



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

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*Sovereign Women in a Muslim Kingdom: The Sultanahs of Aceh, 1641-1699*. By Sher Banu A.L. Khan. Ithaca, NY: Southeast Asia Program Publications, 2017. ISBN: 978-1-5017-1385-9. xvi + 318 pp. \$23.95.

In a world where books about British monarchs are available in almost every bookstore's discount bin, Sher Banu A.L. Khan's exploration of four female rulers of the Malay sultanate of Aceh comes as a refreshing change of perspective. Drawing primarily from Dutch East India Company (VOC) sources, Khan's study analyses roughly sixty years of Acehnese history, most prominently the reign of Safiatuddin Syah, who ruled the sultanate from 1641 to 1675. Throughout her analysis, Khan provides detailed historical context to help readers unfamiliar with Malay politics and economics navigate the world of Aceh in the seventeenth century. However, she also takes deep dives into her source material in order to provide compelling case studies that explore the complexities of this period. The result is an intriguing, if incomplete, analysis of queenship and regional politics within the early modern sultanate of Aceh.

Khan's study is loosely organised into eight topical chapters that frequently deviate from their subject matter in order to investigate related issues. Fortunately, helpful section headers are found throughout each chapter to guide readers as topics change and evolve. The introduction to this book reveals its origins as a doctoral thesis through its over-long methodological section, uneven pacing, and rather formulaic language. However, this trend is not maintained throughout, and most chapters exhibit extensive original research and in-depth analysis. Despite its flaws, there can be no doubt that this book serves as a vital contribution to the English-language study of Southeast Asian politics.

The three chapters that follow the introduction explore the succession and reign of Safiatuddin Syah, the first sultanah of Aceh. Khan begins with an investigation into the history of Aceh up to 1641 and the situation that allowed for a woman to succeed to the throne. Chapter two then explores the ways that the legacy of Safiatuddin Syah's predecessors, notably the Jewel Affair, impacted her early reign. Following from this, chapter three discusses a later crisis, the Perak Affair, and how the sultanah used this crisis to consolidate her power. While these chapters are much more straightforward than the latter chapters, they suffer due to Khan's heavy reliance on VOC sources. Many of her arguments represent an exclusively Dutch perspective or reflect her own interpretation of events, neither of which is ideal. Khan admits that this is a problem, but it nonetheless severely restricts the potential depth of her study. The primary events outlined in chapters two and three relate directly to Dutch trade relations with Aceh, and Khan carefully attempts to

interpret the Acehnese perspective from the available VOC records. While the episodes are certainly interesting, they also appear to be exceptions to standard Acehnese trade policies. The Jewel Affair is the most coherent event that she describes, but it is also relatively short-lived, with stakes perhaps not as high as Khan portrays them. The Perak Affair, in which the Dutch blockaded the port town of Perak in an attempt to gain a monopoly on the tin trade, was undoubtedly a more serious threat to Aceh sovereignty, but Khan is not quite able to produce a fluid narrative of this crisis, nor link it directly to decisions made by Safiatuddin Syah. She also ends the narrative portion of her study at this point, instead organising her remaining study around thematic sections that are decidedly more difficult to navigate.

The middle two chapters focus on a variety of different topics that cover nearly every aspect of female rule in Aceh. Chapter four explores the relationship between Aceh and its vassals and neighbours. Although this chapter initially continues the narrative from chapter three, it soon turns to a more geographical approach, exploring Aceh's relationships with the polities along the Sumatran West Coast and how they all fell under the sway of the VOC and English East India Company in this period. The premise of chapter five suggests that Khan will address Islamic queenship, but instead she compares the reigns of Iskander Muda and Iskander Thandi to that of Safiatuddin Syah, while discussing more generally the sultanah's relationship to the Acehnese *ulema* (Muslim religious authority). The extent that Khan is stretching to make some of her conclusions more convincing can be seen in the wide range of sources she employs throughout this chapter, few of which directly relate to the sultanate of Aceh. While her conclusions in these two chapters are probably well founded, the evidence from the sources is at best inconclusive, or at least heavily biased toward a Western perspective.

The final two chapters in this book are both the most interesting and the least organised. Chapter six borrows much of its ideas from the non-religious governmental leftovers of chapter five, including Acehnese trade policy, style of governance, and royal image, while also addressing topics concerning queenship in Aceh and female rulership in general. In a similar fashion, chapter seven addresses everything that remains undiscussed, such as the reigns of the latter three sultanahs, why four females ruled in the first place, and the downfall of female queenship in Aceh. Curiously, no formal conclusion ends this study and the final two chapters, while extremely detailed and interesting at the section level, lack any real cohesiveness. Furthermore, by organising the study in this way, readers are forced to piece together the narrative of the final four decades of female rule.

This cursory summary reveals the most significant problem with this study: its premise. Essentially, the title and subtitle of the book are misleading.

While this study certainly convinces readers that the female rulers of Aceh were sovereign within their kingdom, it fails to prove that their status as Muslim rulers was something remarkable. More problematic, however, is Khan's insistence that this study covers the reigns of all four sultanahs of Aceh. While this is certainly a noble goal, she fails to achieve it in any satisfactory manner. Khan discusses very little about the latter three queens, Naqiatuddin, Inayat Syah Zakiyyat al-Din Syah, and Kamalat Syah, and none of them have a chapter dedicated to their reign. This is another symptom of the sources she chooses to employ: the VOC mostly pulled out of Aceh in 1663 and Western colonial powers only kept trade offices there for the second half of the seventeenth century. It is upon these Western sources that Khan primarily relies, and they give very little thought to domestic matters, except in specific circumstances.

In the end, this book presents a paradox for historians of Southeast Asian history. It serves as an important step toward bringing the history of the Malay Archipelago to the attention of English-language historians: the vast breadth of topics covered alone is remarkable. But it also reveals that heavy reliance on European records to explore Southeast Asian topics is highly problematic and perpetuates Eurocentric views and perspectives or forces historians to interpret topics through unreliable lenses. Khan has opened the doors to this area of study, but further research into these remarkable sultanahs, especially the latter three, is still needed.

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