

## LIFE&amp;TIMES HERITAGE

# A batik legacy

An exhibition of batik works of Ann Dunham, the late mother of US President Barack Obama, has **Aneeta Sundararaj** in awe of her efforts to help women in Indonesia

**L**EGACIES can take different forms with the most obvious ones being property or money. Legacies can also be intangible such as a tradition that is carried through the generations.

Then, there's a combination of both, where the person leaves behind a collection of possessions as well as ideas, values, stories and philosophies. An example of this is the legacy of Ann Dunham.

Until July 20, the Islamic Arts Museum Malaysia is hosting an exhibition titled *Ann Dunham's Legacy: A Collection Of Indonesian Batiks*.

Dr Heba Nayel Barakat, 48, head of Curatorial Affairs at the museum, explains that Dunham put together a collection of batiks in the 1960s and 1970s when she lived in Indonesia.

To commemorate the exhibition, the museum has produced a 120-page catalogue with the same name. The exhibition will also include 10 Indonesian batiks from the museum's collection. On June 8, Dunham's daughter, Dr Maya Soetoro-Ng, launched the exhibition, marking the first time the collection is exhibited outside the United States.

Dunham was born in 1942 in Kansas and eventually settled in Hawaii. Soon after enrolling in the University of Hawaii, Dunham married and had a child. When the marriage ended, she continued with her degree. In time, she married a fellow student, moved with him to Indonesia and was blessed with a baby girl. In 1972, Dunham and her children returned to Hawaii where she commenced post-graduate studies, focusing on cultural anthropology of Indonesian peoples. In the next 20 years or so, she travelled to Indonesia and other parts of the world as part of her studies and work, specialising in economic anthropology and rural development. In 1980, her second marriage too ended in divorce and in 1994, Dunham was diagnosed with ovarian and uterine cancer.

"At first, my mother wanted to be buried on a hill, under the stars. Then she said she wanted to be buried near water," said Soetoro-Ng, prior to the exhibition launch. Eventually, when Dunham passed away in Hawaii in 1995 at age 52, her ashes were placed in the Pacific Ocean in the direction of Indonesia.

Among other stories told by Soetoro-Ng, the most poignant one was about the moon: "My mother would sometimes wake me up in the middle of the night to look at the moon. It didn't matter if we were in Pakistan, Indonesia, India or Hawaii. She used to say that the stars in each place would be different. But not the moon. The moon was always constant."



Exquisite batik design

Soetoro-Ng acknowledged that her mother was an imperfect person. "I worry," she said, "that people will start to think that she is something imagined. She was solid. She was also very faulty. But she was not afraid of another human being. She was aware that there were people who engaged in acts of malice, but believed that they were few in numbers. She was always ready to make friends. We'd go to a village and in no time there would be storytelling. She travelled throughout Java and met women and got involved in their cottage industries, their lives and artistry. She wanted to help develop a vision of the future."

Of her mother's batik collection, Soetoro-Ng added: "She wanted to celebrate her love of Indonesia and women. She wanted to build a home, a place to hang her batik on the walls and over the furniture. She died before she could create this palace of memories of wood, fabrics and tapestry."

Smiling, Soetoro-Ng said the museum was a "pretty nice home" for her mother's



Sarong with parang rusuk pattern

batik collection. "It's infused with light and there's a wonder of being human, being alive. It honours her work, spirit and intention of bringing together people through art. Art is not superficial, but something deep. It resonates with power, identity and history."

A relieved Heba later said: "I'm happy she's happy with what we've done."

It was only when they started to put this exhibition together that Heba and her team realised how committed Dunham was to understanding the process of making batik and the people who made them.

"Each piece in this exhibit has deep meaning. Ann Dunham was not just a foreigner enjoying the vibrant colours in batik."

Casting a glance around the exhibition hall, Heba added: "Ann Dunham chose to include pieces that were not expensive. Perhaps, there's one with a pattern like a broken keris (Parang Rusuk pattern). Commoners couldn't use batik with this kind of pattern because they were reserved for the Royal Court. A specialist will tell you that all these other batiks are common man's batik. They reflect the daily lives of the people around her."

Heba then pointed to a display of an unfinished work set against one wall and said: "She was so committed to the process that she even tried to make some batik herself. She went beyond the craft and learnt about the people. She saw how they worked on this craft their whole life and how much they loved it. She also saw the problems they faced and digested their issues. She knew that these were the people she wanted to help have a comfortable life. She used the papers she published and interpreted her theses (a doctoral dissertation consisting of a 1,000-page analysis of peasant blacksmithing) to tell those in power, 'I come with a wealth of knowledge

and I want to help these people'. She anticipated that these people who made batik could live in the community and produce their handicrafts without being exploited. She didn't ask them to take their products to the city. Instead, she helped them in situ."

Indeed, it was said that when Dunham witnessed the vibrant elements of a traditional craft and culture in danger of extinction, she used her knowledge, expertise and work with the United States Agency for International Development, the Ford Foundation

and a bank to look at employment issues concerning women. Dunham is often credited with establishing a sustainable micro-finance programme in Indonesia.

Recognising Dunham as a woman not concerned by society's perception of working women, a single mother or marrying men outside one's culture, it seemed apt for Heba to have deliberately inserted the word legacy into the title of the exhibition. Undeniably, the immediate and direct recipients of Dunham's legacy of courage, fortitude and the need to use service unto others as the true measure of life are none other than her two children: Soetoro-Ng and Dunham's first-born, a boy who is today, the 44th President of the United States of America, Barack Obama.

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## Batik Showcase

**What:** Ann Dunham's Legacy: A Collection Of Indonesian Batiks.

**Where:** Special Gallery 1, Islamic Arts Museum Malaysia, Jalan Lembah Perdana, Kuala Lumpur.

**When:** June 8 to July 20. Daily from 10am to 6pm.

**Website:** www.iamm.org.my