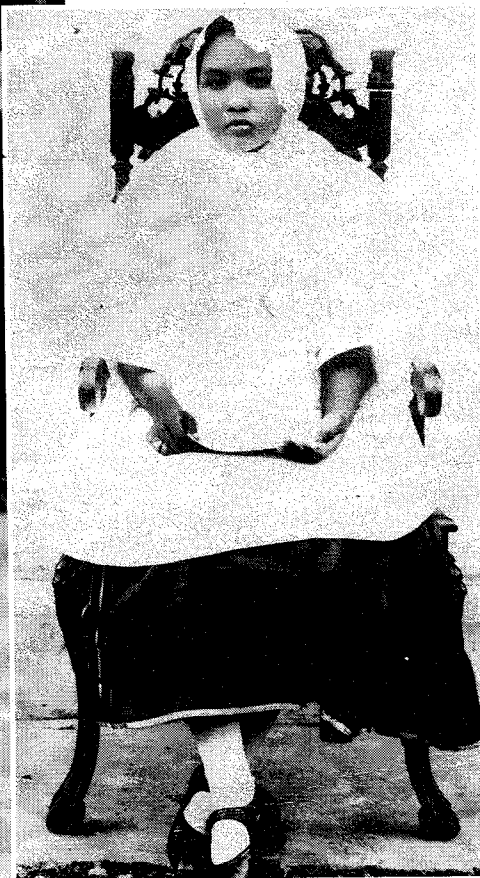


Run-up to the
50th Merdeka
Celebrations

SPECIAL

> This is the first of our monthly articles focusing on Merdeka Families



Woman of substance: The ever patriotic Ibu Zain greeting the nation's second Prime Minister Tun Abdul Razak. Inset: Ibu Zain as a young adult. She became a probationary teacher at 19, and at 24 was made the superintendent of schools in Johor. — Pictures courtesy of SHAKIB AMIN

Ibu Zain's blazing trail

Tan Sri Zainun Sulaiman, a pioneer for Malay women in education and politics, spoke up bravely for the independence cause.

By **SUHAINI AZNAM**
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AS a young girl, she had the opportunity to study medicine in the United States. But her mother wept buckets at the idea and she instead became a teacher — and ended up as one of the pioneers of Malaya's fledgling independence movement.

Campaigning shoulder to shoulder with the men, Tan Sri Zainun Sulaiman, affectionately known as Ibu Zain, would have been 104 had she lived today.

Born in Malacca on Jan 22, 1903, Ibu Zain was a pioneer for Malay women in education and politics.

She was a founder member of Umno in 1946 and by the early 1950s, became its Kaum Ibu chief, a post she held for four years. She became an MP, but only for a term perhaps because of her forthright tongue.

But her story really began half a lifetime earlier. At 16, after obtaining her junior Cambridge, she taught at her

father's private kindergarten in Pasuh Jayawaras, a new settlement along the Negri Sembilan-Pahang border.

She became a government probationary teacher at 19, and later was confirmed as principal of the Sekolah Perempuan Bandar Maharani. When she was 24, she was promoted to superintendent of girls' schools in Johor, whereupon she threw her efforts to achieve two goals: to open new schools for girls and to persuade parents to allow their daughters to become teachers.

On top of all this, she found time to wed Amin Sulaiman, who rose to become the State assistant treasurer of Johor. They had three children.

Her eldest daughter, columnist and novelist Adibah Amin, remembers "a very elegant lady in very crisp, white *baju kurung* and *batek sarong*, high heels, walking very fast through the house" to go to office.

Ibu Zain headed the Johor chapter of the Malay Women Teachers Association from 1930 to 1949.

She founded the *Bulan Melayu*, a Jawi

publication for women teachers as a counterpart to *Majallah Guru* for men. As its manager and editor, she highlighted the position of women, their education and rights.

Thus Umno's early years saw a broad membership base of teachers, some of whom were her former students.

She helped Umno president Dato Onn Jaafar a lot in the Pergerakan Melayu Semenanjung, the precursor to Umno.

"I think she had natural leadership qualities," said Fadzilah, her second daughter.

Later, when the Kaum Ibu women gave their gold bangles to the independence cause, "my mother too felt she should make such a gesture, although she never had much jewellery. She did wear a gold chain with a watch her late brother had given her in 1918, which she treasured very much. She gave the chain. I have the watch until today," said Fadzilah.

Personal sacrifice

Ibu Zain's first trip abroad after the *hajj*

was a watershed.

"In 1947, the Indian Congress invited my mother to visit India where she met Nehru, Gandhi, Mrs Pandit and Sarojini Naidu.

"While in Burma, she met (Gen) Aung San, who was assassinated about a week later. My mother was very upset.

"There were always political people coming to the house. In 1949, weekly meetings were held at Dato Onn's house.

"We lived in the school compound and the school guard would keep an eye on us when our mother was away. My sister was 13 then, I was 11 and my brother nine.

"When she was head of Kaum Ibu, she went around quite a bit. But she always found a relative or neighbour to look after us," said Fadzilah.

Noted Adibah: "At the time, we didn't feel it. Later on, you realise how much time she had to give up travelling all over. She trusted that we would not go wild and that nothing terrible was going to happen to us.

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Model mother and citizen

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"She instilled in us the importance of self-confidence. We must try our very best, then leave the rest to God. She taught us never to be envious of anyone."

By her example, she showed "that family unity, as in the larger family, is very important. We might quarrel but love must bring us together again," said Adibah.

"Fairness is very important. During the Japanese Occupation, we divided things mathematically to make sure everyone had his fair share.

"She taught us never to show off. We must realise that everything comes from God, so there is nothing to boast about," Adibah added.

In her children's eyes, Ibu Zain stands larger than life.

Her son Sulaiman Shakib's earliest memories of her date back to the Japanese Occupation.

"My mother, with a cloth wound around her head, would be digging a bomb shelter for the family on the hill slope near our home," he recalled. He was four, just old enough to run.

"When I was older, I often followed her to meetings and heard her speak for the independence cause. Her speeches were unique and until today no one can emulate her style.

"She spoke without a text. And she would intersperse her speeches with songs to rouse her audience's spirits. Allah gave her a melodious voice, so it was like a lullaby.

"She would speak for over an hour before crowds of 200 to 300, addressing them as *Tuan Tuan dan Puan Puan tanah air* (Gentlemen and Ladies of this homeland).

"She was brave. She didn't care about being arrested by the British. We were in the midst of *ghairah merdeka* (independence fervour)," said Shakib.

Battle scar

He also described the day his mother's train, filled with English wives, was ambushed by communist guerillas near Labis, Johor. "A stray bullet entered her thigh, leaving a huge scar. My mother called it her '*map kemerdekaan*' (independence map)."

Because their father had died of diabetes when they were children, Ibu Zain struggled on as a single mother long before the term came into fashion.

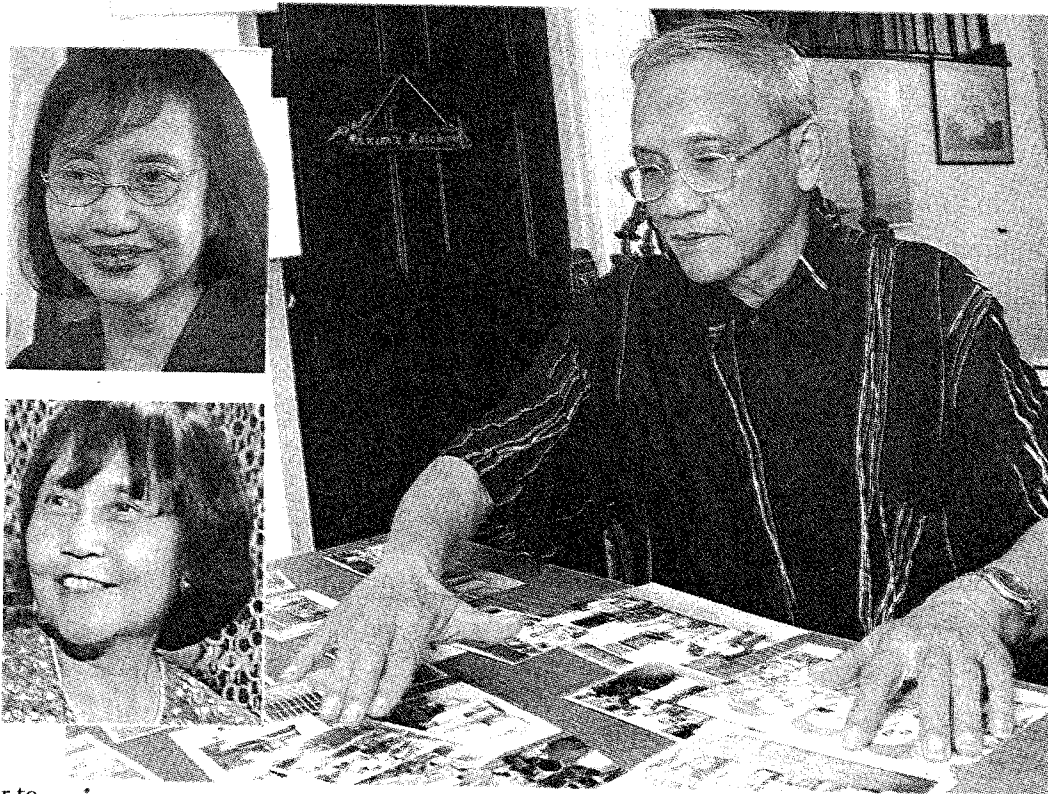
"Women teachers had to retire at 45, and we lived on her pension. We had less than \$200 a month for a family of four but we had enough to eat. There was no great deprivation.

Through this time, despite fighting for a Malay-led independence, her mother opened her heart to friends of all races.

"My mother never had a racist bone in her," said Adibah. "Neither did my father. Chinese, Indians, all came to our house. She loved them all.

This multiracialism lives on in her children, who are puzzled by today's segregation.

Being children of a pioneering politician, the three were avid followers of current events. "In addition to the radio, our mother subscribed to the Jawi newspapers from Kedai Wahab," said Shakib.



Fond memories: Ibu Zain's children (clockwise from left) Fadzilah, Adibah and Shakib agree that their mother's proudest day was Merdeka.

The children agree that their mother's proudest day was Merdeka itself.

"I was at home, in my mother's room, by the radio just waiting for that precious moment when the Union Jack was lowered at midnight, followed by the raising of the flag of the Tanah Melayu," said Shakib.

Adibah was in University Malaya in Singapore then. "Everyone was excited, although trying to act sophisticated about it," she recalls.

"I was longing to be in Kuala Lumpur too. I was 21, so it was also my independence year. But it was not to be. Our radio was not working very well so I listened to Mrs Alfred's radio next door.

Fadzilah remembers being at a foodstall

»She was brave. She didn't care about being arrested«

SULAIMAN SHAKIB AMIN

with at least one friend when Merdeka was announced.

"My mother always kept abreast of the news," recalls Fadzilah.

"She phoned Dr Mahathir and Hussein Onn whenever she was upset over something. And they would listen to her politely. She called them 'her boys'."

Her children today continue to be keen followers of local and world affairs. But where their mother spoke her mind, "we are all a little more tactful," laughed Adibah.

Were she alive today, Adibah feels that their mother "would be happy with the country's progress, the religious revival, the

The two spiritual guides in her life

Ibu Zain had the good fortune of having two remarkable men as her spiritual guides – her father and her husband.

Her paternal grandfather, Mohamed Nor, was an official in the court of the Sultan of Siak in Sumatra. Disappointed with the sultan's refusal to stand up to the Dutch, he left with his 11-year-old son Sulaiman in a boat.

Halfway across the Straits of Malacca, he threw some uncut gems into the sea, vowing that only when the gems resurfaced would he return.

Thus the seeds of nationalism, first against the Dutch, transferred itself against the British. Ibu Zain inherited that fire.

When she was only five, her father Sulaiman, who was given the title *Munshi* because he taught at the Teachers Training College in Malacca, sent her to the local Methodist Girls' School, defying the prevailing kampung view that going to an English school meant to "*masuk Christian*" (adopt Christianity).

He believed that "if we want to defeat the British, we must know their language, their culture, how to speak with them. Only then will they respect us," said Shakib.

"When my mother returned from school, she and my grandfather would compare the teachings of the Quran and the Bible. He would explain the difference; he was the *guru agama* (religious teacher).

"So she was not influenced because when she got home there was already an anti-dote," explained Shakib.

Her other beloved guide was her husband Amin, born of Arab-Javanese parentage, who grew up in Mecca. He learned English from the tourists whose bags he carried.

Orphaned at 15, he and two friends worked their passage on a ship bound for Singapore.

He attended the Victoria Bridge school and later the Raffles College for his Senior Cambridge. He joined the Johor civil service where he rose to become assistant state treasurer at the age of 45.

The couple met when Ibu Zain went to study Arabic before leaving for the *haj* in Mecca. He was her tutor and she learnt to call him *akhi* (brother), recounted Adibah. "When they married, the name stuck."

Fadzilah remembers him being "the only person mother would not cross".

"My father was a sweet person. He was very intelligent and supportive (of my mother). They never quarrelled," she recalled.

While Amin was "perhaps not as high-profile as his wife, he had other strengths. He was a respected Arabic scholar. Had he lived longer, he might have risen even higher in his career," said Shakib.

"My father began a trilingual Malay-Arabic-English dictionary with Dato Onn which stopped at 'J'. We don't know where the draft has gone to," said Adibah.

"The Japanese transferred him to Muar and worked him to death. He died just 11 days before the war ended," recounted Fadzilah, who was then seven. That steeled Ibu Zain to struggle on her own.



standard of education and the confidence everybody has, especially the women."

Being a teacher, their mother had at first found it funny to see the coinage of new Malay terms.

Although Ibu Zain herself spoke English well and read English novels, she insisted on speaking Malay to her children even while speaking English with her husband. "She believed that you must be good in your own language first," explained Adibah.

"But she never believed in sacrificing one language for the other.

"She supported the use of Malay as the national language. And if English should be second to the national language, it should be an excellent second."

All her children grew up at least bilingual.

As a postscript, both Adibah and Fadzilah too were admitted into medical faculties. "Adibah quit after a few weeks and I quit after three years," said Fadzilah.

Coming from a family of teachers, both took naturally to the profession. Fadzilah became a lecturer in English literature at Universiti Malaya and Adibah taught Malay and English for 13 years before switching to feature writing.

Even Shakib, upon retiring as a sub-accountant with a bank, turned to his first love – teaching young children.

Ibu Zain's interest in journalism carried on to another generation. Of her five grandchildren, granddaughter Nadiyah, 30, is now a journalist with the *Romford Recorder* in East London and grandson Amin, 41, writes scripts for television.

The apple does not fall far from the tree.