

CONTROVERSIES SURROUNDING THE ACEH'S SULTANAHS

Understanding Relation between Islam and Female Leadership

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Abstract: The history of Aceh Sultanate in 1641-1699 might be an exception of the Islamic history in general. While the history of Islam is generally male-dominated, Aceh which had strong Islamic credentials was once ruled by four female rulers consecutively during the period of six decades. How did Muslim women become rulers of an Islamic kingdom despite Islamic teaching “prohibiting” them from taking a leadership position? How did people react to this fact? How did the queens rule the kingdom and survive despite opposition? Despite notions of some historians that the queens’ periods were the weakening time of the sultanate, the existence of female rulers is a proof of the continuing position of women in the public sphere even in an Islamic state. The presence of influential aristocrats, the division of Aceh into three powerful sagis, and the support of *‘ulama’* are main contributing factors to the rise and establishment of female rulers in Aceh. The administrative structure of the sultanate and its Islamic character suggest the development of moderate Islam that made women leadership in Aceh possible. The opposition to female rulers in Aceh which the succession of rulers was hereditary was more politically and economically-motivated than religious.

Keywords: The Aceh’s Sultanahs, al-Raniri, women leadership.

Introduction

The history of Islam in the world is equal to the history Muslim men and very few cases that it notes the role of Muslim women (*Muslimah*). This may be because Islamic teaching is male-oriented as

indicated by the Qur'an and the Prophet's tradition. Although some strong women emerged and were noted in the history, very rarely did they become the ruler of Islamic kingdoms. This means that Muslim women becoming rulers of Islamic states can be categorized as an exception in history. Among the exceptions is the history of Aceh Sultanate in which four women were enthroned consecutively as rulers from 1641 to 1699. Other cases are Pattani in 1584-1688,¹ Pasai in the second half of fourteenth and early fifteenth century² and Bone, South Sulawesi.³

There are not many articles, let alone books, discussing specifically the reign of women rulers in the Muslim world, so that their role in the Islamic history is hardly known. This scarcity is mainly due to lack of historical sources that make possible for scholars doing research on the issue. However, this topic is interesting to discuss, especially with the rising concern in gender issues. Therefore, this paper will discuss the Aceh sultanate during the reign of women rulers. How did Muslim women become rulers of an Islamic kingdom despite Islamic teaching "prohibiting" them from taking a leadership position? How did people react to this fact? How did the queens rule the kingdom and survive despite opposition?

The Sultanate of Aceh emerged in the early sixteenth century and became very powerful in the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries. The most powerful and well known ruler was Sultan Iskandar Muda (1607-1636). The power of the kingdom during his rule was unquestioned, but after his reign Aceh gradually declined in power. During the reign of Sultan Iskandar Thani (1636-1641), who was Iskandar Muda's son-in-law, the *Orang Kaya* started again to dominate the government after being dominated by Iskandar Muda. The enthronement of the first queen, Sultanah Taj al-Alam Safiyat al-Din (1641-1675), was the result of a compromise among them. Afterwards, all queens did not ascend without support from the *Orang Kaya*. This means that the governing power was not fully held by the queens.

¹ Ibrahim Syukri, *History of the Malay Kingdom of Patani* (Athens: Center for International Studies, Ohio University, 1985), pp. 22-38.

² T. Ibrahim Alfian, *Wanita Utama Nusantara dalam Lintasan Sejarah* (Jakarta: Jayakarta Agung, 1994), pp. 1-25.

³ Anthony Reid, "Female Roles in Pre-colonial Southeast Asia," *Modern Asian Studies*, 22 (1988), p. 640.

Therefore, many historians attributed the queens' periods as the weakening time of the sultanate.⁴

As a part of Southeast Asian region, the period of women rulers is a proof of the continuing significant position of Southeast Asian women in the public sphere even during an Islamic state. Leonard Andaya, for example, shows that the first female ruler, Sultanah Safiyat al-Din, was in fact a powerful ruler. It is true that the style of administration changed, but this was mainly due to the external challenges, especially from the Dutch, which forced her to act in a more subtle and reconciliatory fashion. Several factors may contribute to the rise and establishment of women rulers in Aceh in the latter half of the 17th century. The presence of influential aristocrats, the division of Aceh into three powerful *sagis*, and the support of 'ulamā' are main factors.⁵ Having examined the administrative structure of the sultanate and its Islamic character, I argue that it was the development of moderate Islam that contributed to the rise of women leadership in the Islamic state of Aceh. Moreover, this paper contends that opposition to female rulers was more politically-and economically-motivated than religious.

The Establishment of the Aceh Sultanate and Its Significant Rulers

There are many versions and differences on the early history of Aceh. Chronicles and notes of Europeans differed from one to the other as discussed in detail by Hoesein Djajadiningrat.⁶ However, most scholars agree that Aceh was established in the early sixteenth century. They also agree, based on al-Raniri's *Bustan al-Salatin*, that Sultan Ali Mughayat Syah was the founder of the Sultanate of Aceh.⁷ Although

⁴ Anthony Reid, "Trade and the Problem of Royal Power in Aceh. c. 1550-1700," in Anthony Reid and Lance Castles (eds), *Pre-Colonial State Systems in Southeast Asia* (Kuala Lumpur: MBRAS, 1975): pp. 52-54.

⁵ Amirul Hadi, *Islam and State in Sumatra: a Study of Seventeenth-century Aceh* (Leiden: Brill, 2004), pp. 86-87.

⁶ Raden Hoesein Djajadiningrat, *Kesultanan Aceh: Suatu Pembahasan tentang Sejarah Kesultanan Aceh Berdasarkan Bahan-bahan yang Terdapat dalam Karya Melayu* (Daerah Istimewa Aceh: Departemen Pendidikan dan Kebudayaan, 1983), pp. 9-20.

⁷ Nuruddin Al-Raniri, *Bustan al-Salatin*, Siti Hawa Haji Salleh (ed.) (Kuala Lumpur: Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka, 1992), p. 1.

Takeshi Ito⁸ states that Sultan Syamsu Syah, the father of Sultan Ali Mughayat Syah, was the one who had established the Dar al-Salam sultanate by uniting Mahkota Alam and Dar-Kamal. He similarly argues that it was Sultan Ali Mughayat Syah who was the real founder as he successfully expanded the kingdom by conquering Daya, Pidie and Pasai in the 1520s. The success of Mughayat Syah was apparently due to his strategic call to unite all forces in order to confront a foreign intruder, the Portuguese.⁹ Since then, the sultanate existed as an independent polity and the anti-foreigner rallying cry became the long-lasting pretext brought forward by its rulers for centuries in maintaining the unity of the kingdom.

Aceh was fortunate to have a number of powerful rulers after its establishment, although they did not always rule consecutively. The next significant ruler recorded in the history was Sultan Ala al-Din Riayat Syah al-Kahhar (1539-1571). During his reign, Aceh emerged as the strongest Muslim state on the Melaka straits.¹⁰ Al-Kahhar was known as the ruler who had challenged the Portuguese power in Melaka. His army reportedly defeated the Portuguese fleet which came to Aceh and launched several attacks on Melaka, though they were all unsuccessful.¹¹ Al-Kahhar also built a strong economic, political and military relationship with the Ottoman Caliphate, one of the strongest kingdoms in the world at the time. Under his rule, Aceh succeeded in establishing suzerainty over the pepper-producing centers on the west coast of Sumatra, as well as the rice-producing regions on the east coast.¹²

Another important ruler was Sultan Ala al-Din Riayat Syah al-Mukammil (1589-1604). Prior to his rule, the *Orang Kaya* were a dominant force and could enthrone and dethrone rulers at will. It was reported that about three rulers were enthroned and subsequently dethroned by these *Orang Kaya* in one year in 1579. Al-Mukammil's accession as ruler was not exempt from their intervention. However, soon after al-Mukammil secured his position, he broke the power of

⁸ Takeshi Ito, "The World of the Adat Aceh: a Historical Study of the Sultanate of Aceh," (Unpublished Ph.D dissertation, Australian National University, 1984), p. 12.

⁹ Reid, "Trade and the Problem of Royal Power", p. 46.

¹⁰ Ito, "The World of the Adat Aceh", pp. 12-13.

¹¹ Djajadiningrat, *Kesultanan Aceh*, pp. 23-24.

¹² Ito, "The World of the Adat Aceh", p. 13.

the *Orang Kaya* (merchant class, which were the elite class of Aceh) by killing many of them, stripping their monopoly over economy, and keeping them under his control.¹³ According to Anthony Reid, al-Mukammil was the first ruler of Aceh to centralize the power, which then continued under Iskandar Muda.¹⁴

The reign of Sultan Iskandar Muda (1607-1636) was categorized by many scholars as the golden age of Aceh, despite his uncompromising cruel attitudes toward his political “enemies.” During his reign, the domain of the Sultanate was extended far to the south on the west and east coasts of Sumatra. In addition, he also conquered several states in the Malay Peninsula and brought them under Aceh’s suzerainty. He also resumed the war against the Portuguese. In 1629 he launched an attack against Melaka with a large fleet under his own command. However he was defeated by the Portuguese. According to Ito this was “the watershed between the glorious days of the Sultanate and its gradual decline.”¹⁵

The greatness of Iskandar Muda might also be inferred from the life of the *Dalam* (royal enclosure) noted by Europeans. Quoting Beaulieu, Ito mentions that there were about 3,000 female servants, around 500 eunuchs and some 1,500 slave guards living in the *Dalam*. The greatness of the sultanate was also accompanied by, and may be the result of, the autocratic nature of Iskandar Muda. Ito argues that the power was centered at the court and that he was a tyrannical ruler.¹⁶ “It was a state in which the sovereign was identical both conceptually and institutionally with the state and thus the ruler’s will was the supreme law of the realm... the royal enclosure was not merely a residence but at the same time the seat of the administration of the state, and even senior administrative officials were, like the servants of the royal household, the ruler’s servants in the broad sense”

Because Iskandar Muda’s son and crown prince was killed, a Prince of Pahang, who had been taken to Aceh as a prisoner and subsequently married Iskandar Muda’s daughter, was enthroned with

¹³ Merle C. Ricles, *A History of Modern Indonesia* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2008), p. 35.

¹⁴ Reid, “Trade and the Problem of Royal Power”, pp. 48-9.

¹⁵ Ito, “The World of the Adat Aceh”, p. 16.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 29.

the title of Sultan Iskandar Thani, after the death of Iskandar Muda. Although his reign was brief, 1636-1641, it was important due to several developments. Ito,¹⁷ for example, notes that internal “disintegration of royal power and the gradual aggrandizement of the *Orang Kaya*” began during his time. In addition, relations with Johor also worsened because of the Johor’s invasion of Pahang and its alliance with the Dutch during the conquest of Melaka in 1641. Aceh’s refusal to make an alliance with the Dutch enabled the latter to make inroads into the pepper trade and damage the trade of Aceh. Overall, Ito argues that the reign of Iskandar Thani was a transition from an autocratic to a weakened royal authority. His death also marked the beginning of a period of women rulers for almost 60 years.¹⁸

The Period of Female Rulers

As already mentioned, the *Orang Kaya* increased their power during Sultan Iskandar Thani’s reign. His death at a relatively young age and without an heir gave the *Orang Kaya* increased power in selecting his successor. The compromise that they reached was to enthrone Iskandar Thani’s widow, who was also Iskandar Muda’s daughter, Taj al-Alam Safiyat al-Din Syah. There are no clear records on how they agreed upon this decision. This has led to speculation among historians in explaining this situation. Reid, for example, argues that the *Orang Kaya* did not want to have a strong ruler such as Iskandar Muda, who had suppressed them and had restricted their access to economic and political resources.¹⁹

The ascension of Safiyat al-Din was the first experience that the Acehnese had of rule by a queen. As an Islamic kingdom and its people were accustomed to male dominated teachings of Islam, it is therefore not surprising that this new phenomenon shocked religious people and resulted in their opposing this decision. There was no report on how the Sultanah responded to this challenge. But many scholars argue that it was Nur al-Din al-Raniri (d. 1658) who had a strong role in defending her accession.²⁰ As the *Shaykh al-Islam* and a

¹⁷ Ibid., p. 17.

¹⁸ Ibid., p. 18.

¹⁹ Reid, “Female Roles in Pre-colonial”, p. 641.

²⁰ Cheah Boon Kheng, “Power behind the Throne: the Role of Queens and Court Ladies in Malay History,” *JMBRAS* 66 (1993), p. 11.

highly respected religious man, he favored Safiyat al-Din and did not question her authority.

Sultanah Safiyat al-Din showed that, to some extent, she was not as weak as perceived by many scholars.²¹ Andaya describes her style of leadership as different from her predecessors, such as having regular audiences at the court and letting the ministers join the audiences as well as relying on *sida-sida* (eunuchs).²² However, all these were due to her following Islamic scripture that made her change the governing style. As the Muslim woman, she was not supposed to have a direct contact with non-relative men, so that she let the ministers join the meeting. She nevertheless successfully kept the independent and autonomous nature of the Sultanate despite the Dutch's continuous pressure on Aceh especially after it successfully defeated the Portuguese in Melaka, in 1641.²³

The next ruler was Sultanah Nur al-Alam Naqiyat al-Din Inayat Syah (1675-1677). In contrast to Sultanah Safiyat al-Din whose lineage was known for sure, it is not clear who Sultanah Naqiyat al-Din's royal lineage was and how she ascended to the ruling position. A local historian argues that Naqiyat al-Din as well as the other two subsequent women rulers were prepared by Sultanah Safiyat al-Din by providing them with courses and tutorials from knowledgeable people, including Europeans, so that they would not be shocked when they came to power.²⁴ This argument is not supported by any historical evidence and is of doubtful validity. Others contend that having enjoyed their position during the women ruler, the *Orang Kaya* appointed another woman as the ruler. This opinion seems to be more acceptable among historians, although, as mentioned earlier, this view also lacks historical documentation.

Sultanah Naqiyat al-Din ruled for only a short period of two years. However, during her rule there were two important cases mentioned

²¹ Reid, "Trade and the Problem of Royal Power", p. 52.

²² Leonard Y. Andaya, "'A Very Good-natured but Awe-inspiring Government' The Reign of a Successful Queen in Seventeenth-century Aceh," in Elsbeth Locher-Scholten and Peter Rietbergen (eds), *Hof en Hande: Aziatische Vorsten en de VOC 1620-1720* (Leiden: KITLV Uitgeverij, 2004), pp. 65-75.

²³ Denys Lombard, *Kerajaan Aceh Jaman Sultan Iskandar Muda (1607-1636)* (Jakarta: Balai Pustaka, 1986), p. 131, p. 186, and p. 200.

²⁴ A. Hasjmy, *59 Tahun Aceh Merdeka di bawah Pemerintahan Ratu* (Jakarta: Bulan Bintang, 1977).

by historians: the emergence of the political power of *Panglima Sagis* and the destruction by fire of the court and the Bayt al-Rahman mosque. Historians state that the *Sagi* as a socio-political unit was introduced during the first queen and there were three sagis known from the number of *Mukim* under its administration. It seems that Sultanah Naqiyat al-Din formalized the structure with the Panglima Sagi heading political power in order to counter-balance the power of the *Orang Kaya* at the center. It is reported that from this time *Panglima Sagis* were among those who had right to enthrone and dethrone Aceh's rulers.²⁵

Opposition or challenge to her authority came from one of the Panglima Sagi, Panglima Polem, who was the half brother of the former queen. He was a son of Iskandar Muda but from a different mother from the former Sultanah. As the Panglima Sagi, he appointed those who supported him. There is little information on this opposition and how the Sultanah responded to the challenge. Her short reign may be the reason that so little is known about this opposition. However, it seems reasonable to argue that the increasing political power of the Panglima Sagis, which was decreed by the Sultanah, was a response to questions regarding her authority.

The next ruler was Sultanah Inayat Syah Zakiyat al-Din (1677-1688). During her rule, English envoys as well as those from Mecca visited Aceh and had an audience with her. The British envoy requested permission from the queen to build a business center with a fortress. The queen responded that a business center might be built but without the fortress. With regard to the Arab messengers, it is explained that initially they came to Moghul, India, but the Moghul ruler was not willing to receive them, and so they continued their journey to Aceh. The queen welcomed her guests and even requested them that they stay longer, so that she could prepare a gift to bring back to Mecca and present to the Syarif of Mecca.²⁶

During the reign of Zakiyat al-Din, an opposing movement to her leadership emerged. A local historian notes that those who opposed the ruler persuaded two of the four Arab messengers to stay in Aceh with the promise that if they successfully overthrew the queen, they would raise to become the new ruler. Such story may have been told to

²⁵ Djajadiningrat, *Kesultanan Aceh*, p. 58.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 59.

account for the fact that when the last female ruler of Aceh was deposed, she was replaced by someone of Arab descent.

When Sultanah Zakiyat al-Din died in 1688 she was succeeded by Sultanah Kamalat al-Din Syah, the last female ruler in Acehnese history. She ruled the sultanate for about eleven years until she was forced to step down in 1699 by those who opposed to a woman ruling a Muslim kingdom. Historians argue that the death of Abd al-Rauf al-Singkili in 1693 was a major blow for the rule of queens. No authoritative *‘ulamā’* could replace him as the strong defender of the idea that a woman could be a ruler. In addition, Meccan *‘ulamā’* issued a *fatwa*, which was apparently a response to a request from those who opposed the ruler, which supposedly state that it is unlawful for a woman to rule a sultanate.

This section shows that there were always opposition movements toward the ascension of women as rulers in the sultanate. Islam could have been a source for those who opposed the female rulers as the case in the first and the fourth Sultanahs. However, the opposition was not simply to replace a woman with a man. They also wanted to enthrone their man instead of the best available at the time. Therefore, political power may have been a stronger reason for their challenging women leadership. Before discussing further debates on this issue, it is worth first discussing administrative structure of the sultanate and then its Islamic nature. The administrative structure will show the power relations among the ruling elites, while the discussion of Islamic character of the state will illuminate the extent of the Islamic presence in the state and hence its role in the opposition movements.

Administrative Structure

It seems that from Aceh’s establishment, political power was a source of contention between the ruler and the *Orang Kaya*. In his article, Reid divides the Aceh sultanate during 1550-1700 into three stages. The first stage was dominated by the *Orang Kaya* and lasted until 1589, when al-Mukammil ascended the throne. The second stage, which Reid categorizes as an era of royal absolutism, continued until the death of Iskandar Muda in 1636. The last stage is characterized as the era of the decline of royal power under the four sultanahs. Although the categorization seems to be arbitrary—how he explains the “absolutist” ruler al-Mukammil was forced to step down by his son and the first female ruler was in fact a powerful ruler—the article

shows that, in addition to the rulers, there were others who had access in dominating power in the sultanate.

Andaya identifies that, there were four persons who were very powerful in the Sultanate. They were Leube Kita Kali (or Kadi Malik al-Adil, the principal judge of religious and secular law); Orang Kaya Maharaja Sri Maharaja (chief minister of state affairs); Orang Kaya Laksamana Perdana Menteri (police commander); and Panglima Bandara (chief officer of ports). While during powerful sultans, like Iskandar Muda, these officials had no decisive power in the administration, they enjoyed greater power under the weak Sultans or Sultanates.²⁷

Andaya also argues that the listing of Kali (or Kadi) as the first minister shows that the Aceh Sultanate place Islam as the most important aspect of life. As discussed further in the next section, Kadi Malik al-Adil was the most trusted advisor of the ruler not only on religious matter but also on other administrative issues including diplomatic affairs. Kadi often joined a meeting with foreign envoys discussing a proposed agreement. During court ceremonies, such as *Td al-Fitr* and *Td al-Aḍa* festivals, Kadi always sat just beside the ruler, symbolizing his high status in the ruling system.

In addition to the ruling class mentioned earlier, the Sultanate of Aceh also recognized socio-political entities which governed daily lives at lower levels. Ito describes that there were three socio-political elements of the sultanate: Mukim, Nanggroe, and Sagi (sagoe). Although he mentions the gampong (or Kampung in Malay) as the smallest unit, it seems that Mukim was the smallest recognizable unit, which Ito identifies as equal to district or township. It is not clear what the leader of this unit was called. He only mentions that this term, as the Arabic word *muqīm* indicates, refer to the prescribed number of adult Muslims living in an area as a condition for a necessity of conducting a Friday congregational prayer. The next level is Nanggroe (*negeri* in Malay word) which comprised a number of Mukim and was administered by Uleebalang. The next level is the Sagi (Sagoe, means angle or corner), a confederation of Nanggroe. The leader of Sagi was called Panglima Sagi.

²⁷ Leonard Y. Andaya, "Aceh's Contribution to Standards of Malayness," *Achipel*, 61 (2001), pp. 52-53.

Ito acknowledges that his description on the socio-political unit was sketchy due to the lack of historical records. It is unclear, therefore, when these institutions were initially developed, became effective and for how long their effectiveness. Neither is their relation with the four *Orang Kaya* mentioned earlier. However it can be assumed that until the ascension of the second female ruler, Sultanah Naqiyat al-Din Syah, the *Orang Kaya* or the elite class was dominant in the ruling authority. Afterward, the ruling power was shared with, and possibly contested by, the Panglima Sagis.

Sagi as a socio-political unit seems to be established during the reign of Sultanah Safiyat al-Din. There were three Sagis known from the number of Mukim in its territory: Sagi XXII, Sagi XXV, and Sagi XXVI. The establishment of Sagi, Ito argues, had political as well as economic purposes. Politically, it counter-balanced increasing political power of the *Orang Kaya*, while economically it was the result of the rising significance of interior contribution to the wealth of the sultanate.²⁸ During the queens' period, the source of revenues did not only come from port areas but also from interiors as agricultural products increased. The increasing power of Panglima Sagi, therefore, signified the tension between them and the *Orang Kaya* in controlling economic sources as well as political power.

The power of Panglima Sagis seems to be more powerful after the reign of Sultanah Naqiyat al-Din as she decreed the Panglimas as people who had rights to enthrone and dethrone the ruler of Aceh.²⁹ Panglimas Sagis, therefore, reportedly weakened the power the *Orang Kaya*. In Ito's words, that the development of the three Panglima Sagi "put an end to the role played by the Uleebalang in relation to the Acehese rulers and set up a new framework of the political life of the Sultanate from the last quarter of the 17th century for the centuries following."³⁰

The opinion that Panglima Sagi had power in electing the ruler has resulted in differences among historians in regard to who really

²⁸ Ito, "The World of the Adat Aceh", pp. 72-73.

²⁹ According to Hasjmy there were four people who have right in enthroning and dethroning the ruler, i.e. three Panglima Sagi and Kadi Malik al-Adil. See A. Hasjmy, *59 Tahun Aceh Merdeka*, p. 189. Djajadiningrat, however, only mentions that the enthronement of new ruler was subject to the approval of Panglima Sagis. See Djajadiningrat, *Kesultanan Aceh*, p. 58.

³⁰ Ito, "The World of the Adat Aceh", p. 78.

opposed the leadership of women in the sultanate. As discussed later on, some scholars argue that those who disagree with the women rulers were Sagi leaders, pointing out to Panglima Polem, while others mentioned the *Orang Kaya* as the ones who were behind the movement to overthrow queens' political power.

Islamic Character of Aceh

As mentioned slightly before, Islam was a very important factor signifying the Sultanate of Aceh from the rest of kingdoms at the time. Andaya argues that "Islam provided Aceh with an advantage over all contenders for leadership in the Malay world."³¹ Pasai and north Sumatra, he argues, were the earliest to embrace Islam while Malaka converted to the religion sometime in the middle of the fifteenth century. Pasai "remained the most prestigious Islamic centre in the archipelago," and its reputation was transferred to Aceh when Pasai was absorbed into Aceh in the early sixteenth century. Islam, then, formed the underpinning of society in Aceh. Andaya argues further that Malay identity, which is inseparable from Islam, came from the period of Aceh Sultanate in the sixteenth and seventeenth century.

The nature of Islamic character seems to be the effect of influential *'ulama'* in the court. It is noted that almost all Acehnese rulers gave royal patronage to the leading Muslim scholars and appointed them as whether Shaykh al-Islam or Kadi Malik al-Adil.³² During the reign of Iskandar Muda, for example, Shams al-Din al-Sumatrani (d. 1630) was appointed as the Shaykh al-Islam. Shams al-Din had very powerful influence over the ruler as noted by many European contemporaries. After Shams al-Din and Iskandar Muda died and Iskandar Thani ascended to the power, Nur al-Din al-Raniri enjoyed his position as Shaykh al-Islam. Then, Abd al-Rauf al-Singkili held the office of Kadi Malik al-Adil during the period of four queens.

³¹ Andaya, "Aceh's Contribution, p. 38.

³² Shaykh al-Islam represents a highest authority in Islam. This term also epitomizes the unity of state and religion. Shaykh al-Islam is not a part of state officials but functions as the advisor or chief-councilor. Shaykh al-Islam might issue a *fatwa*, a non-binding legal opinion. However, a fatwa might be implemented fully and effectively due to the closeness of Shaykh with a ruler. Kadi Malik al-Adil, on the other hand, is a supreme judge or the highest authority of the court. Kadi (*Qadi*) is a part of state officials and a decision made by kadi is binding, since the court is a legal institution to settle disputes or punish those who break the laws. For further discussion on Shaykh al-Islam and Kadi. See Hadi, *Islam and State in Sumatra*, pp. 148-166.

It is the *'ulamā'* through their influence on the rulers that Islamic notion widely spread in the sultanate. In Ito's words, the *'ulamā'* played roles as advisors to the ruler and undoubtedly much influenced the social and spiritual life of the Acehnese.³³

The Islamic character of Aceh was also well represented in literary works produced during the sultanate. Using Malay language, the literary production paid greater emphasis on Islamic themes so that it made distinctive from the rest of other Malay literary works. In discussing the Islamic scholarship in the Malay-Indonesian world in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, Peter Riddell mainly discuss works of those three *'ulamā'*s from Aceh as representing the Malay-Indonesian Islamic literature. This shows the importance of Aceh in development of Islamic scholarly debates during this period. Therefore, it is worth discussing in brief their biography and roles.³⁴

Very little is known about the life of Shams al-Din al-Sumatrani. His date of birth was not known but some scholars assume he was born before 1575.³⁵ He seems to assume central position in the sultanate before the accession of Iskandar Muda to power in 1607. However, it is during Iskandar Muda's reign that his influence to the ruler and, in turn, to Acehnese was highly notified. Through his literary works, the most important of which was *Mir'āt al-Mu'minīn*, he expounds theosophical doctrines toward the Acehnese. He extends and strengthens monistic teaching which was initially introduced to Aceh by Hamzah Fansuri (d. 1590). He also introduces a concept of seven grades of being, which represent the different structures of sufi's consciousness or pathways. The ultimate goal of the pathways is to attain the union between Creator and creature. This is more popularly known as the *wujūdīyah* teaching which was later condemned by al-Raniri.³⁶

Shams al-Din also reportedly initiated Iskandar Muda into the Naqshbandiyah order.³⁷ This implied that, to a certain degree, Iskandar

³³ Ito, "The World of the Adat Aceh", p. 154.

³⁴ Peter Riddell, *Islam and the Malay-Indonesian World: Transmission and Responses* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2001).

³⁵ Ibid., p. 110.

³⁶ Ibid., pp. 112-115.

³⁷ Ibid., p. 111.

Muda was his disciple in the Sufi order.³⁸ It is not surprising, therefore, that Shams al-Din had very strong influence on Iskandar Muda, not only on religious matters, but also on other administrative affairs. He often joined the Sultan's address to foreign guests as well as in negotiations with them dealing with a treaty of commerce. He seems to be the most trusted advisor of Iskandar Muda until his death in 1630. On his overall roles, Ito concludes that "the reign of Sultan Iskandar Muda was, in many respects, Syams al-Din's day, particularly in Acehese religious life."³⁹

When Iskandar Muda died and Iskandar Thani ascended to the power, Nur al-Din al-Raniri was the most prominent *'ulamā'* in the court. Born in Ranir (Randir), an old harbor on the Gujarat coast, around the end of the sixteenth century, al-Raniri was believed to spend some time in Pahang so that he familiarized with the royal family, one of whose descendant was now the ruler of Aceh. This explains why after his coming to Aceh in 1637, he was soon appointed as Shaykh al-Islam by Sultan Iskandar Thani, a Prince of Pahang.⁴⁰ Contradictory to his predecessor, Shams al-Din al-Sumatrani, Nur al-Din al-Raniri was an orthodox *'ulamā'*. Therefore, during his officiant, one of his concerns was to "purify" Islamic understanding of Acehese. This was done through a number of his literary works, one of which was *Hujjat al-siddiq li daf' al-zindīq* (the truth reasons to refute heresy).

As indicated by its title, this book refutes the monistic teaching and claims it as un-Islamic.⁴¹ After having a firm foothold in the court, al-

³⁸ Ito, "The World of the Adat Aceh", p. 249.

³⁹ Ibid., p. 252.

⁴⁰ There is a difference among scholars toward the exact position of Nur al-Din al-Raniri. Some, like Azra and Hadi mention that he hold a position as Shaykh al-Islam. Ito, on the other hand, argues the only Shaykh al-Islam in Aceh was Shams al-Din al-Sumatrani. This implies that Nur al-Din was Kadi Malik al-Adil, as argued by Riddell that he was the Chief Judge. See, Azyumardi Azra, *The Origin of Islamic Reformism in Southeast Asia: Networks of Malay-Indonesian and Middle Eastern 'ulamā' in the Seventeenth and Eighteenth Centuries* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2004), p. 59; Hadi, *Islam and State in Sumatra*, p. 153; Ito, "The World of the Adat Aceh", pp. 259-261; Riddell, *Islam and the Malay-Indonesian World*, p. 118.

⁴¹ Muhammad Naguib Al-Attas, *Raniri and the Wujudiyah of 17th Century Aceh* (Singapore: MBRAS, 1966); Idem, *A Commentary on the Hujjat al-Siddiq of Nur al-Din al-Raniri* (Kuala Lumpur: Ministry of Culture, Malaysia, 1986).

Raniri launched attack on *wujūdīyah* teaching. Based on his fatwa many people were killed when they refused to dismantle their beliefs and practices of *wujūdīyah*.⁴² This shows the great influence of al-Raniri not only on the ruler but also on the shift of religious life as well as Islamic teaching which developed in Aceh.

Al-Raniri's another important, if not the most important, literary work was the voluminous *Bustan al-Salatin*. These seven books reflect his interest in the field of history. The first two books present the history of world, and chapter 13 of the second volume deals specifically with the history of the Aceh Sultanate. This is one of few local written sources that many scholars refer to in describing some details of the sultanate's history.

Al-Raniri continued serving this position during early years of Sultanah Safiyat al-Din. He was forced to leave Aceh in 1645 following his debate with Sayf al-Rijal, the defender of the *wujūdīyah* teachings. Acknowledging that the Sultanah had no capacity in settling in the debate, she sent this matter to the ruling elites who apparently preferred to support Sayf al-Rijal. Sayf al-Rijal was then appointed to replace al-Raniri's position, while the latter was expelled from Aceh.⁴³

It is not recorded in the history the role of Sayf al-Rijal in his new office and how far his influence was on the Sultanah. The discussion of the great *'ulamā'* having strong influence on the ruler then goes to Abd al-Rauf al-Singkili who assumed his office in the early 1660s. Abd al-Rauf was born in Singkel, the southwestern coastal region of Aceh, in 1615. He left Aceh for Arabia in 1642 and spent around 19 years seeking knowledge from one place to another in Arabia. After he came back to Aceh in 1661, Sultanah Safiyat al-Din appointed him as Kadi Malik al-Adil.⁴⁴

Until his death in 1693, al-Singkili held this position and he enjoyed royal patronage from the women rulers. It is understandable that scholars categorize him as the most influential *'ulamā'* in defending the authority of female rulers. His acceptance to the position

⁴² Riddell, *Islam and the Malay-Indonesian World*, pp. 119-123.

⁴³ Takeshi Ito, "Why did Nuruddin ar-Raniri Leave Aceh in 1054 AH?," *BKI*, 134 (1978): pp. 489-491.

⁴⁴ Azra, *The Origin of Islamic Reformism*, pp. 70-78; Riddell, *Islam and the Malay-Indonesian World*, pp. 125-126.

and his dedication to the rulers as recorded in his books are enough bases to argue that statement.

During his life, al-Singkili authored a number of books on different issues, ranging from Qur'anic exegesis, the Prophetic tradition, *fiqh*, theology, and mysticism. One of the most important books is *Mir'at al-Tullāb* which discusses many topics of Muslim life in the perspective of Islamic jurisprudence. This book was written during and commissioned by the Sultanah Safiyat al-Din. Other books which were requested by another ruler, Sultanah Zakiyat al-Din, were *Risalah adab murid akan syakh*, which deals with proper relation and conduct of a student toward a teacher, and a commentary upon the compilation of 40 hadiths by Nawawi.⁴⁵

To some extent, al-Singkili was similar to al-Raniri in terms that both are orthodox *'ulama'*. However, he differed from al-Raniri in his attitudes toward the *wujūdīyah* followers. Although he also claimed the *wujūdīyah* teaching as incorrect, al-Singkili did not regard its followers as *kāfir* (non-believer) and subject to be fought. He even criticized al-Raniri's conduct as wasting time and reminded people for not accusing other Muslims as *kāfir* since this was improper.⁴⁶

The Islamic understanding of al-Singkili, therefore, might be said as moderate. He seems to go in between Shams al-Din and Nur al-Din. In Azra's words, al-Singkili's main concern was the reconciliation between the *sharī'ah* and *taṣawwuf*, or between *ẓābir* (outer) and *bāṭin* (inner) sciences. His moderate position was also found in his acceptance to the authority of women as rulers.⁴⁷ In his 22 books, he never questioned the leadership quality of sultanahs; this implies that he accepted their leadership. Royal patronage that he enjoyed during his whole life is another indication of his position. As a great scholar and influential Sufi teacher—he was authorized by a *murshid* of Syatariyah order in Mecca to spread the order in the Malay world—al-Singkili's position must be a major cause for the failure of opposition movements toward women rulers. As will be addressed in the later part of the paper, the success of toppling down the female ruler was taking place only after his death.

⁴⁵ Azra, *The Origin of Islamic Reformism*, pp. 79-82; Riddell, *Islam and the Malay-Indonesian World*, p. 129.

⁴⁶ Riddell, *Islam and the Malay-Indonesian World*, p. 128.

⁴⁷ Azra, *The Origin of Islamic Reformism*, p. 79.

The discussion of three *'ulamā'* mentioned above shows the reciprocal relation between the sultans or sultanahs and Muslim scholars. The scholars enjoyed royal patronage extended by the rulers while the rulers were maintained their image as pious Muslims and guarded from oppositional challenges. This part also confirms that the type of Islam that spread in Aceh is sufistic Islam. All three great scholars were sufi masters of different orders: Shams al-Din affiliated with Naqshabandiyah, al-Raniri with Rifaiyah, and al-Singkili with Shatariyah. It still needs further studies whether there is causative relation between following a certain sufi order and types of religious thought of the follower. As it is known, while Shams al-Din stresses on theosophical or monistic teachings, al-Raniri emphasizes the shari'ah aspect, which was the opposite of the earlier. Al-Singkili, on the other hand, tried to reconcile both, though he kept shariah as an aspect that must not be neglected. One thing which is clear, however, is that by following Sufism, one does not necessarily mean neglecting orthodoxy of Islam, as shown by al-Raniri and al-Singkili.

The shift between one dominant "school" to another during different rulers indicate the fluidity of society in receipting religious ideas. It is, therefore, not arguable that Andaya classifies Aceh at the time as "Islamic cosmopolitanism," with indication that its people adhered to "the latest religious and secular fashions from the Islamic world." This means that despite Islam being the strong character of Aceh, it is the moderate teaching which developed in Aceh; Islam which is open to new ideas and views, including female leadership.⁴⁸

The latter is not something totally new for the Acehnese as a part of Austronesian societies. As Reid argues that the societies "have been more inclined than perhaps any other major population group to place high-born women on the throne." This also explains why Pasai in the early fifteenth century and Patani in the late sixteenth had been ruled by queens. As an Islamic kingdom, the Aceh sultanate would not likely have the women rulers, had Islam developed in the region been a strong *shari'ah*-oriented or strict orthodox one. In other words, the idea of women rulers does not come from, and even contradicts with, Islamic teachings. It comes from the regional culture. However, the

⁴⁸ Andaya, "Aceh's Contribution", p. 38.

implementation of the idea in the Aceh sultanate was made possible only by moderate understanding of Islam.⁴⁹

Women Rulers in Debates

Different from the ascension to power of Iskandar Muda and Iskandar Thani who were reportedly assigned by the dying rulers,⁵⁰ all women rulers ascended to the power as the result of a compromise among the ruling elites. None of them was designated by the previous ruler. As the position of the ruler was a highly political issue, it is hard to imagine that many people were satisfied with one conclusion. It is, therefore, not surprising that disagreement was noted on every single female ruler. Let alone, this issue is contradictory to the mainstream of Islamic tenets, so that people easily use Islam as the reason to oppose the female ruler.

It is understandable, therefore, that from early beginning of the women rulers' period, questions on their authority were always present. However, it is hard to define who really opposed to the women rulers, since available historical records only mentions sketchily from one case to another. The only thing which is sure is that people involved in opposing the ruler were different from one time to another. During the first female ruler, Sultanah Safiyat al-Din, the opposition might come from Islamic oriented figures who were shocked with a new phenomenon, having a woman as the ruler, as this had never been the case in Aceh. It might be argued, then, that the first opposition movement was more spontaneous and religious and less political. The fact that after a while no opposition was noted in foreign notes as well as in local documents indicates that the opposition was relatively overcome. For this matter, the favor and support of al-Raniri must be an important factor in addition to the Sultanah's good leadership when ruling the sultanate.⁵¹

Having position as Shaykh al-Islam and being a highly respected *'ulama'*, al-Raniri did not have any objection on the enthronement of a woman as a ruler. Although he also did not legalize explicitly the authority of female leadership, in *Bustan al-Salatin*, he did praise Safiyat al-Din as the just, generous, loving and caring ruler. When describing

⁴⁹ Reid, "Female Roles in Pre-colonial", p. 639.

⁵⁰ Al-Raniri, *Bustan al-Salatin*, pp. 18-19; Hadi, *Islam and State in Sumatra*, pp. 87-88.

⁵¹ Kheng, "Power behind the Throne", p. 11.

her death, he also praised her as the ruler who had successfully maintained the implementation of Islamic law, increased state prosperity, and humble before God.⁵² This indicates that he was on her side and in support on her enthronement. It might be argued, therefore, that Islamic-driven opposition toward a female ruler was not strong and it could be swept away by attitudes of the respected religious scholar.

During the second female ruler, Sultanah Naqiyat al-Din, the opposition to her reign came from a member of royal family, Teuku Itam, known also as Panglima Polem. This challenge seems to be more political than religious, as he was reported to be assigned as the next ruler after the death of Safiyat al-Din. Panglima Polem was the son of Iskandar Muda from non *gahara* wife so that he was a half-brother of Safiyat al-Din. The ascension of Naqiyat al-Din had understandably disappointed him and this led him to challenge the ruler. Although Islamic reason was used to support his action and he was backed by some Muslims as he was also the Panglima of Sagi XXII, this movement was clearly a political one because the ultimate aim was to take over the power, and not just against the female leader.⁵³

It is not clear how the opposition movement came to an end. There is possibility that the Sultanah Naqiyat al-Din responded the challenge by granting more power to Sagi. As mentioned before that during her reign, the three Panglima Sagis were among those who had right to enthrone and dethrone the ruler. Whether Panglima Polem then accepted this scheme or not it is hardly known. However, there was no report afterward about his opposition movement.

During the third and fourth female rulers, opposition against the rulers was also present. Different from the second female ruler, this time the group who challenged Sultanah Zakiyat al-Din and Sultanah Kamalat al-Din was unclear. The speculation was addressed to some *Orang Kaya* or elite groups in the center of power. This is based on the development that during Naqiyat al-Din, the power of three Panglima Sagis was more powerful. They not only had right to enthrone and dethrone the ruler but also had more autonomous power in administering their respective Sagis. This might made the *Orang Kaya*

⁵² Al-Raniri, *Bustan al-Salatin*, pp. 42-63.

⁵³ Hadi, *Islam and State in Sumatra*, p. 82; Ito, "The World of the Adat Aceh", pp. 69-72; Reid, "Trade and the Problem of Royal Power", p. 53.

lose some control on economic sources. As also mentioned, since the reign of Sultanah Safiyat al-Din, the ports were no longer dominant sources of wealth for Aceh as a result of intensive intervention of the Dutch in international trade.

Local historians argue that during the reign of Zakiyat al-Din two of four delegates from Mecca were persuaded by some ruling elites not to return to Mecca but live in Aceh instead. The two men were Sharif Hashim and Sharif Ibrahim. The elites who opposed the ruler were apparently trying to seek assistance from them as they use Islamic reasons in order to depose the women ruler. Local historians even argue further that the opposing group promised to enthrone one of the two if they succeeded in dethroning the ruler. This was approved later that Sharif Hashim was enthroned as the ruler after Sultanah Kamalat al-Din was successfully deposed in 1699 following the arrival of a *fatwā* from the Haramayn *ʿulamāʾ*.⁵⁴

Why the opposition movement succeeded in dethroning the women ruler only in 1699? The arrival of Meccan delegation was noted in 1683, so that there was a time lag of about 16 years. If we assume that it was a process needed to a fatwa to come to Aceh, then it is certainly too long, because transportation between Malay and Mecca was very frequent, either for trade or pilgrimage purposes. This brought to argue the significant role of a respected *ʿulamāʾ* at this time, Abd al-Rauf al-Singkili.

As mentioned earlier, al-Singkili had royal patronage with four women rulers and he held position as the Kadi Malik al-Adil. He was in favor of the rulers and never questioned, implicitly or explicitly, the authority of women as rulers. He also praised their leadership as appeared in his works. Sultanah Zakiyat al-Din even commissioned him to write two books.⁵⁵ It is safe to argue, therefore, that al-Singkili's respected status as a scholar of Islamic sciences held sway the issue of opposing the women ruler.

The presence of two leading *ʿulamāʾ*, al-Raniri and al-Singkili, during the four women rulers and their support to female leadership brought to conclude that opposition movement against their ruling power was less religious than political or economic. Islam does provide references that might be used to oppose the female ruler, but this is

⁵⁴ Hasjmy, *59 Tahun Aceh Merdeka*, p. 59; Azra, *The Origin of Islamic Reformism*, pp. 78-79.

⁵⁵ Hadi, *Islam and State in Sumatra*, pp. 84-86.

highly depended on people's interpretation and motivation behind it. The fact that no opposition movement using religious reason succeeded in ending the women rulers during these two *'ulamā'* presence is sufficient to argue that female leadership might be accommodated in Islamic teaching.

Conclusion

The overall discussion makes clear that the rise and establishment of women rulers in Aceh for almost six decades was because of several factors. The presence of influential ruling elites, the division of Aceh into three *sagis*, and supports of *'ulamā'* are all among the significant factors that made women possibly ruled the sultanate. The Southeast Asian culture which place women in relatively higher position than those in other regions is also another factor. The last, and probably the most important thing, is the moderate Islamic understanding among the Acehnese.

The role of *'ulamā'* who were also mystics, especially Nur al-Din al-Raniri and Abd al-Rauf al-Singkili, is certainly pivotal during the era of female rulers. Besides, mystical persuasion of Islam is far less orthodox than legalistic approach. On the one hand, they kept and strengthened an Islamic character of Aceh, while on the other hand, they maintained moderate teaching of Islam by which female leadership was not perceived as contradictory to Islam. Sufism seems to be the key aspect in understanding their role and religious understanding.

Having examined all mentioned aspects of the history of women rulers in the Aceh sultanate, there is no doubt that the opposition to the female ruler was more a politically and economically motivated-ambition than religious one. []

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