within the field of African-centered/Africana Psychology are Africana men. What are the challenges that Africana women face within the development of the field, and what are words of encouraging wisdom for the next generation of Africana women psychologists and psychological theorists?

LJM: We know that sexism is alive and well in this society and most of the world. Yet it is time for the restoration and return of feminine principles, a balance which Africana female psychologists can bring along with their other contributions. I would say, hang in there, keep on doing the good work that you are doing, contributing what you have to contribute, and there will be Africana men and women who will recognize, acknowledge and support you and your contributions. We are the Black mothers of all human culture and civilization. We cannot lose faith or be discouraged in our efforts; we work not for the acclaim, but the salvation of our families, children and future generations. The resurgence of the Sacred Feminine is essential to the sustainability of humanity.

SM: What is the place of the psychology of sexuality and gender within African African-centered/Africana Psychology?

LJM: While the psychology of sexuality and gender is not my specific area or research interest, as long as there are questions to be answered with regard to the human condition and experience, those who find that this area of research fits their purpose must pursue it fearlessly. To the extent an African worldview is adopted in the analysis, such examinations should make significant contribution to the field.

SM: Given that this special issue of the *Journal of Pan African Studies* seeks to contribute to the body of literature and ideas for praxis in African-centered/Africana Psychology, what key themes and initiatives should up and coming African-centered/Africana Psychologists and psychological theorists pursue for not only the future direction of the field, but for the healing of our Africana communities in very practical ways?

LJM: In my humble opinion the key themes and initiatives up and coming African-centered/Africana psychologists and psychological theorists should pursue in terms of the future direction of the field, and for the healing of our Africana communities in very practical ways include: increasing Self-knowledge; sharpening critical and independent thinking skills; identifying the toxic features of color blind racism, and the impact of internalized racism and internalized oppression; illuminating the higher stages of human development; overcoming mentacide; increasing the personal, social and cultural capacity for moral reasoning and spiritual development; and, assisting in the cultivation of our collective abilities to distinguish between the real and unreal and right and wrong in order to render social justice, equity, and build the beloved community.

SM: On behalf of the editors and readers of *JPAS* and myself, we thank you for your words of wisdom and your willingness to take time for this interview. What are last words of advice for up and coming laborers in African-centered/Africana Psychology and African American Studies?

LJM: My pleasure, you are most welcome. You asked some tough questions that gave me pause to think. I will say to all my beloved laborers, keep up your good works until we create the just, sacred and sustainable world our ancestors are expecting of us. Remember you are building to eternity not just for what is expedient today. Be fearless in your pursuit of truth, knowledge, wisdom, understanding and insight. Learn to be in the western academy, but not of it until it becomes truly inclusive of the diversity our Africana heritage brings at the level of cultural deep structure, as well as appreciative of our much needed, though competing paradigms. Engage in your own self-knowledge processes for moral and spiritual uplift, and for the fortification needed to create stellar scholarship and build healing communities. Peace be unto you.