PUBLIC SCHOLARSHIP

Profile of a Public Scholar: Maria Nagawa

MARIA NAGAWA | DUKE UNIVERSITY

Some of my fondest childhood memories stem from a time when my parents—whose careers traversed politics, journalism, and the law—would host gatherings in our home in Kampala, bringing together politicians, journalists, and people seeking solutions to everyday problems. It is not uncommon in my culture to let young children hang around in the early hours of such fetes, and I found them endlessly fascinating. I became an enthusiastic reader, known for hiding in shadows or under tables with a book in my hands. I would read anything my eyes landed on, inevitably wandering to my father's collection, where I once attempted to read his anthology of Shakespearean works. Even during my father's infirmity when I was eleven, it was my job to read him the newspaper each morning. I would later try to distance my personal ambitions from my parents' careers, but I could find no area as remotely interesting as politics, and how it impacted people's day to day lives and the broader economy. A considerable portion of my professional and educational life has thus been devoted to bringing policy research and everyday experiences to public audiences.

I have written (and spoken publicly) about girls' and women's empowerment, the living conditions of university women, social perceptions of contraception, women's fertility (Is it obvious that I'm interested in women's agency in both public and private space?), transactional relationships, and political transition for blogs, magazines, and newspapers. As a researcher, I have translated policy research on international trade, agriculture, youth unemployment, and international development assistance for broader audiences. I have been guided by a strong belief in making technical research as accessible to the lay reader as possible. Otherwise, knowledge circulates in a bubble of people who may not always share the experiences of those they study.

My path to academia was not straightforward. I always wanted to understand how we could solve social and economic poverty and exclusion, perhaps in part because my family had come within a hair's breadth of both. I initially thought I'd become like one of the heroines in Sidney Sheldon's books and pursued a business degree, hoping to one day run my own business and charity foundation. I started out managing the accounts of a small start-up. In a country like Uganda, most businesses fail within their first year, but that company still stands today. The leadership was visionary, the team driven, but luck also played an outsize role in our survival. It is the first time the words "political economy" became salient to me. In my country, the conditions are a death knell to most domestic Small to Medium-Sized Enterprises. I slowly shifted to the policy space. After obtaining a master's in International Economic Policy, I worked at Economic Policy Research Centre in Kampala, lectured at Makerere University Business School, and consulted on projects for Business France and International Development Research Centre. It was an opportunity to expand my knowledge and social networks to the public space: government, policy analysis, and international development. I noticed many political and economic elites wax poetic about the need for youth entrepreneurship, a better savings culture, technological literacy, among others, to overcome poverty, but I believed the bulk of the problem remained squarely with governance. This belief has guided my PhD research where I am investigating the incentives for and behavior of bureaucrats in aid recipient countries and the role of traditional leaders in development.

Madelyn Dewey

The PhD does not always avail opportunities to produce public facing material, which is why the APSA Public Scholarship Program has been such an important part of my graduate experience. It has enabled me to develop strengths in distill-

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ing technical information down to its most essential parts using straightforward language, while also exposing me to the broad range of up-to-date high quality research published in APSR. Max Schaub's work (https://politicalsciencenow.com/poverty-and-the-vote/) is an exemplar of the simplicity and beauty of an ingenious research design that broaches the much debated question of whether poverty galvanizes political engagement. Nina McMurry brings to our attention the importance of state recognition of Indigenous rights (https://politicalsciencenow.com/indigenous-recognition-as-state-consolidation/). I found this topic especially moving, being from East Africa where several ethnic groups have lost their homes and ways of life to national park designations. Sumitra Badrinathan shows secondary findings can be equally illuminating—even poor voters in lower income countries respond to ideological, not just programmatic, incentives (https://politicalsciencenow.com/the-perils-of-social-media-politics/). Milli Lake's work is a masterclass in the execution of first-rate qualitative research with attention to researcher positionality, keen observations, in-depth investigation, rich descriptions, and comprehensive thematic conclusions (https://politicalsciencenow.com/the-two-faces-of-state-capacity/). The field can only be made stronger if we understand that quantitative and qualitative work hold equal importance in knowledge production.

Maria Nagawa in front of the Ugandan flag, drawn by Madelyn Dewey

The Public Scholarship Program also facilitates instructive interactions with brilliant scholars. Coming from Uganda, I approach work on African cultures and countries with a healthy dose of skepticism. However, learning from these scholars about the effort that went into their work and the motivation behind it has softened my all too rigid stance. Collating historical data on the region, implementing surveys requiring a physical presence, and grounding theoretical frameworks in reality are all Herculean tasks; certainly not for the irresolute. I had engaging exchanges with Yannick Pengl and Valeria Rueda about the historical changes that have shaped contemporary conceptualizations of African identities (https://politicalsciencenow.com/how-socioeconomic-revolutions-shape-ethnic-identities/). We further discussed identification, a thorn in the side of historical political economy, but which requires collecting and organizing troves of evidence pertinent to systematically understanding how history shapes the present. This is vital for a region where the flow of history is too often treated as a series of distinct events. I discussed the unintended consequences of well-meaning interventions with Nic Cheeseman and Caryn Peiffer. Their own work shows how anti-corruption campaigns can exacerbate corrupt behavior (https://politicalsciencenow.com/are-anticorruption-campaigns-fighting-a-losing-battle/). Over breakfast, Pia Raffler and I shared anecdotes on Ugandan bureaucrats and politicians and how to ground theory in reality. Her own work disentangles the competing ideals of decentralization and Weberian bureaucratization.

Midway through the Program, I received support to attend my first APSA in Seattle. And no, I did not go just for the hotel stay in downtown Seattle. More enlightening than any presentation was learning about the research conceived of and implemented on the African continent by other Africans at the Africa Training Workshop (did I say I was African?). As a Black African woman, I almost always feel like an anomaly in American academic spaces, even more so since I received my undergraduate education in my home country. Sitting at a table with scholars at African universities investigating relatable and important problems was exceptional. It will remain one of the highlights of my doctoral education. It also underscored a fundamental problem in the research production line: as long as African scholars remain colossally under-resourced and structurally disconnected from the Western scholars who conduct research on our countries, we do not stand a chance at producing core knowledge on our experiences. I consoled myself with the lively repartee at the soirées. I am not well versed in the historical feuds in the social sciences. It was interesting to learn, for example, that some political scientists are dismayed that their peers have given in to the primacy of economics, and yet our field has gone further in applying the methods and theories developed by economists. I developed friendships with other women of color with whom I share a passion for knowledge that embraces intersectional feminism (shout out to the Feminist Mafia) and a desire to expand research perspectives.

My dreams are humble. I hope to continue bringing to light how bureaucrats—actors we rely on to implement development programs—respond to domestic and international pressures and constraints and how traditional leaders impact political, social, and economic development. I want to further expand my research agenda to how women navigate public and private space to assert agency over political participation, organizational culture, sexual and reproductive rights, and economic empowerment. For the latter, I am particularly interested in how resource constrained women tap into non-kin informal networks to insure against economic downturns.

It has been a privilege to work as an APSA Public Scholar and I look forward to continuing to grow as a political scientist. ■

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