

makers) who want to understand what is really going on with Islam in Southeast Asia, without falling into the pitfall of orientalist or alarmist bias.

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

By Sher Banu A. L. Khan. Singapore: NUS Press, 2017. Pp. xvi + 318. ISBN 10: 1501713841;

ISBN 13: 978-1501713842.

Reviewed by Yo Nonaka, Keio University

E-mail yon@sfc.keio.ac.jp

doi:10.1017/S1479591418000128

Aceh Dar al-Salam was located in the north of Sumatra and has for a very long time been known as a staunchly Islamic kingdom. It was also known as the “Veranda of Mecca” because of this. In the second half of the seventeenth century when the Dutch VOC (United East India Company) and the English East India Company were gradually increasing their commercial hold in the region by interfering in the affairs of indigenous polities, Aceh was governed by four successive woman rulers. In an Islamic kingdom and a largely patriarchal state, why and how were these queens able to maintain their positions for fifty-nine years, and how did they deal with challenges from their own local male elite and the European foreign envoys? These are the main questions in this book.

In previous studies, Aceh’s expansion through conquest by Sultan Iskandar Muda (r. 1607–1636) in the early seventeenth century was deemed as a “golden age” in Acehnese history and, in contrast, his female successors were seen as weaklings. It is widely accepted that Aceh’s power dipped in the latter half of the seventeenth century under the four queens’ rule. But did Aceh really decline, and if so, was it because of female rule? This is another main question in this book.

Most of the earlier writings in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries agree on the unfavorable impact of these female rulers on Acehnese history. One of the most popular perceptions was that they were indeed weaklings, mere ceremonial rulers propped up by the male elite and responsible for the decline of the monarchy and royal power by the end of the seventeenth century. On the other hand, some studies with reference to contemporary accounts and archival records tend to adopt a slightly more favorable view of these female rulers. The variety of interpretations and debates and the shifts in view about these enigmatic women are the inspiration for this book. By transliterating, translating, and mining the Dutch VOC treaties, diplomatic correspondence between Aceh and the governors general in Batavia, and the daily registers from Dutch envoys stationed for months in Aceh, this study is able to reconstruct and provide a vivid picture of key turning points in the Acehnese court.

The book consists of seven chapters:

Chapter 1, “The Succession of the First Female Ruler of Aceh”, describes the succession of Sultanah Safiatuddin Syah (r. 1641–1675), a daughter of Sultan Iskandar Muda and a wife of Sultan Iskandar Thani (r. 1636–1641). The author argues that there were no fixed laws of succession in Aceh. However, one necessary condition to ensure the accession and acceptance of a ruler was the consensus of the *orang kaya* (rich nobles/state officials). The elites agreed to accept a woman on the throne because of Safiatuddin’s impeccable lineage and the dearth of royal males in 1641. A candidate with a chance of election had to be neutral, uninvolved with any *orang kaya* faction, and be of royal blood, which conferred legitimacy. By a process of elimination, Safiatuddin emerged as the most suitable

candidate. Acehese adat and historical antecedent allowed women to be in powerful positions, and Islamic doctrines, as interpreted by the ulama of the time, did not ban a woman from leadership.

Chapter 2, “Sultanah Safiatuddin’s Early Years: Keeping Afloat”, illustrates with the discussion of the jewel affair between VOC and the Aceh kingdom how Sultanah Safiatuddin was able to get her own way and successfully steer her kingdom out of troubled waters through peaceful diplomacy. Unlike the reigns of her male predecessors, which were characterized by conspicuous consumption and extravagant spending on jewels to enhance charisma, prowess and status, her reign saw more pragmatic spending and conservation of the kingdom’s resources. Instead of prowess, she emphasized piety and her moral attributes to inspire devotion from her subjects.

Chapter 3, “Sultanah Safiatuddin’s Maturing Years: Politics of Consolidation”, by describing the Perak affairs between the VOC and Aceh over Perak’s tin trade, shows how the sultanah survived on the throne and consolidated her position. She endured these trials by balancing the orang kaya factions, giving favors to her supporters and withholding rewards to weaken the factions that opposed her. Her flexible and soft rule, which the author called “to bend with the wind”, helped her soothe ruffled feathers and reduce the many tensions with the Dutch which could have resulted in a war. And in the end, her policy towards the Dutch prevailed.

Chapter 4, “Tie That Bind? Aceh’s Overlord–Vassal Relations”, examines Aceh’s relations with Perak and her other vassals on the SWC (Sumatra West Coast), with an emphasis on how increasing VOC incursions affected traditional overlord–vassal relations. The author argues that Aceh’s control over her vassals on the SWC had begun to weaken even before Safiatuddin’s accession. Her male predecessors had opened the way for the Dutch through blanket concessions by allowing toll-free privileges. Although Sultanah Safiatuddin signed numerous treaties accommodating Dutch demands, she was careful to limit the concessions and protect her subjects’ livelihoods. Personal bonds based on reciprocal emotional, kinship and religious ties tended to engender more lasting loyalties than force. Aceh lost some vassals and both the Dutch and the English gained footholds in Sumatra, but Aceh’s independence was preserved. Sultanah Zakiatuddin (r. 1678–1688), her successor, continued her policy of accommodating European powers but granted them only limited concessions.

Chapter 5, “Female Rulers Negotiating Islam and Patriarchy”, examines how Islam was practiced under female rule, and the female rulers’ relations with the male elites and ulama. Neither religious knowledge nor gender were prerequisites in the selection of the ruler. The main responsibilities were to uphold Allah’s laws, pursue prosperity for the subjects and ensure public welfare. The ruler must be just, merciful, generous, prudent, knowledgeable, pleasant/good looking and possess good conduct. To a large extent, the Achenese queens possessed many of these qualities. Although the queens were not secluded or invisible, they did not intrude into areas that would be considered distinctively male, such as the main hall of the mosque, nor did they undertake religious rituals usually reserved for the imam. Unlike their male predecessors, the sultanahs did not support any particular religious faction, so in this sense they took the politics out of religion. They were also dedicated patrons of religion and their court became the most important center of Islamic studies and learning in the region.

Chapter 6, “The Practice of Queenship”, describes the features of female rule and examines what the differences were between their leadership styles and those of their male predecessors. The author argues that the sultanahs’ advantage was that they had a unique arbiter-mediator role, called “stranger-queens”, and their relationships with the elites were free from macho rivalries. Establishing a network of powerful women confidants and eunuchs, a keen interest in fashion, and showing care to envoys’ wives and children were distinctively feminine traits they possessed. The male elites, both local and foreign, had a positive view of the sultanahs, especially Safiatuddin. It appears that there was an institution of “queenship” that differed from “kingship”.

Chapter 7, “The End of Female Rule and Its Legacy”, explains how and why the fourth Sultanah, Kamalat Syah (r. 1688–1699), was deposed and female rule ended in 1699. By the 1690s, the group

hostile to female rule had become powerful, thanks to their prestige and political ties to royalty. Patriarchy justified by religion sealed the sultanah's removal. While the letter from Mecca stating that a female rule was illegal was used to justify deposing Kamalat, the author argues that the real reason for her deposition had more to do with the politics of power than religion. It is already made clear by the examination in previous chapters that adat, or local Malay ideas of political leadership, did not consider the sex of the ruler as a determining factor for succession or effective leadership. How female leadership and status were contested, conceived, defined and practiced in a Muslim society depended on how the power holders of the time interpreted Islamic tenets.

The author confesses that this book has not answered all the questions posed at the beginning, however, it has clearly established that this female model of leadership was better suited for facilitating peace, trade and diplomacy in the age of commerce, and it was a key reason that helped Aceh remain independent and economically autonomous in the seventeenth century. The leadership style of the queens, which was more collaborative and preferred to gain the loyalty of the male elites, certainly limited royal power, but, contrary to popular belief, this did not lead to its decline; rather Aceh experienced its longest-ever period of political stability to date.

From the eighteenth century on, female rule never appeared again in Acehese history. And now in the democratic era of Indonesia the province of Aceh is granted special autonomy to enact regional regulations including Islamic criminal law. Under these regulations Muslim people there are forced to perform certain religious activities and wear Islamic attire, and intimacies outside marriage are forbidden. One of the more controversial punishments is caning. Some scholars argue that the Islamic law implemented there is based on a conservative and limited interpretation of Islamic tenets and therefore is very exclusive and discriminative against women. This book shows that the female rule in the latter half of the seventeenth century was just, merciful and generous, and therefore it was deemed to be Islamic. Such findings might be a good lesson for the current, controversial Islamic reign in Aceh.

Governing Cambodia's Forests. The International Politics of Policy Reform.

By Andrew Cock. Copenhagen: NIAS Press, 2016. Pp. 322. ISBN 10: 8776941671; ISBN 13: 978-8776941666.

Reviewed by Jewellord T. Nem Singh, Leiden University

Email j.nem.singh@fsw.leidenuniv.nl

doi:10.1017/S147959141800013X

This book weaves together the literature on aid provision, natural resource politics, and the international sources of domestic reforms to explain the failure of Cambodia's ruling elites in protecting the forest hinterlands. Using a single case study research design, the book offers an account of how externally-designed policies have reinforced, rather than challenged, the neo-patrimonial characteristics and practices of the state. Linked to this argument, country ownership in aid provision appears to play a central role in the success of development policy-making – a key ingredient apparently lacking in the reform process in the Cambodian forestry sector.

The book consists of seven chapters, three of which are empirically specific to forestry governance in Cambodia. Chapter 1 opens the discussion with the literature on the politics of aid-driven reforms in the global South, focusing mainly on the relations of power between those who exert external leverage and the political elites in targeted states. Chapter 2 offers a strong narrative as regards the