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Sovereign Women in a Muslim Kingdom: the Sultanahs of Aceh, 1641-1699.

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Based on Khan's doctoral thesis of 2009, this book is a long awaited study of the apparent anomaly of the rule of four women in succession in the Islamic state of Aceh during the seventeenth century. While this has been remarked upon in the scholarly literature since Veth (1870), and has been discussed by contemporary researchers including Reid (1988: 170-2) and Andaya (2006: 166-168), *Sovereign Women in a Muslim Kingdom* is the first monograph on this important topic. Khan's aim is

“to show that the ways in which women's roles were interpreted in Islam depended largely on the socio-historical context of the time and the attitude of the male elite, and there was no universal injunction upon which all Muslims agreed. . . . As far as the Acehnese sultans were concerned, we do not need to look for tension between Islam and adat with regard to women's political roles and positions. Indeed, the contexts surrounding the reign of Sultanah Safiatuddin illustrate that the legitimacy of her rule and the allegiance of her subjects depended on both Islam and adat” (p. 12).

The book's outstanding contribution is to provide a clear, cohesive and detailed account of this period in Aceh's history, and particularly of the reign of Sultanah Safiatuddin as it appears in the VOC sources. The recent publication of these sources (Ito 2015) complements Khan's book, as few will have the expertise to comb through the early modern Dutch documents.

The book's introduction sets out the problem—rule by four women in succession in the “staunchly Islamic kingdom” of Aceh (p. 1)—and the evaluation of this phenomenon by contemporary observers and later historians. Contrary to most of the latter, Khan argues that Aceh did not decline under the women rulers, and, indeed, that they were in fact *more* Muslim than their predecessors: “under female sovereigns the success of the ruler relied less on notions of sacral and charismatic power based on prowess but more on Muslim notions of piety and the just ruler” (p. 23). Here Khan also briefly sketches the available sources (pp. 23-6): Dutch VOC documents, most plentiful up to the closure of the Aceh factory in 1663; EIC records, which Khan puts beyond the scope of the book; Malay manuscripts (about which more later); and contemporary travellers' accounts. It is evident that the bulk of the substantial original research underpinning this book is on the VOC records.

In Chapter 1, Khan examines the criteria for political succession in Aceh, as discussed in Malay court texts such as *Hikayat Aceh* and *Bustan al-Salatin*, to explain how Sultanah Taj al-'Alam Safiatuddin Syah, daughter of Iskandar Muda

and widow of the Pahang-born Iskandar Thani, came to the throne. Chapters 2 and 3 draw extensively on VOC documents to describe two key episodes in her reign: what Khan terms “the jewel affair,” in which Safiatuddin successfully resisted VOC attempts to collect payment promised to the Company by her late husband for jewels it had procured for him, and “the Perak affair,” in which this vassal state of Aceh defied the VOC’s claim of a monopoly of its lucrative tin trade. In both cases, Khan contends, Safiatuddin managed to steer a course through dangerous waters thanks to her “flexible and ‘soft’ rule by accommodation rather than confrontation” (p. 127). The question of whether Aceh, under pressure from both the Dutch and the English, lost control of its vassal states on the Sumatran west coast during this period is addressed in Chapter 4, with Khan pointing out that the treaties which set this in train were agreed by Safiatuddin’s predecessors, and that Aceh nevertheless managed to preserve its own independence. Chapter 5 treats the broader issue of the practice of Islam at the Acehnese court under the women rulers, and how they dealt with male elites, including ‘ulama’. As noted above, Khan takes the view that “rather than employing religion to enhance her power, Sultanah Safiatuddin used power tempered by religion” (p. 175)—in other words, that she was a more genuinely Muslim ruler than her male predecessors. Chapter 6 revisits scholarly literature on Malay kingship in the context of female rulers, again advancing the idea that rule by women after 1641 replaced absolutism with “a different, more benevolent and moral style of leadership” (p. 215). The reigns of the three succeeding women, and the eventual end of female rule in Aceh, are treated in Chapter 7. Here the VOC sources give out, and the chapter relies on European travellers’ accounts and existing scholarship.

Khan’s approach does not engage with scholarly perspectives that take a more critical approach to gender, whether in Islam or in South East Asia (for the latter see, e.g., Ong and Peletz eds. 1995, Sears eds. 1996, Peletz 2009). The book presents a rather unproblematised view of what it means to be a woman. The use of a metaphor involving fragrance in a royal letter from Sultanah Safiatuddin, for instance, “perhaps reflects a more feminine orientation” (p. 181). “It is safe to say,” Khan writes elsewhere, “that discussions with envoys’ wives and children about European fashion and an interest in wigs would be unique to women rulers!” (p. 243). The Sultanah’s request to the Dutch envoys to dance for her and her women councillors is taken as “[p]artly owing to her youth and partly to feminine mischief” (p. 87). Why not, instead, take this as a demonstration of how the Acehnese ruler made the Dutch literally dance to her tune? At times, it appears that Khan’s advocacy for the Acehnese women rulers as successful Muslim sovereigns simply reverses the gender paradigm (women are better Muslim rulers than men, not worse) rather than unpicking it (what indigenous ideas of gender underpinned the choice of women as rulers?).

At times, too, it is evident that Khan’s book owes more to European sources and paradigms than South East Asian ones. While a comparative perspective is welcome, at times this seems to be at the expense of engagement with the indigenous sources. Such material, including court chronicles, seals, coins, and letters, could contribute a great deal towards understanding the self-presentation of the women rulers as Muslim sovereigns, but are discussed in

summary fashion (i.e. p. 182, 192). The quote from the *Bustan al-Salatin* (p. 192) in which Safiatuddin is called a “Sultan” not a “Sultanah” cries out for further analysis. The Malay manuscript sources listed in the Bibliography (pp. 284-5) consist of a rather late and potentially problematic collection of documents pertaining to Aceh, which would need to be used with care. Even staying within the framework of European source material, it would have been worthwhile for Khan to have provided an analysis of the fascinating cover image, a 14th-century European depiction of a Queen of Sumatra, or indeed of 17th-century Dutch attitudes to women and authority.

Sovereign Women in a Muslim Kingdom is part of a mini-boom in recent scholarship on Aceh’s history, including not only Ito’s edition but also *Mapping the Acehnese Past* (Feener, Daly and Reid, eds., 2011), to which Khan contributed, and *From Anatolia to Aceh: Ottomans, Turks and Southeast Asia* (Gallop and Peacock, eds., 2015). It is a welcome companion to these volumes, enriching our knowledge of 17th-century Aceh and of the women who ruled it.

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