

The Mother of Microloans (and Obama)

A Q&A with anthropologist and author, Alice G. Dewey

*Alice G. Dewey, professor emeritus at the University of Hawai'i at Manoa and granddaughter of the renowned American philosopher John Dewey, is an economic anthropologist who did ground-breaking research on local markets in Indonesia in the 1950s. She recently co-edited *Surviving Against the Odds: Village Industry in Indonesia* by S. Ann Dunham, the mother of President Barack Obama. Dewey chaired Dunham's dissertation committee, supervised her anthropological field work in Indonesia, and recalls a much younger, but still thoughtful Barry Obama, in this interview with NEA organizational specialist Christine Maitland.*

THOUGHT & ACTION: When did you first meet Stanley Ann Dunham?

DEWEY: I first met Ann in the early 1970s, when she applied for graduate school and received a scholarship from the East West Center at the University of Hawai'i. I was excited about this student: She had been living in Indonesia for six to seven years with her Javanese husband and two children, spoke the language, and was knowledgeable in the handicrafts that Java is famous for. In a sense, she had a minor in art. She was a weaver and already interested in approaching people through this art.

Her focus on production was complimentary to my work on marketing, though her interests lay more in the analysis of economic systems.

THOUGHT & ACTION: Tell us about the scope of Ann's work.



Ann Dunham and her young son, Barack Obama.
Source: Corbis Images

DEWEY: For her Ph.D., Ann originally meant to cover handicrafts in five villages, each with a different craft: Puppets (leather); textiles (batik); bamboo works (floor mats, baskets, and construction materials); blacksmithing (pots and pans, knives, tools); and clay (ceramics, figurines). The blacksmithing was done by men, while women primarily did the other crafts. She did one project for the Indonesian government that studied the economic impact of the women's handicrafts in 25 villages. Some of her work is still going on.

She liked her research—she found it fascinating, and she hoped it contributed to the people. It was worthwhile. She ended up with a multiplicity of skills, and a tremendous amount of knowledge—a Britannica of information. Eventually, we said pick something and write a dissertation, and so she wrote 1,000 pages on blacksmithing.

She chose blacksmithing because it is the most complex manufacturing process, using fire and the anvil, and it is an old craft, 2,000 years or more. It also includes a specific skill, the making of the beautiful *kris*, which are sacred daggers that require great skill to forge. Ann had an eye for them and could identify the best. Kajar, the village in which she studied, used blacksmithing to help it survive famines and wars. Another unusual feature was that the women took over the agriculture, while the men ran the forges. The women had the wherewithal to do this. They were accustomed to being in the fields, especially during the rice harvest when they use a special knife.

THOUGHT & ACTION: Why was Ann so inspired by Indonesia?

ALICE DEWEY: If you go and talk to people there, you fall in love with Java. It is magical. She went with her second husband, Lolo Soetoro, and her young son, Barry. He was about 6, I think he was starting first grade. She and Lolo had met at the East West Center at the University of Hawai'i. He had a government scholarship, and it was withdrawn when the Indonesian government needed his skills as a geographer to measure a complicated line, over a mountain, between two countries. So he went back home. He was a very charming guy, he spoke fluent English, and he got a job with Union Oil. People used to joke: Ann was becoming Javanese and he was becoming more American. They had cocktails by the pool and they all played golf. (Ann thought the events were boring.) She had her hands full with two kids and her development work with the Ford Foundation and Indonesian banks.

THOUGHT & ACTION: She had important positions in Indonesia—a front-row

seat to economic development plans. In one instance, she developed credit-and-savings programs that were channeled to 3,500 village banks for local economic development. How important was this work?

ALICE DEWEY: The jobs gave her access to the country's economic data, and got her involved with the Indonesian government, working on five-year economic plans. It put her in the middle of the country's planning and growth. She was an example of a woman pioneering what was traditionally a man's job—economic development work. And she advocated gender-specific policies.

She did the early work on microloans. Toward the end of her life, she was working in Africa, using different sized loans. She also worked in Pakistan. People have compared her to the microfinance banker from Bangladesh who won the Nobel Peace Prize (2006), Mohammad Yunus.

THOUGHT & ACTION: Tell us more about her work with women. She was a pioneer in giving money to poor women, understanding that women drive these economies.

ALICE DEWEY: For hundreds of years, women in Java have been decorating cloth, using a wax-resistant process called batik, which tourists have found to be charming. Ann knew where to put extra resources, and she helped the women get in touch with sellers who could get it to the market. She'd tell them it was good stuff and she'd say, "Do it! Don't let people talk to you out of it." Women traditionally wear a batik that is broad and long, and perhaps hard for tourists to manage. They changed the size of some to more of a shawl size. The price is nice and plump, and the women are making money.

Batik is hand done with special dyes. The women tend the plants for the dyes and threads, and women hold on to the patterns. Most of the cloth is cotton, but some is silk. Many decades ago a new techniques these days was introduced, using a *tjop* (stamp) with the design, which is pressed into the hot-wax and then onto the cloth. It makes the dying faster than the original method in which the wax is applied with a special tool.

THOUGHT & ACTION: Do you think his mother's work with poor women has inspired President Obama to support gender-specific polices, for example, equal pay for equal work?

ALICE DEWEY: Barry grew up in a house where you looked after people, and you enjoyed it. I think he thought that is what you do in life. You learn how to help people. You learn how to listen to people. And you enjoy it.

Why have an ordinary job when you can go see how the women in these little coastal villages find a way to get this deep, deep red in their cloth? His mother enjoyed life enormously—and helping women was part of it. Barry and Maya, his sister, grew up with a mother who was working very hard and finding it all fascinating. He has her powers of observation and great intellect too.

THOUGHT & ACTION: Tell us about Dunham's book, *Surviving Against the Odds: Village Industry in Indonesia*

ALICE DEWEY: Nancy Cooper and I edited Ann's dissertation, which was more than 1,000 pages long, and Duke University, published the first volume. *Surviving Against the Odds* describes the large scope of her work through the handicraft of blacksmithing in Java in a single society. The second volume sets the broader world of metalworking in Indonesia from three approaches: the historical, the archeological, and the mythological. We felt that the work was valuable because almost anywhere in the world, the handicraft economy works this way: with the exception of blacksmithing, it is based on handicrafts chiefly done by women. Ann's ideas and ways of helping women to develop their economic potential improved the economy of the country.

Ann's work was directed toward understanding needs, and finding ways to fulfill those needs, make the work easy, and put more money into local economies. For example, in the village of Kajar, which is very mountainous with a very steep road, it used to take days to get the iron from the lowlands. Ann found the money to pave the road, and get them a jeep, so they wouldn't have to carry the heavy stuff on their backs. That was a big amount of money to facilitate this particular craft. If you are talking about a craft in the low-land you don't need that kind of assistance. It's about sitting down with a cup of tea and finding out what is needed. And then it's about coming back the next day to make sure you understood. 

