

Petronella W. K. Muraya is Assistant Professor of Geography in the Department of History at Howard University. Born and raised in Kenya, she earned a Presidential Scholarship to study at St. Bonaventure University in New York, then moved on to study geography at the University of Maryland for her Master's. She earned her PhD in Geography from Kent State University in 2002. Her research and scholarly work, which already includes numerous journal articles, reports and international presentations, focuses on engaging stakeholders in housing development projects in developing regions, as well as engaging students in community development and service learning. She lives in the Washington, D.C. area with her three children and her husband, also from Kenya.

AAG: What is it like to be a geographer in a history department?

Petah: I like it. We do have a minor in geography, but I miss the daily interaction and sharing research issues with other geographers. I miss that so much, and colloquia in departments, which is why I look forward to the AAG (Annual Meetings) and think, "Oh good, I'm home again."

AAG: Did you always know you would be a geographer?

Petah: I did love geography in high school at home [in Kenya]. It is emphasized much more there than here in the U.S., and by the time you graduate from high school, you have an advanced knowledge of both human and physical geography in Kenya, Africa, and the rest of the world. That is how I got to love it so much. I got a full scholarship at St. Bonaventure University, and when I came here, geography was one of my joys. I took several courses, but they didn't offer a major and that was disappointing.

AAG: What did you do then with your degrees in Journalism and Spanish?

Petah: When I got out of school I worked for a newspaper called Youth Today and I also worked for the U.N. High Commissioner for Refugees. They were both interesting but they didn't give me that kick. So I went back to graduate school and remembered my love of geography at College Park, and later used my Spanish during my fieldwork in the Dominican Republic.

AAG: What motivated you to return to the university?

Petah: I was really interested in helping poor people in developing countries. Coming from Kenya, affordable and adequate housing is a big deal, and when I got to Maryland, then later at Kent State, I decided I was going to analyze housing for the low-income.



Muraya

AAG: How did you decide to focus on housing issues?

Petah: I had lived away for a while, and hadn't been home since 1990, and I remember getting shocked by the latest population census in Nairobi and wondering where those four million people were living. The previous census in the 1980s had estimated only one million people.

AAG: Where does the Caribbean connection come in?

Petah: The idea came from secondary research and learning how the World Bank and the United Nations emphasize the need for comparative research so countries and regions can learn from each other. I wanted to compare the situation in Kenya with a Central American country, and when I applied for my doctoral studies I got to know a particular professor who encouraged me to look at the Dominican Republic. I had some very good friends from there and I felt comfortable. It is complicated enough to study one country, but I said, "I'll just do it."

AAG: How did you work through that complexity?

Petah: My advisors worked hard to help me and I'll forever be grateful to them. When I began researching the housing conditions in both cities, I realized their population sizes and housing needs were similar. It turned out that both cities, although on different continents, had a lot in common. Growing up in Nairobi, I had watched the government destroy slums and squatter settlements and now they had adopted new policies to help the poor. It was all so amazing to me.

AAG: What future research questions do you have planned?

Petah: I plan to keep track of how the development projects proceed and to analyze future global housing policies that may be adopted in the developing world. The U.N. recommends global policies, but each country is unique and by comparing various countries these global policies can be amended to suit most countries.

AAG: I suppose that's where the geography comes in.

Petah: Exactly.

AAG: How do your students get engaged?

Petah: I got funding to change my class to a Service Learning Course, and to do so I introduced fieldwork. The students and I visited HOPE VI sites here in the District (the District of Columbia) and interviewed residents as well as those implementing the program. The students loved it and got to learn a lot about federal housing policies and how local communities are trying to solve their own housing problems.

AAG: What about the students in the Dominican Republic and Kenya?

Petah: In both countries, students and professors are involved in housing projects, especially the architectural programs. For example, in both countries the universities invented new building materials and building technologies that suited each country. They also contributed to the housing research, and students worked in the low-income settlements.

AAG: What a valuable experience for them.

Petah: Well, the scholars in Africa and other developing countries hardly have the means to do what I can do here. I am glad the AAG has established the AAG Developing Regions Membership Program. It will enable so many scholars to participate. Providing access to the AAG journals to the developing world will also be very beneficial, and I am sure it will encourage many scholars from these countries. That is why I do my work. There are all these issues and problems in the developing world and with geography you can pick up an issue and try to find solutions. ■