

A photograph of two women smiling and standing outdoors. The woman on the left is wearing a grey top and a black and white patterned scarf. The woman on the right is wearing a white tank top and a teal patterned scarf. They are both looking towards the camera.

FOR A GOOD CAUSE

Yeoh Ee-Leng and
sisters Sasibai and
Poomabai Kimis on
building their social
enterprise Earth Heir
and raising awareness
of ethical consumption



GOODWILL HUNTING

DRIVEN BY A BURNING DESIRE TO DO GOOD AND IMPACT OTHERS, SASIBAI KIMIS LEFT THE CORPORATE WORLD TO FOUND ETHICAL FASHION AND SOCIAL ENTERPRISE EARTH HEIR IN 2013 WITH HER SISTER, POOMABAI, AND LATER ON WELCOMED THEIR FRIEND, YEOH EE-LENG, INTO THE FOLD. THE COMPANY ADVOCATES FAIR TRADE PRINCIPLES AND ETHICAL PARTNERSHIPS WITH THE CRAFTSMEN THEY ENGAGE WITH, AND CONTRIBUTES TO CAUSES CLOSE TO THEIR HEARTS LIKE COMBATING HUMAN TRAFFICKING AND THE ENVIRONMENT. THE TRIO SPEAK TO **ELAINE LAU ABOUT HOW EARTH HEIR WAS BIRTHED, THE TRIALS AND TRIUMPHS THEY'VE EXPERIENCED THUS FAR, AND ENCOURAGING CONSCIOUS CONSUMPTION.**

Sasibai Kimis knew from a young age that whatever it was she would end up doing with her life, there would be the element of making other people's lives better. It took many years, various life-changing experiences and encounters, but she is finally doing exactly that with the ethical fashion and social enterprise she and her sister Poomabai founded in 2013. Called Earth Heir, it sells luxurious, handcrafted fabric items such as scarves and shawls, sourced from craftsmen and weavers from around the region. Fair trade principles and ethical partnerships that ensure the men and women making the products can have sustainable livelihoods are at the core of Earth Heir's operations. Furthermore, the company commits to giving 10% of revenue to groups and organisations combating human trafficking and abuse, among others, causes close to Sasibai's heart.

It began with a dissatisfaction with the status quo, the conviction that there's more to life than the mindless acquisition of material wealth and scaling the corporate ladder. The year was 2000, and Sasibai, armed with an economics degree from the prestigious Wharton School of the University of Pennsylvania, got a job at the now defunct Lehman Brothers in New York City, but left after two years.

She explains, "I felt rather unfulfilled doing what I was doing, where everyone was more concerned about whether the Dow Jones went up or down than what was happening around the world. I decided that I wanted to learn more about how I could do more and understand the poverty nexus. This was when I left Lehman and went to Cambridge to do my masters in microfinance, gender and conservation."

After graduating from Cambridge, followed by a stint at a railway engineering firm in Malaysia, in 2004 Sasibai fulfilled her dream of working in Africa with the United Nations, and volunteered as a programme assistant with the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) in Ghana, focusing on women and gender projects, and the 2004 presidential elections. "Luckily, I have very understanding parents," she quips. "I borrowed money from them and headed to volunteer with the UNDP."

The next few years saw Sasibai working in both the corporate sector and non-governmental organisations (NGO), first with American NGO Opportunities Industrialization Centers International in Ghana after her six-month internship with the UNDP, then at a private equity advisory firm in London followed by Khazanah Nasional in Malaysia. In 2011, she decided to quit and enrolled at faith-based school Youth With a Mission (YWAM), where she got the chance to do social outreach in Cambodia. "Overall, I felt that my life was constantly an exploration between the capitalistic and non-profit worlds. The financial world had a lot of money but cared little for the well-being of people and planet, while the non-profit world seemed to do a lot of good but was constantly lacking money," she observes. "My time in Ghana was where I learned that neither the capitalistic model nor charity alone is sustainable. A new way of building economies is needed, one that considers both."

Her time in Cambodia left an indelible impression on her, as the social outreach work she was involved in there with YWAM exposed her "to the plight of weavers, garment workers and families who had lost their children to trafficking", she recalls. It was after this trip that the idea for Earth Heir began to germinate.

"I felt that it was time to make the leap and do something that could do good sustainably. I had also reached a turning point in my life where I began to



Handwoven scarves and shawls are one of Earth Heir's staple offerings sourced from Cambodia, Thailand, Malaysia and India

think about the legacy I was going to leave behind in my life. I lost a friend in the Sept 11 attacks in New York City, and that episode has always remained with me, that life is ephemeral, and we need to live with impact and purpose every day. I thought, 'Do I want to keep building up my bank account and one day look back and wonder what I have achieved in my life, or do I want to leave knowing that I have impacted the lives of others positively?'" she muses.

The result of that rumination and her encounters in Cambodia is Earth Heir, which Sasibai established on Feb 14, 2013, together with her sister, Poomabai, who from the start, has been Sasibai's sounding board and co-conspirator. Poomabai helps out with the business from London where she is based, working as director of markets and institutions at the Official Monetary and Financial Institutions Forum, an independent platform for dialogue and research. In late 2013, Sasibai's good friend, Yeoh Ee-Leng, an architect, became a director of Earth Heir after initially coming on board just to lend a hand. "It was very informal at first," Yeoh says. "I was freelancing at the time and could take it on. I wanted to be involved in a business, and Sasibai said why don't you come and work for me and experience what it's like."

I'd met Sasibai and Yeoh briefly before at a weekend bazaar where they had a booth selling Earth Heir's gorgeous scarves and clutches, but it was at this interview that I really got to converse with them at length. Both easy-going and sincere, they spoke frankly about the challenges of running a business for the first time, and the priceless lessons learnt and connections made along the way. Our conversation is peppered often with girlish laughter, and it quickly becomes evident to me the special bond shared between these two, no doubt forged and strengthened from the trials and triumphs they've experienced thus far.

A devout Christian, Sasibai explains the biblical implication of the name, Earth Heir. "It is inspired by the concept that we are all heirs of the Earth, that God has given us the responsibility to be good stewards, and we need to take on that responsibility." Meanwhile, the brand's logo is a West African Adinkra symbol called *nyame nti*, which means "by God's grace". "Overall, the inspiration was to create a business that honours God and creation," she says.

"Christ does have a big role in our business model," says Poomabai, who spoke to me over a Skype call. "It's one of the reasons we give 10% of our revenue to the various partners we have. This is fundamental to our business. There are very few businesses that do this, but this counter-intuitive business model is functioning and has been sustainable — we're living proof of the concept. Ultimately, this isn't for us to make huge amounts of profits; we're here to really make an impact. Obviously it would be nice to make a nice living out of it, but that wasn't the fundamental driver and still isn't." Specifically, Earth Heir contributes to WeForest.org, Chab Dai in Cambodia and Redeeming Roses in Malaysia.

It took some time and a fair amount of trial and error to get to where they are, but Earth Heir is now self-sustaining — although neither of them have drawn a salary from it yet as all profits are ploughed back into the business. Sasibai shares that when she began, she sold scarves she had bought from weavers in Cambodia to family and friends, before moving on to selling at weekend markets, bazaars and pop-ups for all of 2013 while they waited for their website to be built. This was a real character-building experience.

Says Sasibai, "It was exhausting and tiring. We've even done 18 days straight, and it's from 10am to 10pm. We tried to hire people but we had all these

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challenges finding people. Ee-Leng and I carried bags of stuff, did the set-up, essentially manual labour... We were really starting from the ground up, and we felt quite miserable at times. But I must say all those experiences built us up to where we are today because that really gave us the tenacity to not give up. Even when things sucked, when it's just so bad and your morale so low, we told ourselves not to give up. We encouraged each other."

"We did meet a lot of interesting people and very supportive people who gave us more contacts," says Yeoh. "A lot of people have come to us to hear our story, talk to us and even ask if there is a way they can work together with us or introduce us to somebody. That's been really nice."

When they were not selling at pop-ups, Sasibai and Yeoh travelled to Cambodia, India and Thailand to secure their sourcing. Sasibai explains, "We're not buying from a factory somewhere. We're working with discreet groups of weavers, and we would go to their homes and buy from them. Then we moved to working with NGOs and cooperatives, who manage a network of weavers. But even with these NGOs we still have to check everything. We still need to feel confident about what we're buying. We travel to the villages to meet with them. We needed to make sure that the weavers are well treated, so I always interview the weavers."

Initially, they were buying whatever was being produced, but they soon engaged the weavers to produce original designs that the three of them come up with. The latest one is the very chic Chevron collection of scarves, offered in bright mono-colours of mustard, fuchsia and teal, as well as black and navy, with bold white Chevron stripes. "We wanted to do something a bit more contemporary," says Yeoh.

Another noteworthy collection is the one done in collaboration with Janavi, India's premiere cashmere brand. "They are high end, and they supply to brands like Chanel and Dior. Why would they work with us? They said they like our story, what we're doing and they don't have a presence in this part of the world so they were happy to collaborate with us," says Sasibai.

There are plans to source from other countries as well, like Vietnam, Laos, Myanmar and the Philippines to name a few. But the process of securing reliable and quality suppliers is not without its challenges, not to mention the costs involved. Says Sasibai, "We've had a lot of lessons along the way. We've had mishaps and problems, and we've had to remove people we couldn't rely on or who didn't do good work. There was a lot of relationship-building and developing networks, and it took us two years. Now we've reached a point where we have great relationships with groups in Malaysia, Cambodia, India and Thailand. We can work with so many different techniques: batik, natural dye fabrics, tie-dye, prints and lace. We are at the point where we can scale; we can attend to large orders."

To that end, the trio is targeting corporations who want to give meaningful gifts and is also looking to expand Earth Heir's online presence and points of sale overseas. The brand is currently stocked in London and Chicago, as well as various international and local e-commerce sites.

Closer to home, there will soon be an Earth Heir space in Ampang Point, set to be launched at year-end or early 2016. "It will be a combined space with our office, showroom and a studio/workspace where we can have mini workshops with makers teaching the public various hand craftsmanship skills. Our showroom is being designed with the help of Tony Heneberry," says Sasibai.

Growing the business, while crucial, is but one aspect of it. The greater vision is "to raise awareness



From left: Yeoh, Poomabai and Sasibai

in the country and the region about ethical fashion, helping consumers and also people who are producing fashion to think about the impacts of how they are making what they are making," says Sasibai. "We want to encourage and build awareness towards conscious consumption, just encouraging people to ask questions and think before they buy."

Poomabai adds, "It's a simple vision: One, to make a difference in people's lives, and that means we bring more awareness to the human trafficking and slavery story. It means that we get people like you and me to understand what ethical fashion is — I didn't know until we started exploring more. It's getting people to have a better understanding of living well and doing good with simple things... You don't have to use ethical goods for everything. Start small — start with a scarf, see the impact you're making in people's lives and take it from there. That's often what I tell people. It's not an unreachable goal."

"I think there needs to be a change of mindset," says Yeoh. "Fashion is about trends and following what other people wear. But if you have a change of mindset where you're going for uniqueness and

quality, it may be more expensive but it's handmade, it's a craft, and there's artistry in it. If you're paying the same amount of dollars wouldn't you want to get something that actually contributes to someone else's livelihood and to preserve a heritage? There should be more options out there. Going back to advocacy, it's trying to raise awareness that there is a better option."

Aside from a strong belief in the cause, what has kept them going is the positive impact they see in the communities and groups they are involved with or support. Says Sasibai, "There's on the sourcing end, the weavers, but also the 10% we give to the charities we support, like the one in Cambodia, where the money we give goes to emergency assistance for trafficking survivors. Here in Malaysia with Redeeming Roses, they work with street women. Just the other day I went to brothels again with them to distribute food. It's a vehicle for us to be able to go in and engage with these women."

Sasibai is heartened at the fact that Earth Heir is a source of inspiration. She says, "We realised that what we're doing represents something. A lot of people ask me, 'Why did you leave your job and what motivated you to do it?' There's a desire within a lot of people to want to do more but they don't know how, or they're worried, and they can't take the leap yet. People see what we're doing as a positive example for others who may want to do good to try to do it, to be more fearless."

Poomabai adds, "It's not just the Sasi, Ee-Leng and Pooma show. It's getting everyone else on board and being a part of the story. The more multipliers we have, the more we will be able to make a difference. We want to be the drivers but eventually it's got to be something that everyone buys into and we're seeing that already. We're seeing the successes and we're thriving in it. We'd like to just get that momentum going even more and make a true difference." ■

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