



# The Mother Who Was Overlooked

The true inspiration behind the political ideals and acumen of Aung San Suu Kyi

By **Kyaw Zwa Moe**

People who are acquainted with the name Aung San know of Aung San Suu Kyi. Equally, people for whom Suu Kyi is a famous name also know of Aung San. Aung San and Suu Kyi, father and daughter, share symbolic resemblances when it comes to Burma's politics.

While the late Aung San is held as a symbol of the country's independence, Nobel Peace laureate Suu Kyi, who celebrated her 61st birthday on June 19, is regarded as a symbol of democracy. But this heritage could hardly have come directly from her father—she was just two years old when Gen Aung San, Burma's founding father, was assassinated by political rivals in 1947.

"My father died when I was too young to remember him," Suu Kyi wrote in a preface to her biography *Aung San of Burma*, published in 1984. So, who was Suu Kyi's mentor and who inspired her to become a national leader of her father's stature?

The answer can only be her mother, the late Khin Kyi, who was regarded as one of Burma's most influential women of her time, although she never achieved the fame of her husband and daughter.

"Daw Khin Kyi made her children, from their earliest years, aware of their father's heritage," wrote M Than E in an article, *A Flowering of the Spirit: Memories of Suu and Her Family*, which was published in Suu Kyi's book *Freedom From Fear*. M Than E, once a famous singer and retired senior staff member

of the UN's secretariat, is a close friend of Aung San's family.

Some other close friends believe as well as being a conscientious mother, Khin Kyi was her daughter's political and cultural mentor. "In front of her mother, Daw Suu looked like an innocent child, not knowing anything, including politics and things like that," said the celebrated poet Tin Moe, who had meetings with Khin Kyi and Suu Kyi in the 1980s.

Khin Kyi was very well informed and knew a lot about Burma's politics, although she rarely paraded her knowledge, said the poet. When she talked about politics, she was very diplomatic—Suu Kyi must have learned a great deal about Burma's politics from her mother, he added.

Tin Moe was often invited in the early 1980s to visit Khin Kyi at her

her country in India and also taking special responsibility for Nepal. Her teenage daughter wasn't neglected in this busy time—Suu Kyi studied diligently, took riding and piano lessons and dallied with such social skills as flower arrangement.

Khin Kyi's achievements were rewarded with honors from the US, Yugoslavia and Thailand, while at home the Rangoon government awarded her the Maha Thiri Thudhamma prize, given for services to Burmese social and religious life.

Suu Kyi was the child of a happy union. Her father fell deeply in love with the senior staff nurse who treated him during his World War II campaigns and they married in 1942. Khin Kyi was the name of the beautiful young nurse.

Suu Kyi wrote of the romance in her biography of her father: "[Khin Kyi] han-

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“Aung San had married a woman who had not only the courage and warmth he needed in his life's companion but also the steadfastness and dignity to uphold his ideals after he was gone”

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lakeside home in Rangoon. Suu Kyi would be there, visiting from her home in London, and Khin Kyi would chat with them while gardening or sitting in the kitchen.

Although Khin Kyi never shared the fame of her husband and daughter, she was a successful woman in her field. She was a member of parliament from 1947-1952, became chairperson of the Women's Association of Burma in the 1950s and a leading light in other social organizations.

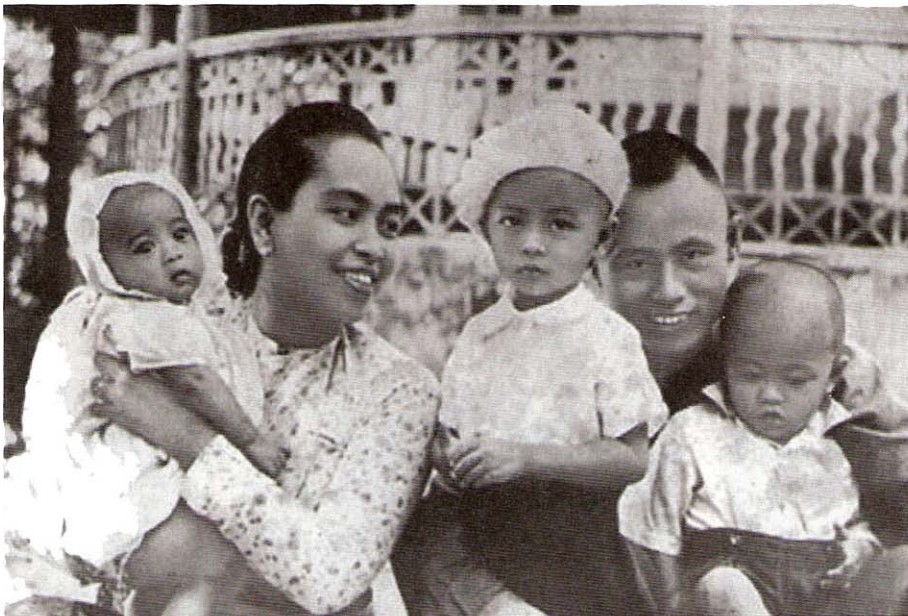
In 1960 she became Burma's first and only woman ambassador, representing

dled Aung San with firmness, tenderness, and good humor. The formidable commander-in-chief was thoroughly captivated.

"Aung San had married a woman who had not only the courage and warmth he needed in his life's-companion but also the steadfastness and dignity to uphold his ideals after he was gone."

These ideals were clearly instilled in her daughter by Khin Kyi. The respected 87-year-old author and poet Dagon Tayar noted a significant parallel in the thinking of father and daughter—"Whatever Ko Aung San said, he had one condition:





Together: Khin Kyi and Aung San with their three children, Suu Kyi (left) Aung San Oo (centre) and Aung San Lin

'if Burma restores independence.' Like her father, Daw Suu always has one condition: if Burma restores democracy." In a phone conversation from his home in Shan State, Dagon Tayar summed

up Khin Kyi's character in one word: "integrity."

Suu Kyi decided to enter Burmese politics in 1988 when students initiated a nationwide pro-democracy movement

against the authoritarian regime. She was then living in London but visiting Rangoon to look after her ailing mother. She decided instinctively that not only her mother needed her—so did Burma.

Khin Kyi had only months to live—she died in December 1988—but the poet Tin Moe believes Suu Kyi consulted her before taking up politics and obtained her mother's approval. A huge crowd of mourners, estimated to number 200,000, gathered to pay their last respects at Khin Kyi's funeral.

One large gap remains in this family story—a biography of Khin Kyi. Tin Moe says the ever-modest Khin Kyi turned down a biography proposal by one of Burma's most popular writers. Perhaps the time has come for Suu Kyi to attempt the task—she is, after all, the person most qualified to profile a woman who so shaped her life and who has been overlooked by posterity.

A biography of Khin Kyi by her daughter would not only provide a fascinating version of the Aung San family story but also throw much light on the politics of post-colonial Burma. ■

# Learning with the Irrawaddy 12

To accompany July 2006 Issue of Irrawaddy magazine

Selected article: *The mother who was overlooked: The true inspiration behind the political ideals and acumen of Aung San Suu Kyi*, pages 16-17

## Activities to do Before Reading

### Activity 1

#### Predict the main point

- a) This article is called *The mother who was overlooked: the true inspiration behind the political ideals and acumen of Aung San Suu Kyi*. Do you understand this title? What does it mean?
- b) Look at the pictures, but don't read the article yet! Can you guess the main point of this article?

### Activity 2

- What do you know?**  
**What do you think you know?**  
**What do you want to know?**

You are going to read an article about Daw Aung San Suu Kyi's mother, Daw Khin Kyi. What do you know about her? What do you think you know? What do you want to know about her? Complete this chart.

Daw Khin Kyi		
Things I know	Things I think I know	Things I want to know

## Activities to do During Reading

### Activity 3

#### Check the main point

Skim-read the article. What is the main point? Check through the suggestions from **Activity 1**. Which suggestions are correct?

**Activity 4****Match the vocabulary**

- a) Students go through the article and underline the words they don't understand.
- b) Students match these words with their definitions.

- |               |   |
|---------------|---|
| 1. symbol     | a. to ask for advice  |
| 2. founding   | b. something or someone that competes with another            |
| 3. rival      | c. a person who attends a funeral                             |
| 4. mentor     | d. the people who will live after you are dead                |
| 5. inspire    | e. to attract and interest someone                            |
| 6. heritage   | f. one of the first organizers of something                   |
| 7. neglect    | g. a picture, person or thing that represents an idea         |
| 8. captivate  | h. the traditional beliefs and customs of a country or family |
| 9. integrity  | i. being honest, having high moral principles                 |
| 10. ailing    | j. to ignore, to not pay attention to                         |
| 11. consult   | k. an experienced person who helps a less experienced one     |
| 12. mourner   | l. being sick   |
| 13. posterity | m. to encourage someone to do something good                  |

- c) Students match these words with their definitions.

1. The football team were beaten by a \_\_\_\_\_ team from the next town.
2. If you \_\_\_\_\_ neglect your children, they will grow up unhappy.
3. Daw Khin Kyi was very truthful, she had a lot of \_\_\_\_\_ .
4. The older teacher was a \_\_\_\_\_ to the new staff.
5. Aung San Suu Kyi's parents \_\_\_\_\_ her to become a leader.
6. I like to \_\_\_\_\_ my parents when I want to make a decision.
7. There were a lot of \_\_\_\_\_ at Daw Khin Kyi's funeral.
8. The actor \_\_\_\_\_ the audience with his performance.
9. Aung San was a \_\_\_\_\_ of Burma's independence movement.
10. Aung San Suu Kyi returned to Burma when her mother was \_\_\_\_\_.
11. Please keep these photographs and documents for \_\_\_\_\_.
12. Aung San was a \_\_\_\_\_ member of the AFPFL.
13. Burma has a strong \_\_\_\_\_ of arts and culture.

## Activity 5

### Idioms and phrasal verbs from context

Choose the sentence or phrase that means the same as the underlined idiomatic phrase or phrasal verb from the article.

1. ...*although she rarely paraded her knowledge...* (paragraph 7)
  - a. appeared in the media
  - b. showed that she knew a lot
  - c. argued with other people
  - d. organised street festivals
  
2. ... *Suu Kyi must have learned a great deal about Burma's politics from her mother* (paragraph 7)
  - a. a lot
  - b. a little
  - c. accurate information
  - d. important things
  
3. ... *and a leading light in other social organizations.* (paragraph 9)
  - a. electrician
  - b. famous person
  - c. spokesperson
  - d. important leader
  
4. *Dagon Tayar summed up Khin Kyi's character in one word...* (paragraph 15)
  - a. summarised
  - b. added
  - c. exaggerated
  - d. liked
  
5. ... *Suu Kyi consulted her before taking up politics...* (paragraph 17)
  - a. organising
  - b. writing about
  - c. participating in
  - d. speaking about
  
6. ...*gathered to pay their last respects at Khin Kyi's funeral.* (paragraph 17)
  - a. say goodbye
  - b. cry
  - c. celebrate
  - d. express their anger
  
7. ...*but also throw much light on the politics of post-colonial Burma.* (paragraph 19)

- a. provide a different opinion about
- b. use bigger writing about
- c. provide more information about
- d. tell lies about

### Activity 6

#### Comprehension

Answer these questions. If the answer is not in the text, write 'Doesn't say.'

1. Why is it unlikely that Aung San Suu Kyi got her ideas from her father?
2. Was Daw Khin Kyi very ambitious?
3. Did Daw Khin Kyi tell her children about Aung San and his ideas?
4. According to Tin Moe, who knew more about politics, Daw Khin Kyi or Aung San Suu Kyi?
5. Has Burma had many female ambassadors?
6. Did Daw Khin Kyi ever visit the US?
7. Why did Khin Kyi decide to marry Aung San?
8. What similar phrases have Aung San Suu Kyi and her father used?

### Activity 7

#### Order the events

- a) Put these events into chronological order.
  - 1 – Aung San Suu Kyi celebrates her 61<sup>st</sup> birthday.
  - 2 – General Aung San is assassinated
  - 3 – Aung San Suu Kyi publishes a biography of her father.
  - 4 – Daw Khin Kyi becomes ambassador to India.
  - 5 – Khin Kyi and Aung San get married.
  - 6 – Aung San Suu Kyi gets involved in Burmese politics.
  - 7 – Daw Khin Kyi dies.
- b) Two other events happened in Daw Khin Kyi's life that are mentioned in the article. What are they? Identify them and put them in order with the events from a).

### Activities to do After Reading

### Activity 8

#### Research and planning a biography

- a) The writer of this article suggests that Aung San Suu Kyi should write a biography of her mother. If Aung San Suu Kyi does not have enough time to do this, she might ask you to do the job. Where could you get information about her? There are a few sources mentioned in the article. In groups, think of a list of sources - people and places you could go to find out more about Daw Khin Kyi.
- b) The publishers have decided the book must be 12 chapters long. Decide what chapters to divide the book into, and decide on a title for each chapter.