

Book Review

Sovereign Women in a Muslim Kingdom: The Sultanahs of Aceh, 1641–1699,

by Sher Banu A.L. Khan. Singapore: NUS Press, 2017, 335 pp.

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The book covers an exceptional period of the Sultanate Aceh, in which the attributes of kingship were in the hands of women, so to speak. The accession of the first female ruler set a precedent; she was succeeded by three more women. They were all of royal blood.

The application of female rule, “queenship” as termed by the author, and its significance is the intriguing subject. The seven chapters take us from its extraordinary but turbulent beginning in 1641 to its doomed and dramatic ending in 1699 when an Arab male candidate was preferred over a woman to ascend the throne.

The narrative moves from the author’s initial mystification over the choice of a woman to take up the high function of Sultan(ah), to her conclusion that the considerations of the elites, the so called *orangkaya*, to appoint her “was a unique confluence of events and personalities”. What are we to make of this?

The author asserts that it was internally motivated and the increasing European incursions were taken into account in their deliberations. She claims that the *orangkaya* had suffered badly under despotic male rulers, who brutally murdered them at will and deprived them of their share in the growing international trade. Was it the lack of eligible royal princes in Aceh and mistrust of foreign princes to ascend the throne that smoothed the choice of a woman?

I perceive that by recasting kingship to queenship with the appointment of Safiatuddin Syah, who was not just the widow of Sultan Iskandar Thani (r. 1637–1641) a Malay prince from Pahang who became Sultan of Aceh, but more importantly, the daughter of the formidable Sultan Iskandar Muda (r. 1607–1636), the *orangkaya* showed their inclination to dynastic kingship at a most critical moment, even if they had suffered under royal princess.

But what were her virtues? It is said that she was pious, loving, caring and generous. These characteristics must have been evident before she was appointed; how could these be noted if she stayed “behind the silk curtain” as respected court ladies did?

Already in the Introduction chapter we note the eagerness of the author to pronounce queenship as sovereign, successful, progressive and peaceful. She follows a gender-oriented line, in which female and male rule are compared. This has its caveats. The image of the male rulers has suffered by an overwhelmingly negative description in the foreign literature.

To draw premature conclusions, and repeat the negative opinions, when the arguments and analyses have yet to develop, leaves the reader no alternative ways to look at the past and the rulers who acted during a time when trade became competitive and geopolitical aspirations threatened peace in the Straits.

Following the author’s criteria, by comparison the woman ruler stands head and shoulders above the male ruler in conducting the role of Sultanah and the affairs of State. The Sultans could behave cruelly and meted out harsh punishments, sometimes for no reason at all but out of capriciousness. By contrast, the Sultanahs adhered to non-violent punishments of wrongdoers, more in tune with *Sharia* law. They were inclined to behave and act according to the admonitions in the *Taj as Salatin* (a guide-book for Muslim rulers), in which the ruler is summoned to be *adil* (righteous). Accordingly, tyranny is a main distinguishing feature between female and male rule.

In what other aspects did male and female rule differ? The author describes the close cooperation between the Sultanah and the *orangkaya* as “collaborative rule”, explaining its workings. In the court hierarchy, the *Eunuch* Maharadja Adonna Lila was the most important functionary at the court of Safiatuddin Syah. She would only communicate with people through her intermediaries. In comparison, the relationship between the male rulers and the *orangkaya* is described as autocratic and despotic. Historians were quick to describe the relationship of ruler and *orangkaya* as one wrecked by rivalry for the trade and the throne. This is seen as

the crux and crucible. What was the reality? While I was studying the evolution of kingship in Aceh from 1599–1641 (Mitrasing 2011), I came to understand that the relationship between ruler and ruled, between the local ports, stronger and weaker states, were to a great extent defined or pushed by the presence of the Portuguese in Malacca since 1511, who formed a threat to the local and Muslim trade and the territorial integrity of the Straits region. The arrival of the northern Europeans around 1599 added to the challenges and the flux. In the long struggle against foreign encroachment the Acehnese Sultans all fulfilled their roles at different stages and under different circumstances, in which the *orangkaya* sometimes collaborated and sometimes rebelled. The political realities created the conditions to which the *orangkaya* responded.

The foreign traders usually dealt with several *orangkaya* like the *shahbandar*, the *penghulu kawal* and the *panglima bandar* who advised the Sultan on taxes and other trade matters and to which he tended to listen, to keep their loyalty. This system was already in place during the reign of Sultan Alauddin Al Mukamil (r. 1589–1604), the great-grandfather of Safiatuddin Syah. Even if privileges to foreigners could rupture the relationship between the Sultan and the *orangkaya*, both were utterly concerned with Aceh's sovereign position and leadership role from the very start of Portuguese intrusion in the Straits and would not give away an inch of this prerogative. This was a binding element in their relationship, in the words of the author which are also true for the whole period of Portuguese presence which lasted 130 years, "for the sake of the kingdom".

The author states that the *orangkaya* were given regular audiences by the Sultanah in contrast to the annual audience under Sultan Iskandar Muda. Yet, the *Adat Aceh* clearly mentions the audiences for the *orangkaya* on every Saturday (*Hari Sabtu*) when they addressed him with *Tuanku*. Kingship was primarily a contractual institution and the *orangkaya* would pledge their obeisance to the Sultan as stipulated in the *majlis djungdjung duli* of the *Adat Aceh*. This not only happened at his installation, but was repeated at other times. The *Adat Aceh* is made up of regulations and royal decrees starting from the time of Iskandar Muda and continuing under Safiatuddin Syah (Drewes and Voorhoeve 1958). It includes regulations for the emoluments of port functionaries at all levels. The products the foreign merchants needed to present the different functionaries, are clearly described. Obviously, the interests of the *orangkaya* were protected under Iskandar Muda. He ruled for 29 years and did not die at the hands of assassins.

If the female rulers only communicated through their intermediaries, the male rulers sometimes directly communicated with foreign head merchants and envoys;

the intimate conversations between Iskandar Muda and the Frenchman Augustin de Beaulieu and the private conversations with the English general Thomas Best are well documented.

Contrary to what the author asserts, Sultan Iskandar Muda did not grant the European merchants trade monopolies; he gave them trade contracts for a limited period in exchange for artillery, cannons, cash and nice goods, taking advantage of their rivalries.

Were the *orangkaya* against the enthronement of foreign princes as the author professes? Were they the “kingmakers and the king breakers” as the adage goes? I take the liberty to put their actions under the lens.

Aceh played the leading role in the struggle against the Portuguese in Malacca. Since Johor, the successor state of the Sultanate Malacca, for several reasons often sided with the Portuguese, Aceh considered Johor as the local enemy. This is the political reality which probably motivated the enthronement of the two Malay princes at different points in time. In 1619, Iskandar Muda nominated a captured Prince of Pahang as his successor. The *orangkaya* accepted his nomination without opposition. They installed the prince in 1637 after the two great men behind his appointment, Sultan Iskandar Muda himself and the revered religious advisor, Sheikh Shamsuddin Pasai had already passed away respectively in 1636 and 1629.

It can be regarded as an act of “collaborative rule” in which the *orangkaya* followed the earlier royal resolution. The enthronement of this prince was a strategy to aggrandize Aceh in the eyes of Johor, the overlord of Pahang. His father, Sultan Ahmad of Pahang, was replaced by Johor with a pro-Johor candidate. The prince was also a descendant of the sultan of Malacca and thus closely related to the Johor royal family. He would be known in the history books as Sultan Iskandar Thani.

Curiously, the *Bustan-as-Salatin*, a chronicle which includes the genealogy of the Acehnese kings, composed by the Sheikh al Islam, Nuruddin al Raniri, who came from India in 1637, claims the enthronement to be an act of God to deliver Aceh a king from Pahang who originated from the two great kings of the past: Solomon and Alexander. It fitted al Raniri’s idea of lifting Aceh to greatness. He canalised the political strategy set out by Iskandar Muda and the *orangkaya*, giving it a religious stamp.

We may draw a similar conclusion of the events of 1577 when a captured Malay prince of Perak was created Sultan of Aceh by the *orangkaya* after the Mahkota Alam dynasty was exhausted by rivalry and bloodshed. The choice of this Perak

prince should baffle the Portuguese and Johor. He too was a descendant of the Sultan of Malacca. Johor was furious that Aceh had invaded its vassal state Perak in 1568 where it constructed a fort and captured members of the royal family.

This highly respected Sultan was murdered after 10 years. Had the *orangkaya* overstretched their hand? The explanation can be found in the fact that he had married off his daughter to the Sultan of Johor and the couple's young son who stayed at the Court in Aceh was raised to succeed his grandfather on the throne. Would Aceh become a vassal state of Johor? The *orangkaya* prevented this by murdering the crown prince and appointing a descendant of the Dar al Kamal dynasty of south Aceh on the throne.

It can be rewarding to follow the signals in the primary material, telling you in what direction to look for clues. It is not certain where this leads you, but you may acquire surprising insight. Their intervention is also exemplified in the enthronement of a woman at a most critical time when the untimely death of Sultan Iskandar Thani, who had no offspring to hand over the reign, created a vacuum and the country spun into a catharsis with the persecution of the *Wugudyah* mystics and their followers which was instigated by Sheikh Nuruddin al Raniri.

The author focusses on the rule of Sultanah "Taj al Alam" Safiatuddin Syah who was in office for about 34 years and set the conditions under which the three successive Sultanahs could function. The rule of these women, for periods of respectively three, eleven and again eleven years, is not discussed, however, it is believed that under the second ruler, Sultanah Naqiatuddin Syah, changes were made in the government structure regarding the three federations or *sagi* as advised by the influential Sheikh Abdur Rauf, who was also an important advisor to Safiatuddin Syah.

Two cases are discussed in great detail in which Sultanah Safiatuddin's sagacity and tact proved to work positively in negotiating and dealing with an increasingly demanding VOC (the Dutch East India Company), the "Jewel Affair" about the money she was summoned to pay for diamonds bought by her deceased husband, Iskandar Thani. In defending her case to pay a lower sum she showed remarkable agility and grace.

In her mediating role regarding the VOC's encroachment on Perak's tin trade, her diplomatic skills were evident. Apparently both the Sultanah and the VOC authorities were keen to continue the good relations and settled the cases without animosity. Important to note is that Safiatuddin had a big stake in the tin trade of Perak. She received tributes of tin precisely because her father, Iskandar Muda,

subdued Perak in 1620 where the Portuguese tried to make inroads. Her forefather, the audacious Sultan Alauddin Al Kahar, first invaded Perak in 1568 where he built a fortress to protect the trade coming from Malabar against the Portuguese. In the literature these actions are condemned as raw conquests to plunder the local trade.

By contrast the “protection” of the subdued areas or vassal states by the female ruler is perceived by the author as a sign of sovereign power and strength. Safiatuddin survived rebellions and other crises during her reign, pacifying the several factions of the *orangkaya* with her soft speech, tactful behaviour and by remaining in the background in their disputes. She had great moral authority.

The author scorns the male rulers for their high-sounding titles and bloated egos. Safiatuddin’s title, “Taj al Alam”, means Crown of the World. Iskandar Muda bore the title “Meukuta Alam”, which is Acehnese for Crown of the World. Apparently there is no difference.

Meukuta (Mahkota) Alam was the name of the northern polity that was united with the Dar al Kamal polity in the south, to form the Sultanate Aceh, to which the names of the two dynasties refer. The title Iskandar Muda (the young Alexander) is a posthumous title first mentioned by Sheikh Nuruddin al Raniri in the *Bustan*. Yet both male and female rulers exulted over their high, God-given position; Sultan Iskandar Thani even saw himself as God’s representative on earth.

While it is clear that the enthronement of women did not clash with Islam in Aceh, it was certainly a peculiarity. Yet female rule lasted for 58 years. In my comments above, I put the motivations of the *orangkaya* to appoint or remove a ruler, in perspective.

Since many *orangkaya* were followers of *Wugudyah* mysticism, their sudden dislike of Iskandar Thani, the foreign prince they installed on the throne, but who suppressed the long established order of *Wugudyah*, can be explained.

The burial spectacle of the deceased Sultan Iskandar Thani, in which animals and strange figures took part, was certainly not an Islamic ceremony, but a manifestation of a syncretic rite of passage over which Safiatuddin, his widow, presided. The author regards this as an important first task of the Sultanah to glorify her husband.

Did the Sheikh al Islam, Nuruddin al Raniri have a hand in this? He was the ideological force behind Sultan Iskandar Thani, instigating the persecution of the mystics and their followers which wrought havoc in society. Was this magnificent

spectacle intended to draw the attention away from the horrors committed by the orthodox clergy, when heterodoxy had been the accepted norm under the former rulers?

Al Raniri wrote extensively in the *Bustan* about this celebratory event, describing its colourful details. Was this his “balancing act” so to speak? Why did he leave Aceh in 1645? Further research may throw light on this enigmatic figure who left his stamp on the history and the historiography of kingship.

Final Remark

The book fills a gap in the historiography of the Sultanate Aceh. It is a tribute to female rule which lasted for a long period, signifying that it was accepted by the different factions in society and that it was successful. It was an era of peace and prosperity in a society that had suffered from strife, religious persecution and wars with the Portuguese and their allies. The political scene was intrinsically going to alter with the fall of Portuguese Malacca in 1641. Aceh’s goal and aspirations were no longer defined by the pressing presence of the Portuguese. This is the main reason why its political significance diminished. Was it because the Sultanahs refused to spend huge amounts on wars and weaponry like the male rulers did, that peace ascended on society? It was a huge achievement of female rule that the relationship with the VOC did not deteriorate but remained friendly saving Aceh another age of wars.

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