

**SURVIVING AGAINST THE ODDS**

**Sandra NIESSEN**

**Anthropologist/Writer**

Iron is both metal and a meaning  
(O'Connor 1975)

I did not know S. Ann Dunham Sutoro. As it turns out, however, I conducted my first year of fieldwork at the same time as she conducted her first fieldwork, and like hers, mine was a longitudinal study that took place over approximately 20 years. I was younger than she was, however, and I am now only slightly older than she was when she passed away. Her book appeared posthumously in 2009, the same year that my life's work, entitled *Legacy in cloth, Batak textiles of Indonesia*, appeared. Presumably that publication is the reason why I was invited to participate in this WISDOM conference, hence I weave a discussion of my own publication through my reflections on hers and on the theme of the survival of craft and craft-producers.

In the early years of my PhD program in The Netherlands, I was inspired by Dr. W.H. Rassers' *On the Javanese Kris* (1940) in which he describes the complementary worlds of male and female in Javanese life. A comparable opposition prevails in Batak social and intellectual life. At the time, I did not know that I would go on to devote a good portion of my life to Batak textiles, and thus, curiously, one day be invited to talk to you about my then-unknown colleague's work on metal working in the village of Kajar just a few kilometers outside Yogyakarta.

The conference theme, *Local Wisdom Inspiring Global Solutions*, offers a powerful lens through which to look at Dunham's work. I highly appreciate this theme and am honoured to participate in this colloquium.

As I understand it, three chapters of cultural data have been left out of the published version of Dunham's dissertation because it would otherwise have been unwieldy in length. Bits of the cultural data are proffered as juicy "human interest" teasers for the reader in the introductions to the book, while the body of the work focuses on economic issues. Ann Dunham's kris has been used as the compelling, decorative frontispiece, even while the theme of the kris is noticeable on the pages that

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follow mostly for its absence. What would her choice have been if she had been able to publish her work? What would she have done with the “cultural elements”? Clearly Ann was a brilliant scholar. Her work is of profound scope and depth with the insightfulness that comes of close and long association with her material, and extensive related background knowledge. For this reason alone, I am disappointed that I have not been able to read the excluded chapters -- they would have been more familiar terrain for me -- but there are also other reasons.

It appears that the choice to extricate the cultural dimension from this economic analysis could have been made because that dimension, in Dunham’s own words, “generally coexists with the economic dimension and does not conflict with it.” The only real exception to which she referred was the rejection of a new, imported anvil because the form did not fit the symbolic requirements of the smiths. (p. 266) This and the mention in passing that the smiths are being encouraged to stand rather than sit at their work are clues that a unique meaning system was operating in their work, but it is unclear whether that meaning system was thriving, whether and how it might have been surviving, and against which odds.

Dunham’s publication with its absence of “cultural elements”, also fits within a specific tradition of writing about craft in the Netherlands East Indies. As she noted, “the economic and the cultural dimensions [of metal working]... evolved together over a period of at least two thousand years...” (p. 266). It has become accepted wisdom that the material expressions of the ethnic groups in the Indonesian archipelago are fully and profoundly integrated with the thought systems and world views of their makers. Nevertheless, the Westerners in the nineteenth century plying the shores of the vast and marvellous island archipelago that we now call Indonesia, perceived the local *industry* that they encountered primarily in terms of economic competition. Today, the word *industry* connotes mechanized production, but two and three hundred years ago the word was closer in meaning to the French, *industrie* or Latin, *industria*, denoting diligence. It included the manufacture of tools required to build homes, clear the land, till the soil and weave cloth. *Manufacture* is another word that has come to imply mechanized industry, while the Latin roots *manu* and *factum*, denote hand production.

As European production became mechanized, out-competed hand production in Indonesia -- now quaint and charming because no longer threatening -- gained the designation *craft*. In addition, the finest expressions of local hand production began to

disappear. They had been supported by court cultures and upper social rungs that were now looking elsewhere for trappings of prestige and adopting new mindsets. The first warnings about the demise of the exquisite Javanese kris were issued in this era.

At the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, in addition to pointing out that the most beautiful and the best of the handicrafts had already disappeared, the West was predicting the end of indigenous culture. This awareness resulted in a heyday of collecting by Western ethnographic museums. Ethnographers became intensively engaged with the *material culture* of indigenous peoples -- another term coinciding with the assessment of these objects as economically non-threatening to the West.

In the Netherlands East Indies, the heyday of collecting coincided with the Ethical Period in which the Dutch colonial government was forced to take more responsibility for the health, welfare and education of the inhabitants of the archipelago. The colonial regime was concerned about *local industry* because this sector had the potential to absorb a significant portion of the workforce. In the first decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the colonial regime assigned Johan Ernst Jasper the task of reviewing the state of handicrafts in Indonesia. He championed the capacity of craft for offering economic alternatives and some measure of autonomy to the local populace. The annual markets that he set up on Java were intended to stimulate craft production of high quality throughout the entire archipelago; he also forged high-end market ties with Europe. To fill the terms of reference of one of his assignments, he surveyed the state of the arts of plaiting, weaving, batik, gold and silver-smithing, and metalwork in the archipelago and published a five-volume masterpiece on Indonesian craft.

Jasper was correct in his reading of the crucial importance of craft as, in the words of the Canadian development expert, Elwood Pye, “a buffer against poverty” (1988). Ann Dunham preceded Pye in pointing this out for Kajar: when there is unemployment, when the crops fail, when a husband dies, or when there is not enough land to go around, the unemployed return to the village pinning their hopes on small industry: marginalized employment for marginalized people. Dunham also points out that such employment is often the only viable alternative to hunger. In this sense, the title of Ann Dunham’s book pinpoints the economic essence of craft: a means of surviving against the odds, a bridge between indigenous life and the mainstream, now globalised economy. The brilliance of Ann Dunham’s work is in her minute detailing of how it works. She explores the hindrances that the smiths encounter and suggests

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alternative courses of action and improved policies that could ease their struggles and allow them to become more competitive.

She creates an image of rational ironworkers who weigh their economic choices logically, regularly and carefully. So-called “cultural issues”, by virtue of their absence, appear irrelevant and unimportant. This is interesting in light of the trajectory specifically of the kris as sketched by numerous authors. In his introduction to Isaäc Groneman’s recently translated classic on the kris, David van Duuren cites a report that noted in 1893 that “the occupation of kris forger was dying out and only one good smith continued to work in parts of the former Residentie Banjoemas in Central Java.” (2009:31) He presents the decline as inevitable: “The new spirit of the times and the modernizing processes that characterized the Dutch colonial twentieth century made a silent end to time-honoured local art and handicraft traditions” and he describes Groneman, who took his own life partly because his attempts to obtain more attention for the kris failed, as “blowing against the wind”. F.A. Noor (2008:239) used the kris to illustrate the rise and decline of a civilization and Stanley O’Connor (1975:190) underscored its loss in heart-rending prose about the loss of meaning and the purging of the intuitive and accidental in the rationalization of metallurgy for the modern world. He likened it to speech being stripped of metafore thus becoming “bare inarticulacies”, the emptying of the metaphysical and the sacred. In this world in which Dunham’s central Javanese metalworkers were competing, the reader is left to wonder *what*, exactly, is surviving against the odds? Clearly much has *not* survived the odds. I went to visit Kajar before this conference began because I wanted to see the village that Dunham had described in her book and also to give the villagers a copy of her book. During this visit, I learned that the tradition of kris-making has died out completely since Dunham was there.

It has been twenty years since Dunham completed her research; the ethnographic landscape has changed. We appear to be at a confusing and critical juncture in history. We are assembled here at Gadjah Mada University to underscore the importance of local wisdom even while local wisdom has become an endangered good. The situation is dire. Fully half of the languages on the face of the earth are destined to disappear within the next two generations, their cultural matrixes having collapsed. The implications of this projection are too massive to fathom, yet we hear more about threatened species than we do about the devastating loss of human cultural heritage.

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Local wisdom, like language and craft, requires a vibrant cultural matrix to survive. Where are the expressions of concern? Today there are more anthropologists, most of them cultural anthropologists, than ever before in history (there are 11,000 members of the American Anthropological Association alone). Clearly, something has gone very awry and needs to be addressed as we acknowledge the importance of local wisdom for the future of the world. Without the hen, there is no golden egg. Placed in this context, if the title of Dunham's book, *Surviving Against the Odds* is not remarkable for its optimism, it is a symptom of denial.

David van Duuren pointed out that Groneman's despondency a century ago over the disappearance of the kris was unrealistic because he was failing to recognize the inevitability of change. Who has not shrugged his or her shoulders acquiescing to the inevitability of this change? Juxtapose this doomsday scenario with the UNESCO initiative for the protection of intangible cultural heritage that conferred the title Masterpiece of the Oral and Intangible Heritage of Humanity on the Javanese kris in 2005 and urged Indonesia to preserve this heritage. The UNESCO challenge is more easily issued than met. The designation comes a little late in the game, but obviously, some wise people have decided that there is still something to preserve and, presumably, that there is also a means to do so, that Groneman was right in some respects and that shrugging the shoulders at the inevitability certain kinds of change is not the (only?) solution.

When I finished writing my comprehensive book on the textiles of the Batak people of North Sumatra, Indonesia, for personal and professional reasons I wanted to give those who had helped me with my research a copy of the results. I fulfilled my obligations to museums, archives and funders which demanded one or more copies of my book in exchange for their support. While the weavers in North Sumatra had made no such demands, I knew that of all the recipients, they were the most deserving of a copy. Originally my documentation of the Batak textile repertory had been intended for museums, but in the course of completing it, I witnessed the decline in the Batak weaving arts, and I became convinced that my book could serve as a useful reference for weavers who require design templates for inspiration and technical information.

This past June, with the support of more than 40 people who believed in my project and donated books to the Batak weavers (it is noteworthy that no funders of my

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research would support the project and none of them stipulated that the results of my research be given to the people who had provided the information in the first place), I was able to bring 40 copies to villages in North Sumatra.

There are many parallels between the trajectory of smithed crafts on Java and the textiles of North Sumatra. Both products meet the demand of primarily internal markets but both have had to adapt to changing economic circumstances. The finest expressions, in both cases, were the first to disappear, and the subsequent erosion of the culture in the craft has been constant and cumulative. Once sacred cultural expressions, both have become by and large mere tokens of the ritual objects they once were. The wonderful resilience and adaptive capacities of Batak weavers, surviving against the odds, has yielded exactly the same kind of modern “bare inarticulacies” that O’Connor saw in the Javanese kris emptied of its metaphysical and sacred content. Poverty has played an unmistakable role. Many weavers have packed in their looms because they receive too little compensation for their work. All have been forced to adopt rational weaving strategies that have done nothing for the quality and beauty of their products.

Both despite and because of these losses, the reception of my book was overwhelmingly positive. Among other things, I perceived among the Batak a tremendous hunger for knowledge about their own culture and a tragic lack of access to it. I witnessed people’s amazement at the wealth of their own weaving tradition when they examined the book. They had not been aware of the extent and quality of their own cultural wealth. Indeed, how could they have gained such awareness? Just as with the kris, the finest examples of their weaving tradition have been removed from the country and are now found in the collections of museums and aficionados. Batak villagers have no access to the holdings of local archives and museums, let alone those in a foreign country. The opportunities to listen to the elders have diminished and the knowledge of the elders has also diminished. The influence of the church on perceptions of indigenous sacred values, as well as the constant exhortations of global society to value a different kind of material wealth have taken their toll. My book engendered pride in the weavers because they gained tangible proof of their spectacular, centuries-old accomplishment. They could see the fruits of their labours in a new light; they are poor and marginal people but the book raises their craft to the level of something universally admirable. As pride for their tradition expanded, so did

their sadness and regret at its passing. One excellent elderly weaver who was particularly enamoured of her craft wept for what had been lost. The pain at the loss of her culture, knowing that she was the last weaver in a village, is impossible to describe.

I asked MJA Nashir, a talented Indonesian photographer, to document my return of Batak cultural heritage in that expedition last June that I called *Back to the Villages (Pulang Kampung)*. His on-going reaction is also significant. Responding to what he perceived to be a rare occurrence between an anthropologist and an indigenous population, he chronicled the journey not just in photographs but also in the form of a serial published on *Facebook*, in this way reaching a wide Indonesian and especially Batak readership. The response to his sensitive and detailed descriptions has been overwhelming. Many Batak have expressed concern about the disappearance of their culture and a willingness and need to translate their feelings into actions that will ensure that their culture does not disappear. Many of them are urban Batak who regret having lost touch with their roots but intuitively understand the importance of their cultural home as the wellspring of their identity.

Observing the impact of the distribution of my book has taught me much about the deleterious effect of the loss of cultural tangibles. Local wisdom is now often encased only in memories. These memories can be stimulated by evidence, both written and visual, of a previous time when the culture was still vibrantly alive. The memories have to still exist, however. In Kajar, it appears that the memories of making the kris had seeped too far into the past. The copy of Groneman's book that I showed to a handful of metal smiths elicited no response whatsoever. Sometimes the memories emerge only very slowly. Sometimes they generate excitement and pride and kick-start cultural renewal. No longer may craft be perceived in isolation solely with respect to its economic role as a buffer against poverty -- at least, not if UNESCO's intentions for the Masterpieces of the Oral and Intangible Heritage of Humanity are to be honoured.

If museums were collecting avidly a century ago, those collections can now be made available, in some form or other, to the cultures whence the objects originated. There are many examples of how museum collections are being used to prime the pump, as it were, of cultural memory and regeneration. My *Back to the Villages* project is one example. Another noteworthy one is Professor Ruth Phillips' project at Carleton University in Canada. She has marshalled the latest internet technology to build lines of open, two-way information flow between indigenous communities and museums,

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thus benefiting both: the indigenous peoples experience a broad spectrum of cultural, social, emotional and intellectual benefits from access to their otherwise lost cultural heritage stored in museum collections around the world and the museums gain access to indigenous knowledge that enhances their value.

Such North-South linkages are an example of how local wisdom can be given a chance to “thrive in the sea of globalization”. The beauty of these projects is that the bolstering of indigenous local wisdom *simultaneously* renews the value of ethnographic museums in the world. The regeneration of local wisdom, in this sense, *is itself* a global solution.

Local wisdom is not simply available for harvesting or harnessing as it once may have been, but can perhaps be generated through a process of knowledge sharing. Because I am convinced that an infusion of information to the Batak about their own culture would be beneficial to them, in a private practice of civil disobedience, I feel morally justified in giving photocopies of my archival Batak materials, obtained from anywhere, to the Batak who wish to have it. It was theirs to begin with; it was transferred to the West where it is held in safe-keeping. Shared / returned, it gains inestimable value.

The world has changed since Ann Dunham wrote sympathetically about the Javanese metalworkers practising their craft. Her engaged research of more than twenty years ago suggests that if she were alive today her passion would be with the theme of this conference. I am sure that she would be talking with us not about surviving against the odds, but about *changing the odds to ensure survival* not just of craft objects, but of the indigenous wisdom of which they are an expression.

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### Photographs

1. Just prior to the WISDOM conference, Sandra Niessen visited the metal working village of Kajar to present a copy of *Surviving Against the Odds* to people who had known Ann Dunham Soetoro. (Photograph by Nia Fliam)
2. The people of Kajar were hugely interested in Ann Dunham's photographs taken in their village. (Photograph by Sandra Niessen)
3. Ann Dunham's kris. The photograph is used as the frontispiece of *Surviving Against the Odds*.
4. J.E. Jasper when he was Governor of Yogyakarta (1926-1927). (from <http://www.rmv.nl/publicaties/24Gemeen%20Goed/n/tekst/jasper.html>)
5. The last kris-maker in Kajar as depicted in *Surviving Against the Odds*, p.148

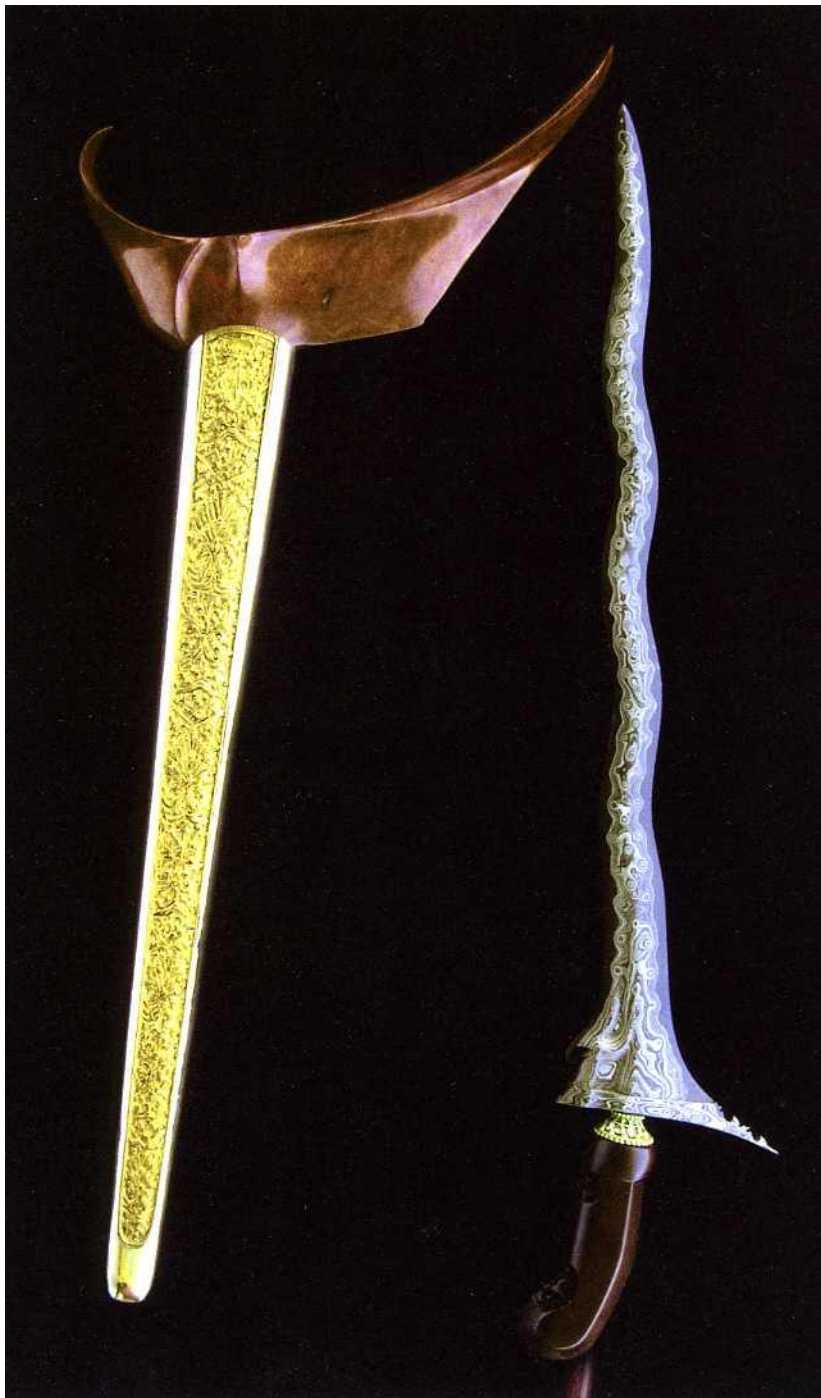
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1 2010 Giving Dunham's book to her former hosts just prior to conference



2. 2010 Interest in Kajar for Dunham's book



3. Ann Dunham's kris024



4. J.E. Jasper as Governor of Yogyakarta



5. Last Kris-maker in Kajar in Dunham's time

**Profile**

Sandra Niessen is a freelance anthropologist specialized in material culture. She completed her PhD at Leiden University in The Netherlands in 1985 and taught for 15 years at the University of Alberta in Canada. Her work has focused on Indonesian textile traditions, especially that of the Batak of North Sumatra. In 2009, her crowning publication appeared under the title *Legacy in cloth, Batak textiles of Indonesia*. The Batak weaving tradition is now in sharp decline. Dr. Niessen is investing her energy in initiatives aimed to ensure the survival of the ancient art. More information about her publications and activities are available on her website [www.Bataktextiles.com](http://www.Bataktextiles.com).

Sandra Niessen

Fangmanweg 23

6862 EH Oosterbeek,

The Netherlands

[san@sandraniessen.com](mailto:san@sandraniessen.com)

