



## Ann Dunham

### A Personal Reflection

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Ann Dunham, now gaining recognition as Barack Obama's late mother, was an anthropologist who embodied many of the values and visions of her time. Given that she is attracting attention through the campaign for the US presidency, we felt that other anthropologists would appreciate hearing something about her career. Here we offer a brief personal reflection about Ann Dunham's formative years as a practicing anthropologist. We've chosen an interview format, with Alice Dewey providing insight into Dunham's life as a friend, colleague and former chair of her doctoral committee at the University of Hawai'i.



**Ann Dunham at Tanah Lot, Bali in the 1990s.** Photo courtesy Bronwen Solyom

as a friend, colleague and former chair of her doctoral committee at the University of Hawai'i.

#### Geoffrey White: *What do you recall of Ann Dunham as a former student?*

**Alice Dewey:** Her parents named her Stanley Ann Dunham, as her father had reportedly wanted a son. When she was married her name became Mrs Barack Hussein Obama, until she married again and became Mrs Lolo Soetoro, with the old Dutch spelling. She moved to Indonesia because her new husband was Javanese, but she soon came to love Java and the arts. She was herself a craftswoman and weaver. Most of her clothes were Indonesian. Java was as much her home as Honolulu. She'd be in Indonesia for a few years and then she'd get homesick for Honolulu and move back here for some months to pursue her studies, see her parents and friends. Then she would return to Indonesia, homesick for Java and needing to earn money.

#### GW: *What can you tell us about Ann's entry into anthropology?*

**AD:** Despite some reports that she majored in mathematics, she majored in anthropology here at the University of Hawai'i (BA 1967, Department of Anthropology, prior to the MA and PhD). That's when she met Obama senior in a Russian language class and eventually married him. After she broke with Obama she married her second husband, Lolo Soetoro. When Ann, Lolo and young Barack (known as "Barry") moved to Indonesia, she taught English in Jakarta.

#### GW: *It is obvious that Indonesia transformed Ann. Since that is your own field of interest, how do you read her involvement there?*

**AD:** Ann stayed four or five years in Indonesia before she and Barry returned to Hawai'i. In the early 1970s she applied for graduate school and received a scholarship from the East-West Center, and she returned with a lot of knowledge of Java, particularly Javanese crafts. She knew what she wanted to do and while she pursued an MA she was already thinking about her PhD dissertation. She was one of those students that you think, "Why don't I let her lecture?" She had much more contemporary knowledge of Indonesia than I. She did very intensive research in central Java during a time when the modernization paradigm held sway and the prevailing view was still that village life was falling apart and peasant society and handicrafts had all disappeared. We both knew this was ridiculous and Ann saw it as her life's work to study this topic and clarify for others how they could assist craftspeople. There was also a gender dimension to her interest that would surface more clearly beyond the PhD as she took up work with the Ford Foundation, and later USAID and the World Bank, through projects concerned with policies that would benefit small businesswomen. In Indonesia, iron tools are made and sold by men but the rest of the market is made up of women traders, craftspeople and farmers. As an essential part of the economy and the family, these women reminded Ann of her own hard-working mother.

#### GW: *Ann's 1992 dissertation was titled "Peasant Blacksmithing in Indonesia: Surviving and Thriving Against all Odds." Why was this her research focus?*

**AD:** Indonesian blacksmithing is spiritually powerful and sacred, and an area exclusive to men. The story is that blacksmiths forged human souls for the next generation. There's a carving in an Indonesian temple

depicting a demigod hero as a blacksmith, which is highly symbolic. It developed as a sacred craft for 2000 years. Ann wanted to study the whole spectrum of crafts, but out of practicality I urged her to pick one, so she wrote 1,000 pages on blacksmiths as part of a larger research project on crafts and craft markets. Every time she'd go to Indonesia, she'd return to Kajar, a blacksmithing village, and travel to other craft villages as well. So she was constantly adding new field sites and she eventually set up microcredit programs all over Indonesia as well as in Pakistan and Kenya.



**Ann Dunham and colleagues, Bank Rakyat Indonesia (1989).** Photo courtesy Bronwen Solyom

Ann completed requirements for the MA in 1974, although it was not formally granted until 1986. Prior to that she was offered a job with the Ford Foundation (Regional Southeast Asia office in Jakarta) that suited her so well we said, "You're still getting your degree but this is just the job you want when you finish. Go grab it now while the offer is hot." And so she did. The best way to summarize the range of her work at that time is to quote from a letter she wrote to me on February 13, 1984:

This year I have major projects for women working on plantations in West Java and North Sumatra; for women in kretek factories in Central and East Java; for street food sellers and scavengers in the cities of Jakarta, Jogja and Bandung; for women in credit cooperatives in East Java; for women in electronics factories, mainly in the Jakarta-Bogor area; for women in cottage industry cooperatives in the district of Klaten; for hand-loom weavers in West Timor; for shop girls along J1... for slum dwellers in Jakarta and Bandung; for street food sellers in Thailand....

It wasn't until 1992 that Ann would file her dissertation, just prior to taking a position with Women's World Banking in New York. At the time of her death she was working for Bank Rakyat of Indonesia. She died on November 7, 1995 back in Hawai'i.

*Alice Dewey is professor emeritus in the University of Hawai'i department of anthropology. Geoffrey White is professor and chair in the same program. □*