

**Identifying and Embracing Ourselves as Caribbean Anthropologists:  
Global Lessons We Have to Teach and Negotiate**

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Wi Kon, Wi Kon... Dya

I am a psychologist, an anthropologist, a dancer, a mother, daughter, sister, and a Lyman T. Johnson Scholar.

I am a child from Surinamese parents. I am here as an Afro-Caribbean person who grew up in the Netherlands. At the age of 18 I moved to the US where I received all my higher education schooling and training. I am saying all of this to premise the fact that I am honored to speak here, but also that I come from a certain perspective and do not have direct experience with psychology as it is practiced and trained in the Caribbean. What I know about Caribbean psychology is based on research, personal exchanges, and assumptions, so if there are some things that do not make sense, please forgive me and feel free to correct me. Take from this what you can and reject what you don't need.

In 2003 I started my dissertation research Suriname in medical anthropology. I looked at a model of mental well being among working class Afro-Surinamese people. My dissertation was a follow up to my Master's thesis in which I studied a mental health model of an African-American population in a low income community in Lexington, KY. My master's research engaged the community and their vision of mental health. I learned about how mental health is always lived and experienced within the context of community. There was a strong sense of black identity and an "us vs. them" feelings. I found the importance of informal networks, stigma, social support systems and artistic expression as essential parts of mental health. My findings changed my course. I changed from looking at "mental health" and instead started looking at the broader, more holistic concept of "mental well being".

Prior to my academic pursuits in anthropology I had worked as a therapist in a community mental health center, often with dual diagnosis populations. What I found was that my training as a clinical psychologist did not suffice. I was trained to work with white middle class people with unlimited resources, who could lay on my couch weekly, indefinitely. These were not the people that I encountered. What I had learned did not work here, but what I had learned did not suffice for white middle class people either. What was missing was the role of culture, the cultural context of people's lives and their own knowledge and patterns they brought into the engagement of their mental health. So I left the field and went back to the university to study this phenomenon of mental health and culture.

And in 2003 I started to research a model of mental well being of my own people. As a result I described a model of mental well being of the Afro-Surinamese population from Suriname, which was based in a particular history, identity, and experience of the Surinamese people. This model used Afro-Surinamese concepts and terminology. I started with the fact that how we see ourselves in the world is as an interconnected vessel. As I stand here, you may see just me, but I am connected to forces seen and unseen that contribute to who I am at any given moment. So ancestral and natural forces, family, organizations, communities, all contribute to my being. Thus in Suriname when something is wrong you are told, “go tak’ nanga yu srefi”, go have a talk with yourselves. Go somewhere quiet with a candle and a glass of water and talk. Because you might not know what is wrong with you, but one of those things that walks with you will know. I talked about “sabi yu srefi” – knowing yourself or selves, and “opo yu yeye” – lifting your spirit or “saka yu yeye”.

I talked about the role of spirituality, not just as a topic, but as a factor in methodology. We are trained as lone individuals and when you go out there and something doesn’t work out you must have messed up. I have a spiritual system that believes that my ancestors have my back, so I am never alone. So if something did not happen as planned, perhaps something else will happen in its place that is even better. And thus it sends you out there in a totally different way. I used theory from Caribbean feminists, indigenous and Iranian scholars. I placed my work within the context of African, African American and Caribbean mental health models. I found strong commonality with indigenous approaches to mental well being. **And I felt good about my work.**

I subsequently used my model, this model based in the Afro-Surinamese experience to work with African and Iraqi refugees in Lexington, Kentucky. I helped develop support programming in the local public schools and a community reading program for refugee children and their families. **And I felt good about my work.**

So what does this have to do with multiculturalism? I have been asked to talk about multiculturalism as it relates to Caribbean psychology.

I believe multiculturalism relates to our field in two ways: **through our academic training and subsequent practice; and 2. through the population that we work with.**

Indulge me an example: My son attended the Savannah College of Art and Design. I was eager for him to attend. You have some trepidations about your baby going off to college of course, but he is an artist and so finally he got to be with his people. At the introduction we were seated in a large auditorium, and Americans do a good job of making a show and getting people excited. “African American students stand up! Asian students stand up, Latino students stand up, international students stand up!” Americans have no problems pointing out ethnicities. And so they made a big show of the diversity of all the students, and it was impressive. A few weeks later he called me and told me that in his art history class they were skipping African art, Asian art and Oceanic art. They were only going to do European art history. And so there might

have been a great display of a diverse and multicultural student population, but when it comes to whose story was being told it was very clear. One story was dominant, while the others were less or invalid. And the problem is not only that my son will not learn about art representing his African heritage, everybody is shortchanged. Everybody receives an incomplete story. And consequentially a standard is set in the academy about whose story, methodology and viewpoint is valid and whose is not. The standard narrative is incomplete. And this standard narrative creates a climate of inequality, and this inequality becomes the norm.

In both my thesis and dissertation work I used materials from African, African American, Indigenous, Middle Eastern and Caribbean scholars. Their work was vital to my academic and professional development. But **none** of their work was introduced to me during my classes. Like my son, I was only introduced to the dominant narrative. I learned about Jung, Freud, Adler. I was trained to work with middle class white people. Now I did not mind learning about Jung, Freud, and so on, but the story was incomplete.

The material that reflects a multicultural population was and is out there, but it is in the margins and you have to find it on your own. Many of these scholars you will find at this conference. And if you use too many of these sources for your references you will be penalized. If you use sources that have not been sanctioned by the dominant norm, your sources will be rejected. So the multiculturalism that is presented in academics is visual. It is limited to "how many of those do we have?" When it comes to content, to our way of thinking, talking, worldviews, experiences, those things are silenced, and deemed as less or invaluable. Whose work is being published, quoted, heralded and pushed to the front?

I am glad to see that the Master's level psychology programs at universities in the Caribbean specifically address Caribbean context and scholarship, however I am not sure if that is the case in the undergraduate psychology programs. From what I have seen the undergraduate programs don't differ at all from my undergraduate training in the U.S. I also get the impression that when Caribbean scholarship and content is presented it is still presented as a supplement to the dominant model and not as a starting point, you can correct me if I am wrong. Academically the dilemma is not limited to our training, but when it comes to publishing, promotions, recognition for our work, etc. We are always measured and evaluated against a norm that doesn't start with us. I had to defend, explain, justify my research approach many times. I had to fight to claim a space for my Surinamese scholarship.

I would call my godmother, ready to pull my hair out and quit. She would listen patiently and then boost me up and told me to get back out there because my community needed me to get that diploma. I could not call my mother because she would be sick with worry if she would hear. But so we have our networks, our aunties, godmothers, friends and other that help us deal with our constant marginalization.

The dilemma we face is not only how academia and the professional field might overlook or diminish our presence. We have to understand how we are a product of this system as well. In

America we say “we all drank the poisoned coolaid”, which is a horrific reference to what happened in British Guyana under Jim Jones. But I use this metaphor because I am very serious about emphasizing our own conditioning in this system. We have to fight to be seen and heard, while questioning our own value.

Indulge me another story. In 2001 I attended my first AAA conference, the American Anthropological Association, where I presented my paper on African American mental health in a low income community. This conference was significant for me in three ways. **First**, I attended sessions with black anthropologist and couldn't really find a connection. They talked mostly about wanting to be treated like the white anthropologists. They wanted to be published, quoted, paid like the white anthropologists. And there is nothing wrong with that, but it wasn't enough. I then went to the Native American anthropologists and heard people talk about “these anthropologists should not enter our communities without our communities benefitting from them”. They specifically talked about how the profession should contribute to the well being of their communities, and I totally was able to connect with that idea. **Secondly**, I heard Ruth Behar speak, a feminist anthropologist. She stated: “I write in a way so that my mother will understand.” Those were the most profound and affirming words I had ever heard, because that is exactly what I wanted to do. **Third**, I attended the secret session. Every year there is a secret session that is not announced anywhere, where the black anthropologists gather and just talk about the racism they experience. It is a brutal session, more of a purging/witnessing session. We listen, affirm, and support each other. After you leave you think why in the heck would I want to do this profession, but I am glad I attended, because it prepared me for what I encountered out there.

Thus, **first we have to understand this academic arena and what it does with multiculturalism.** We have to understand this climate of inequality and marginalization from a content as well as our own subject matter. We must learn to understand it so we can navigate it with our eyes open.

**The second aspect of multiculturalism is the people we deal with.** As people of the Caribbean we are used to multicultural populations. We are used to migration and immigration. We are used to the complexities of intercultural communities and intercultural relationships. We are the experts. But do we treat all ethnic groups equally with the same kind of attention they need and deserve? Do we fall into the trap of making certain stories more valuable than others? Do we advocate enough for our populations? When we think Caribbean do we automatically refer to Afro-Caribbean?

I come from Suriname where we have many different ethnicities. In Suriname we pride ourselves on our society where the ethnic groups live in harmony with each other. We compare ourselves favorably to our neighbors where Hindustani and African descendants have come to bloodshed. We do not talk about the maroon and indigenous who are marginalized in our society; the many young Maroon men who stand on street corners, excluded from participation and more likely to end up in a life of crime. We do not talk about indigenous and

maroon youth who are forced to come to the city if they want to pursue education after the 6<sup>th</sup> grade and who succumb to depression based on the treatment they receive. “I always felt like I was less than everybody else. The teacher always assumes you are dumb because of the language difficulty” one young Amerindian woman told me. Teachers with the least qualifications are sent to teach the schools in the interior. Somehow there are some stories that are less worth investing in than others. We have to be critical of ourselves and how we address multiculturalism in our own countries.

And what about those of us who have migrated? How many of us have family members in the US or Europe? How have migration factors impacted our families and communities? How well trained and aware are professionals of the richness of our stories? Do we just get lumped in as Black Americans, Black Canadians, East Indian Europeans, or other?

So what would I like to pass on here today to my fellow colleagues who are invested in Caribbean psychology?

We must first be **cognizant of this academic “house” that has raised us**. We must be aware that in this field that is enriched by the multitude of voices, experiences and viewpoints, some voices – and especially our voices – have been silenced and/or deemed less valid. Our voices, if heard at all, are on the margins. We must also be aware that we have internalized those same messages. Not only did we drink the coolaid, we continue to be fed the coolaid every day. We have been conditioned. Thus, we also must be continuously aware of our own vulnerability and we must be vigilant against it. We have to be self-reflexive and remind ourselves and each other that what we have to offer is just as worthy. We must call upon our network support systems, those friends, aunties, ancestors, secret sessions, whatever it takes. We cannot do it on our own.

Subsequently we must be understanding and be forgiving of those of us who have decided that the status quo is just fine how it is. They are not interested in any kind of change. Some of us just want to make their money and go home. As a matter of fact, they can be the most critical of anything that might upset their position. The people who have been most critical of me are the people who look like me. “Why is your hair or your clothing like that? Don’t you know where you are? Don’t you understand what I have been through to get here?” The point is we do understand. Hence we must be careful not to judge or condemn their behavior.

Secondly, **we have to be vigilant about creating a normalized space for our work**. Of course we can approach any issue from a Caribbean perspective. Of course Caribbean scholar references can be used. Our presence is important, not just for Caribbean scholarship but for general psychological scholarship and practice. The standard story is incomplete. We must encourage each other to publish, present, and share our work. A conference is great, but how do we continue that support throughout the year? Those of us who are the only ones in our academic departments, or one of the few; those of us who are in private practice, how will we engender sustainable support?

We might have to find alternative ways to make sure that we reach each other and not limit ourselves to the official channels and standards. We must question the standard norms. All we hear these days is how things have to be “evidence based”. Well, what kind of evidence are we talking about? Evidence based tends to be positivistic in nature, and is considered best when supported by loads of quantitative data. There is room for that of course, but it is not the only way, or the only right way. When we gather information from sitting at the feet of our elders, does that qualify as evidence? Does that engender information that can be of use to people? We have to fight to make that kind of data collection and knowledge procurement just as normal as the other kind.

Third, we must **play a purposeful role to be an advocate for our multicultural populations**, and I am not just talking about Caribbean populations. We are not faced by stories that are embedded in multiple ethnicities, religions or classes. We are the experts on true multiculturalism. And guess what, the world needs our perspectives, experiences and expertise. People are moving at rates and numbers never seen before. People are overwhelmed by the influx of people who are different from them. Consequently, true inclusivity is a challenge. We are the experts on multiculturalism. In this world where people are confronted with multicultural issues due to mass migration, people need our insight and help. Let our awareness of multiculturalism and what it should really mean be an impetus for us to become better activists for our clients, no matter where they may be in the world, and better psychologists in general.

We need to speak up and participate. We need to take our voices, models, and experiences out of the margins and into the mainstream. I am asking us to question, resist, create alternative spaces, hold our ground, be present. I am asking us to be aware of our own conditioning and subsequent biases. I am asking us to do it collectively and with our eyes open, for it will come at a price. You might not gain heralded status in main stream academia, so if that is your goal you need to be aware. I am asking us to think about our spirituality as an essential part of our methodology. When you go out there to do therapy or interview or help in some way you are vulnerable. You take in people’s stories of pain and suffering. What are you doing to protect yourselves? What are you doing to release that stuff from your spirit? You will not get that information in academia, but that information is out there. You might have to sit at the feet of your elders to get that information. Your people need you. The world needs you. As we say in Suriname: *Wi kon, wi kon, dya*. We are here, collectively, and it matters.