



*An anthropological study by  
the mother of President Barack Obama*

**S. Ann Dunham**

**Surviving  
against the Odds**

**VILLAGE INDUSTRY IN INDONESIA**

*Edited and with a preface by* ALICE G. DEWEY *and* NANCY I. COOPER



For Immediate Release  
December 2009

## **PRESIDENT OBAMA'S MOTHER'S DISSERTATION PUBLISHED 14 YEARS AFTER HER DEATH**

**Duke University Press Proud to Publish S. Ann Dunham's  
*Surviving against the Odds: Village Industry in Indonesia***

Duke University Press is proud to announce the publication of an anthropological study by S. Ann Dunham, the mother of President Barack Obama. Dunham, who died in 1995, completed the dissertation in anthropology for the University of Hawaii in 1992.

*Surviving against the Odds: Village Industry in Indonesia* is based on Dunham's research, over a period of 14 years, among the rural craftsmen of Java. The book centers on the metalworking industries in the Javanese village of Kajar, and how they offer a viable economic alternative in a rice-dependent area of rural Southeast Asia.

Through the book we now have a more complete picture of President Obama's mother. Her ideas on development and microfinance seem ahead of their time. Dunham's role as a benefactor and her generous spirit were remarked upon by villagers in Kajar when a *London Times* reporter visited there recently. According to her daughter, Maya Soetoro-Ng, Dunham passed along a deep respect for other cultures to her children.

The book was launched at the annual meeting of the American Anthropological Association on December 3, 2009. Dunham and her work were the subject of a Presidential Session and a special reception. Editors Alice G. Dewey and Nancy I. Cooper attended as well as Maya Soetoro-Ng and Duke Press's Editorial Director, Ken Wissoker.

Wissoker sees *Surviving against the Odds* as a good fit with Duke University Press's list in anthropology and believes that the book will strike a chord with anthropologists in particular. Speaking to the *Chronicle of Higher Education*, Mr. Wissoker recalled that at last year's anthropology meeting, "everyone was thrilled that we would have a new president whose mother had been an anthropologist. They were happy to ascribe some of his more expansive and nuanced views of the globe and of other cultures to her good influence."

"It is a great privilege for Duke University Press to be publishing this remarkable work by Ann Dunham," Wissoker said. "Her global perspective and obvious respect for other people's intelligence and self-direction is a model we all can learn from. Her children clearly have!"

The book took over a decade to be published. At the request of Dunham's daughter, Maya Soetoro-Ng, two anthropologists—Alice G. Dewey, Dunham's graduate adviser, and Nancy I.

Cooper, a fellow graduate student—revised and edited the dissertation, going through over 1000 pages originally stored on now-obsolete floppy disks.

Robert W. Hefner, director of the Institute on Culture, Religion, and World Affairs at Boston University and current president of the Association for Asian Studies, wrote the afterword for the book. He said he finds Dunham's work on metalworkers prescient. "Ann Dunham's legacy remains relevant today for anthropology, Indonesian studies, and engaged scholarship," he said.

Maya Soetoro-Ng said she was "delighted that our mother's book is being published, and I am grateful to Duke University Press for making this dream of hers come true. My hope is that this book will be read by those who come to love the particularities of its world and who also see the myriad potential application of its ideas and methods to other worlds."

***Surviving against the Odds: Village Industry in Indonesia***

**By S. Ann Dunham**

**Edited and with a preface by Alice G. Dewey and Nancy I. Cooper**

**With a foreword by Maya Soetoro-Ng and an afterword by Robert W. Hefner**

**440 pages , 50 illustrations, including 16 page color insert**

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## About the Author, Editors and Contributors

**S. Ann Dunham** (1942–1995), mother of President Barack Obama and Maya Soetoro-Ng, earned her undergraduate, master's, and doctoral degrees, all in anthropology, from the University of Hawai'i at Manoa. Dunham spent years working on rural development, microfinance, and women's welfare through organizations including USAID, the World Bank, the Ford Foundation, the Indonesian Federation of Labor Unions, and Bank Rakyat Indonesia.

**Alice G. Dewey**, an Indonesianist, is Professor Emerita of Anthropology at the University of Hawai'i. She was Dunham's dissertation advisor. She is the author of *Peasant Marketing in Java*.

**Nancy I. Cooper** is Adjunct Associate Professor of Anthropology at the University of Hawai'i. She was a fellow student of Dunham's.

**Maya Soetoro-Ng** has a doctorate in international comparative education from the University of Hawai'i. She is currently working on a children's book entitled *Ladder to the Moon*.

**Robert W. Hefner** is Professor of Anthropology and Associate Director of the Institute on Culture, Religion, and World Affairs at Boston University. He is President of the Association for Asian Studies. He is the author of many books including *Making Modern Muslims: The Politics of Islamic Education in Southeast Asia*.

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# THE CHRONICLE

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## Hot Type: Obama's Mother's Dissertation Gets Star Treatment From Duke U. Press



Photo courtesy of Bron Solyom

The Ph.D. dissertation of S. Ann Dunham, President Obama's mother, is being published, 15 years after her death. Dunham (left, with Indonesian villagers) wrote about craft industry in rural Indonesia.

By Jennifer Howard

The scholarly book getting the most buzz at the American Anthropological Association's annual conference this week is likely to be a doctoral dissertation published 15 years after its author's death. *Surviving Against the Odds: Village Industry in Indonesia* is by S. Ann Dunham, the mother of President Obama, a connection noted on the book's front cover. The publisher, Duke University Press, will unveil the book on December 3 at the conference, to be followed by a special session devoted to Dunham and her life and work.

I spoke with Dunham's daughter, Maya Soetoro-Ng, who is President Obama's half-sister, about their mother's life and work and how the dissertation made it from her closet to print. Ms. Soetoro-Ng wrote a foreword to the book. She and Mr. Obama spent some time in Indonesia as children while Dunham worked as a development and microcredit consultant and did fieldwork for the dissertation.

The book runs about 300 pages and focuses on a blacksmithing village called Kajar, in the province of Yogyakarta on the island of Java. The work has been whittled down significantly from its original form, which ran more than a thousand pages and investigated the socioeconomics of several village-based handicrafts, including batik, pottery, and the making of puppets used in shadow theater.

Ms. Soetoro-Ng told me her mother was "a real romantic and a pragmatist" at the same time, interested in objects that were beautiful in their own right and also a practical means of making everyday life better. "Metalworking was an embodiment of that fusion between art and livelihood and between beauty and utility that was very much in keeping with her vision as an anthropologist," Ms. Soetoro-Ng said.

Dunham's research and writing continued off and on until 1991; she submitted the dissertation a year later. When she died, in 1995, she left behind a collection of floppy disks that contained it all. "It was sitting in my closet for over a decade," Ms. Soetoro-Ng told me. She found it while doing some cleaning.

Dunham did not have time before she died to get the book into publishable shape. "I knew she had hoped that one day it could be published," her daughter said, but she did not know where to begin editing it. Ms. Soetoro-Ng has a doctorate in international comparative education and is working on a book about peace education drawn from her experiences teaching conflict resolution at a girls' school in Hawaii, but she is not an anthropologist. The prospect of editing a thousand-page anthropology treatise was daunting. "I wouldn't know what to take out, what was still relevant and what was not, what to emphasize. I was lost."

She handed the lot over to Alice G. Dewey, a professor emerita of anthropology at the University of Hawaii. Ms. Dewey had been Dunham's graduate adviser. With the help of Nancy I. Cooper, an adjunct associate professor of anthropology at the university, Ms. Dewey pared the dissertation to a more manageable size. According to an editor's note in the book, another scholar put Ms. Cooper and Ms. Dewey in touch with Ken Wissoker, editorial director at the Duke press.

### **'Prescient and Pathbreaking'**

Skeptics are likely to ask whether the quality of the scholarship is really what got Dunham's book into print. Ms. Soetoro-Ng makes a case for the value of her mother's work and its combination of scholarly detail and personal engagement.

"It was very moving for me to read the dissertation because I find that she's really a fine scholar and very thorough, very detailed, and very meticulous," Dunham's daughter said. "It's very professional, and it adheres to the mandates of objectivity that are used in the field, to some degree, but it's also full of feeling, and it's clear that she cares deeply about the ideas and the people and the place."

In an afterword to the book, Robert W. Hefner, a professor of anthropology at Boston University and president of the Association for Asian Studies, also says the scholarship is good. He met Dunham in Yogyakarta, and he praises her integrity as a cultural anthropologist. He writes that Dunham wanted "to correct broad-stroke characterizations of rural Java's economy" that put too much emphasis on agriculture and not enough on industry. Mr. Hefner also writes that Dunham was "intent on refuting portrayals of Indonesian peasants as tradition-bound and irrational, prone to placing diffuse social needs above precise economic calculations."

Mr. Wissoker says the book is a natural fit with the Duke press. In an e-mail message, he pointed out that *Surviving Against the Odds* aligns with the press's editorial emphases. "Anthropology, Southeast Asia, and critical work on development are all central to our list," he said. "We are honored to have the chance to publish her prescient and pathbreaking work."

Ms. Soetoro-Ng has come to see her mother as a pathbreaker as well. "Her work in microfinance was fairly pioneering, although I didn't realize that at the time. Now it has gained immense popularity, and there are a lot of people who see microfinance as an important facet of sustainable development." Dunham wanted to see that approach used widely, but she died before she had a chance to try. "That was her goal, to reach every corner of Indonesia, but also beyond," her daughter said. "I don't think you often found that coming from anthropologists, that kind of large-scale ambition coming from these programs. I think she was remarkable that way."

It's possible that the book will find an audience among anthropologists and perhaps in the microfinance community. Mr. Wissoker recalled that at last year's anthropology meeting, "everyone was thrilled that we would have a new president whose mother had been an anthropologist. They were happy to ascribe some of his more expansive and nuanced views of the globe and of other cultures to her good influence."

Ms. Soetoro-Ng would probably agree with that. "That natural respect she had for all people is something that we learned from her," she said.

She recognizes that some readers will pick up *Surviving Against the Odds* out of less-than-scholarly curiosity. "But it is an academic book. It is a smart and thoughtful book. And they will either have to have, possess, or discover an interest in socioeconomic anthropology and in cottage industries in Southeast Asia if they are going to read the book in its entirety."

Has the president read his mother's book? "I don't know," Ms. Soetoro-Ng told me, adding that Dunham had shared the dissertation with Mr. Obama while she was writing it. "He has a copy, but he's been busy."

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## Duke University to Publish Obama's Mom's Pioneering Book

By Calvin Reid -- Publishers Weekly, 11/24/2009

The American Anthropological Association is working in conjunction with Duke University Press to publish *Surviving Against the Odds: Village Industry in Indonesia*, a revised edition of the doctoral dissertation of S. Ann Dunham, also known as Ann Dunham Soetoro, the mother of President Barack Obama. The [book](#) will be published with an initial print run of 10,000 copies in a hardcover edition that will be launched with a press conference, panel discussion and reception to be held in Philadelphia on December 3.

While the story of Barack Obama's childhood growing up in Indonesia is by now well-known, there is much less known about his mother's academic work as an economic anthropologist and rural development consultant. Ken Wissoker, editorial director of Duke University Press, said Dunham's dissertation, completed in the early 1990s, was prescient and anticipated much of the current thinking on economic development in the developing world. The new edition includes rare photographs of Dunham in Indonesia; a foreword by Maya Soetoro-Ng, Dunham's daughter and the sister of President Obama; as well as an afterword by Robert W. Hefner, president of the Association for Asian Studies, that puts her pioneering work in scholarly context.

Wissoker said that Duke University Press's anthropology list was focused on books about "how conventional foreign aid has not worked and how it should be rethought," and Dunham's book is a perfect fit for its program. He hailed the importance of Dunham's scholarly work in Indonesia—she spent nearly 15 years in the field—and called the book, "a forerunner of much of today's work on using direct micro-credits and small loans. The book is about what small villagers can do entrepreneurially to help themselves. Her message is very accessible: trust people in small villages to be able to do good things if they have resources."

Dunham originally planned to revise her dissertation into a book herself but died in 1995 shortly after receiving her doctorate from the University of Hawaii. Her original dissertation—well over a 1,000 pages—was revised and edited for publication by Dunham's original academic advisor Alice Dewey, now in her 80s and professor Emeritus of Anthropology at the University of Hawaii, and adjunct associate professor Nancy Cooper, a fellow graduate student of Dunham who studied alongside her. The project started long before Obama was elected President, driven by the combined support of Dewey, Cooper, the AAA and Maya Soetoro-Ng.

Wissoker said the initial printing is "large for us" and emphasized that while the book was not written for a general reader, "it's very well written and its message is very accessible. We think people will be moved by her story and will love to have this book. It will also shed light on part of President Obama's legacy and why his life brings something different to the presidency."

[Print this page](#)From [The Sunday](#) November 8, 2009[Times](#)

# Jungle angel was Barack Obama's mother

[Christine Finn Kajar, Java Tony Allen-Mills New York](#)

IN a remote corner of rural Java, a blacksmith and his family were astounded last week to learn that the American woman who helped save them from poverty 26 years ago was Ann Dunham, an anthropologist better known as the late mother of the US president.

Dunham is still remembered in the central Javan hamlet of Kajar as a generous benefactor whose gifts of money, food and schoolbooks helped numerous villagers. Yet none of them had realised that the woman who paid several visits to research rural crafts in the 1980s had a son who was to become America's 44th president.

Told by The Sunday Times that Dunham was Barack Obama's mother, Darmo Sujak, a 67-year-old blacksmith, said he was "shocked" to discover the full identity of the woman who had changed his life.

Sujak recalled how Dunham arrived at his home in 1983 in a white Jeep with more than 100lb of rice, sweets, pens and school books.

He said Dunham, who died of cancer in Hawaii in 1995 at the age of 52, had given him four donations worth the equivalent of \$1,000. The money enabled him to build his house, expand his business and pay for his children's education.

Other villagers recognised Dunham, and themselves, from photographs that are included with parts of her

graduate thesis in a book that will be published next month with a foreword by Maya Soetoro-Ng, Dunham's daughter by her second marriage and Obama's half-sister.

Soetoro-Ng said last week she was happy to learn that her mother was still remembered in the Javan villages where she did most of her research while Barack, then a teenager, remained in Hawaii with his grandparents.

"She had a real affection for those people and that place," Soetoro-Ng told *The Sunday Times*. "She helped a lot of people through her work and it was very much like her to help them on a more personal level."

Dunham's visits to Indonesia would later cause political controversy over bogus claims that Obama had been raised as a Muslim and had been born overseas, making him ineligible to be president.

It was partly to set the record straight about their mother's Indonesian work that Soetoro-Ng found a publisher for *Surviving Against the Odds: Village Industry in Indonesia*, an academic study based on her mother's 1,000-page graduate thesis. Gazing at Dunham's portrait on the cover, Sujak said he felt his benefactor was still with him in spirit. "It means that she still loves me; after 25 years she is still looking out for me," he said.

Sujak recalled how he had applied for a grant after seeing a notice posted by Dunham. He recalled that he enclosed a photograph of his then seven-year-old daughter, Sutini, with his application. The Kansas-born American was travelling at the time with her own daughter, Maya, whose Indonesian father married Dunham two years after her 1964 divorce from Obama's Kenyan father.

Kay Ikranagara, a friend of Dunham's at the Academy of Educational Development in Jakarta, said the gifts were in keeping with the American woman's nature.

"She was so warm-hearted. It is nice that someone she helped has been traced in this way. I hope there will be more."

In all, Dunham gave the Sujak family 1m rupiah, then equivalent to twice the annual salary of a factory worker. Recognised in Java as a pioneer of microfinance, Dunham was campaigning to extend small loans to rural industries.

Some of the cash may have come from one of the international development agencies for which she worked as a consultant, but Dunham added her own gifts, including a fondly remembered present of three watches.

Sutini, Sujak's daughter, is now 32 and still lives in the village. Shown Dunham's photograph, she vividly remembered the childhood visit from a smiling, dark-haired woman.

Another villager recognised herself as a child, photographed in her late father's shop. The 42-year-old woman, who said her name was Mintarsih, rushed to show the picture to family and friends. Her mother, Bu Sastro, was visibly moved to see her late husband's portrait in the book. He had been one of Dunham's main research subjects.

Dunham first visited Indonesia in the 1960s with her second husband, Lolo Soetoro. Obama lived with them in Jakarta for four years from 1967-71. When the couple split up in 1972, Dunham moved to Hawaii before

returning to her Indonesian research in 1977. Barack was 16 at the time, and decided to stay with his grandparents in Honolulu.

While undertaking her fieldwork Dunham stayed at the home of Bu Maggie Norobangun, who last week recalled how the American visitor had loved to dress in vividly coloured traditional batik skirts. “She was anxious to raise the position and role of women, especially in villages . . . teaching young mothers how to make soup, showing an interest in them,” she said.

Dunham’s simple room, today bearing cracks from an earthquake in 2006, overlooks fruit trees and a terrace, where she would talk about her work with her hosts, and other visiting students. She described the village as “a wonderful and mysterious place”.

Dunham’s thesis reflects her passionate interest in Indonesian rural life. She describes how in 1978 Pak Sastro, a technology enthusiast, bought the village’s first television — battery-run as there was no electricity.

He and his wife settled down to watch it when, Dunham recalls, “hundreds of visitors crowded uninvited into their house to watch this strange new device”.

“Finally, in exasperation, Pak Sastro was forced to place the set in the window, facing the yard, and sat outside with his wife, on two chairs closest to the set, the villagers clamouring to view it behind them.”

Soetoro-Ng often accompanied her mother on her research trips. She writes in the book’s foreword: “Many hours of my childhood were spent in the homes of blacksmiths or by their furnaces . . . on these trips the greetings that the village women exchanged with Mom conveyed an intimacy that made it clear they had fully taken each other’s measure ... she was welcomed and trusted by all.”

In his memoir, *Dreams From My Father*, Obama displayed no trace of anger or regret that his mother had left him in Hawaii as a teenager.

He described her as “the kindest, most generous spirit I have ever known”.

Additional reporting: Sara Hashash

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## The untold story of Obama's mother

The President's formative years are well documented, but only now are his mother's exploits in Indonesia coming to light, reports Judith Kampfner

*Wednesday, 16 September 2009*



**AP** The young Barack Obama, known as Barry, with his mother in the 1960s

The shadow puppeteer flicks his wrist as he beats a stumpy stick against a wooden box and begins a dramatic introduction to a story about Kunti, a mother who fights for social justice. This is Pucung, a remote Indonesian village where skeletal leather puppets, some of Indonesia's best-known handicrafts, are made. The character has a mass of black hair. Ann Dunham, too, was famous for her shock of black hair, which she claimed came from a trace of Cherokee blood in her veins. Barack Obama's mother also did more for social justice in her adopted Indonesia than her son's accounts suggest.

"What is best in me, I owe to her," the 44th US President acknowledged in the second edition of his memoir *Dreams From My Father*. But Dunham has been little more than a footnote in his

extraordinary story. In the preface, Mr Obama wrote: "She travelled the world, working in the distant villages, helping women buy a sewing machine or a milk cow or an education that might give them a foothold in the world's economy."

But he chose to highlight a dreaminess in his mother. "She gathered friends from high and low, took long walks, stared at the moon and foraged through local markets for some trifle, a scarf or stone carving that would make her laugh or please the eye." There is more than a hint of superficiality; a sense that his mother was a hippy chick.

What Mr Obama's narrative omits is any detail of how Ann Dunham was an economic anthropologist and that for 30 years she devoted herself to studying rural enterprise in Indonesia. She took on projects as a development officer with the Ford Foundation, the US Agency for International Development and the Asian Development Bank, pioneering micro-credit projects that extended small loans to the rural poor.

Dunham's legacy both as a scholar and a mother whose influences would shape her son will finally receive wider prominence later this year when her PhD treatise, which took 14 years to complete, is published by Duke University Press. A feature-length movie about her life, Stanley Ann Dunham: A Most Generous Spirit, goes into production next year.

"She wanted to know why people do things and how they do what they do – applied anthropology," says Alice Dewey, Dunham's PhD supervisor. "She was the hardest-working person I have ever met. When she came down to breakfast, she had already been working for four hours."

But Dunham was more than an academic. In Indonesia, she supported radical groups opposed to the military dictatorship. She was an activist, an adventurer, a supporter of traditional arts and culture, a teacher, and a development worker. The country today is a world leader in micro-credit. "She was a pioneer," says Adi Sasono, chairman of the Co-operative Council of Indonesia, who watched her micro-finance achievements. "She was an orang besar [great person]. In Obama's books and speeches, I see the same sensitivity, the same concern for common people and for justice."

Dunham was born in Kansas in 1942 and named Stanley Ann because her father had wanted a boy. The family moved to Hawaii where she met her first husband, Barack Obama Snr, at university. After their brief marriage ended, Dunham returned to complete her anthropology degree and met Lolo Soetoro, an Indonesian student who would become her second husband.

The young mother, aged 24, and six-year-old Barack arrived in Jakarta to join Soetoro at a difficult time. The Muslim nation was in turmoil after the bloody coup in 1965 that brought General Suharto to power. But Dunham knew she wanted to pursue her studies and Indonesia, with its plethora of islands and languages, is a social anthropologist's paradise. According to friends, she spoke fluent Bahasa Indonesian (the national language) and some Javanese. She was an amateur weaver fascinated by textiles, who amassed a significant collection of batik cloths.

Like Dunham, Kay Ikranagara, was an American anthropologist married to an Indonesian. "She had high ideals for [Barack]," she recalls. "She said anyone who didn't work hard didn't deserve to get ahead. She had traditional values like honesty, (which in Indonesia was not especially prized – getting on with people was considered more important) and she hated hypocrisy."

Dunham's cultural heroes were Gandhi and Martin Luther King. She was a peacenik and believed implicitly in racial equality. But she did not anticipate the problems her son would have a black child at school in Hawaii, says Ms Ikranagara, adding: "Maybe she was not aware enough about that. We had this belief that there should be no racial difference, so maybe that made us a little blind to the difficulties one might have in a position like that."

In the atrium of Dunham's Jakarta home, Julia Suryakusuma points to carvings and earth colours and muses that it is "a very Ann house". Ms Suryakusuma was one of Dunham's closest friends and recalls her as "new age" – in that she was interested in spirituality but also "very, very disciplined". "[Ann] was a pragmatic idealist," she adds.

Dunham divorced Soetoro in 1980. "After her divorce, she was a free woman and she expressed it in a way a woman does," says Ms Suryakusuma. "She dared to live."

With Barack settled back at school in Hawaii from the early 1970s, living with his grandparents, and his half-sister Maya with Indonesian relatives, Dunham was free to pursue her studies. Her PhD thesis "Surviving Against The Odds" is an academic but lively account of village life and structure as well as the ancient rites, the shamanism, the sexual divisions of labour and the blacksmith trade.

The village Dunham studied is Kajar, in the foothills of mountains a 90-minute drive along dirt roads from Indonesia's second city, Yogyakarta. She lodged with Maggie Norobangun, who is still alive and leads the way through a courtyard where turtles crawl. Ann was easy to live with and "always cheerful, never complaining", she recalls. She would leave early, getting on a motorbike and hiking up her batik wrap skirts, and return late. She didn't talk about her children, Ms Norobangun says, "but I knew she missed them. She would ask me often about my children".

According to Bronwen Solyom, an anthropologist whose work in Indonesia overlapped with Dunham's: "She was a fluent speaker. She asked intelligent questions because she cared."

Some have suggested that the young Barack Obama resented being separated from his mother while she worked abroad. He told one interviewer last year that she had "a certain recklessness". Whatever the truth, the President is due to visit Indonesia in November. Locally, there is already much excitement. He likes nasi goreng, the national dish of fried rice it's rumoured. But one of Dunham's former friends, anthropologist Yang Suwan, refuses to read the President's autobiography. She says she can't ever forget when Mr Obama, then a law student, was made editor of The Harvard Law Review. His mother read out an article in Time magazine. "You know Suwan, they just say 'the mother is an anthropologist'. Just that, just one sentence," she said. Suwan repeats the sentence in disgust.

If he gets around to visiting Kajar, the President will hear how its families have just clubbed together for their first low-interest loan. It will allow them to nurture what Ann Dunham called the "ingenuity" of rural Java. It was one of her cherished goals.

*Judith Kampfner's documentary about Ann Dunham, Dreams From My Mother, can be heard today on BBC World Service radio*

<http://www.independent.co.uk/news/people/news/the-untold-story-of-obamas-mother-1787979.html>