

political party, the National League for Democracy won, a landslide electoral victory in 1990, but the military refused to relinquish power.

Meanwhile, Suu Kyi has remained in Burma at great personal sacrifice. She has only sporadically been able to visit with her two sons. As her husband was dying with prostate cancer in 1999, the junta refused to grant him a visa to see her one last time.

The world hardly needs another crisis at this moment, but the situation in Burma has been worsening. Drug dealers have turned Burma into one of the world's largest producers of heroin and amphetamines. At the same time, Burma has one of the fastest-growing AIDS rates in the world—and one of the world's worst health care systems.

When I spoke with Aung San Suu Kyi in February, she was gracious, articulate and clearly frustrated by the lack of progress. "There is a crying need to democratize our country," she said. "We cannot do anything about the appalling social and economic problems until we do something about the government. People ought to be able to live without fear of being dragged off in the middle of the night to who knows where."

Even if this champion of democracy emerges unharmed from her current incarceration, the movement for free elections appears drastically damaged by the recent crackdown. The offices of her party were padlocked across the country. Party officials were hauled into jail. And "The Lady" herself remains in greater jeopardy than ever before.

The U.S. Congress has voted to tighten sanctions against Burma, and Kofi Annan has said the U.N. will seek to pressure the Burmese junta to release Suu Kyi. The rest of us wait and hope.

—RENA PEDERSON

## Beads Spell R-E-S-P-E-C-T

*Masai women work to give their daughters more choices than they had.*

I AM SITTING AT THE MOONLIGHT Hotel in Isinya, Kenya, a rural town about an hour outside of Nairobi, being taught how to bead by Sankoyan, a Masai woman whose slender fingers are far more nimble than my own. She asks my name and nods in approval as she repeats it: "Lisa." If she has another daughter—she already has seven children—she will name her Lisa. She then gives me a name for my child—I am three-months pregnant—and pronounces this exchange "good friendship."

Talk turns to Sankoyan's 14-year-old daughter, Eunice. Were it not for her mother's beading, Eunice might have been circumcised and bartered for cat-

tle, married to a man many years her senior with more than one wife. According to Masai custom, the only way an adolescent girl can avoid this fate is if she is in school. And so Sankoyan and the 24 other Masai women in the Dupoto Women's Group craft traditional beaded artifacts—coasters, headbands, dog collars—which are sold in the United States.

The money earned from the beadwork gives the Masai women the opportunity to send their daughters to private school, which costs \$300 a year. Primary school has been free and compulsory in Kenya only since last year. Secondary public schools aren't free.

The Dupoto Women's Group was



set up by Debby Rooney, who runs the African Conservation Center in Kenya and who recently started a second group, in Amboseli, in conjunction with the African Wildlife Foundation.

I spent the day with the group as part of an Eco-resorts safari. Though I lived in Nairobi for 12 years—my father worked for the United Nations—my interaction with Masai women was limited to buying crafts from them at tourist attractions. The Masai make up only 2 percent of the Kenyan population but are perhaps the best-known tribe, in part because their traditional homeland is in an area with the most popular game parks. They also are visually striking: the women with their beaded finery, the men clad in vibrant, red robes. While most other tribes have modernized, the Masai have clung fiercely to their traditions, preserving a culture that does not grant women much power. Thus, the women I encountered all those years ago were acquiescent, seemingly a backdrop to the more flamboyant *morani*, the young male warriors with their long red, ochre-coated hair.

The Dupoto women are still demure: All are circumcised, most were married young and have co-wives, few know their actual ages. But they aren't docile. Leah, 40, the group's chairwoman, left her husband because he beat her and wouldn't let her wear the European-style clothes she favors. Her parents ultimately "returned" her to her husband, but his behavior is much improved. "He knows with the money I make here I can leave again," she explains, "and maybe this time even go overseas."

The women have embraced elements of the Western world, but work at preserving the positive aspects of their culture. Esther, 42, is wearing a dress fringed with Masai beads, accessorized with traditional necklaces—and a knockoff Versace purse.

When we go to the home of Na-



This photograph was taken April 27, 2003, by Stephanie Sinclair. The young Iraqi girl was playing outside her Baghdad home when a cluster bomb exploded, killing her. The U.S. continues to use these weapons despite pleas from human-rights groups.

soore, another member of the group, for tea, the women sing a welcoming song as I am first invited into her hut, and then offered a lavish spread in her Western-style house. We sit in a circle, the women deftly beading as we chat.

When they learn I am pregnant, they explain that if I were to have a girl, she would be "booked" at birth for an arranged marriage, which could take place as early as age 8. I ask if there is any escape from the forced union, and there is a collective, coy giggle. The answer is no, but, as Leah says, "You can always find 'friends,'" meaning a boyfriend on the side—although this doesn't happen as often these days because of AIDS.

Several of the women, such as Kaiyayo, who claims to be 100, and 40-something Doris, are co-wives. Most accept and even welcome polygamy. Mary, the second of three wives, explains: "Masai women marry not because of love, though you'll end up feeling something for your husband. But the love between co-wives is often stronger because we work together."

The Dupoto women are determined to make a better way for their daughters. Among them they support 125 children, 56 of them girls who

have avoided early marriage and are attending school. These young women will in turn have the chance to make simple choices—who and when to marry, how many children to bear—that their mothers never could. "Beading has empowered us women," says Leah. "Men used to take advantage of girls because we never went to school. Now, because we at least have something"—money of their own—"they are starting to respect us."

The day ends with a prayer, as Esther gives thanks for the visitors who have traveled from so far away. Even though I have come from someplace very different, and returned to a country where I had been little more than a spectator, my day with the Dupoto women brought to light a simple truth: We're all concerned about the same age-old issues—our roles as mothers, as wives and as individuals.

—LISA ARMSTRONG

To purchase beadwork or to sponsor a Masai girl, visit [www.beadsforeducation.org](http://www.beadsforeducation.org). For more information on the Eco-resorts Women in Perspective safari, go to [www.eco-resorts.com](http://www.eco-resorts.com) or call 866-326-7376.