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What happened to Sayf al-Rijal?

Who was Sayf al-Rijal?

Sayf al-Rijal is a little-known Sheikh al-Islam, the highest religious appointee in the seventeenth-century court of Aceh Dar al-Salam.¹ He replaced the renowned Sheikh Nur al-Din in 1643 and in turn was succeeded by another famous ulama, Abd al-Ra'uf al-Sinkili, in 1661. While much ink and paper have been devoted to illuminating the lives and writings of al-Raniri and al-Sinkili, curiously al-Rijal has remained in total eclipse. This darkness shrouding al-Rijal is all the more surprising since he appears to have been Sheikh al-Islam for eighteen years, longer than his predecessor al-Raniri, who held the post for only six years from 1637 to 1643. Furthermore, Al-Rijal was no less involved in religious controversies whose echoes reverberated in the whole of the Malay world. These violent and at times bloody debates were between the more orthodox shari'a-oriented ulamas and the more mystical-syncretistic ulamas.² In Aceh, this controversy was exemplified by the bloody debate between the more orthodox shari'a-inclined al-Raniri and the disciples of the more philosophical mystical-oriented Shams al-Din al-Sumatra'i (died 1630), believed to be the Sheikh al-Islam in Aceh during the reign of Iskandar Muda (reigned 1607-1636). Iskandar Muda's successor, Sultan Iskandar Thani (reigned 1636-1641), appointed al-Raniri as Sheikh al-Islam, and apparently it was under the influence of Iskandar Muda that Iskandar Thani ordered the execution of

¹ I am grateful to Emeritus Professor Anthony Reid, Associate Professor Jan van der Putten, and Associate Professor Peter Borschberg for their valuable comments on earlier drafts of this article. I am responsible for the views expressed in this article.

² Azra 2004b:106-8. This division had existed since the fifteenth century in Java, where the earliest polemical treatise was written against what were considered heterodox teachings. Opposition to Islamic mysticism was seen when the Wali Sanga collectively condemned to death Shaykh Siti Jenar, who was accused of adhering to heterodox mystical doctrines. Sunan Panggung was burned to death because he had allegedly violated the shari'a in favour of mysticism. Another mystic, Shaykh Among Raga, was sentenced to death by Sultan Agung of Mataram for violating shari'a and propagating heterodox mystical doctrine. For more details, see Azra 2004b:106-8.

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Shams al-Din's followers and burnt their books in front of the Bayt al-Rahman Mosque (Azra 2004a:112). Al-Raniri remained as Sheikh al-Islam during the reigns of Sultan Iskandar Thani and his successor Sultanah Safiatuddin Syah (reigned 1641-1675) until he was abruptly replaced by Sayf al-Rijal in 1643, after which he left Aceh for his hometown in Surat.

According to Azyumardi Azra (2004a:112),

it is ironic, however, that his [al-Raniri's] departure was caused by the return to Aceh of a Minangkabau scholar named Sayf al-Rijal from Surat, India. Sayf al-Rijal had previously been banished from Aceh after the arrival of al-Raniri because of his allegedly unorthodox Wujudiyya views. Now, he challenged al-Raniri, which gave rise to endless debates between them. When Sayf al-Rijal gained influence, he was summoned to the court and accorded honorary treatment; whereas al-Raniri, who lost his position, was forced to withdraw from the arena.

Azra does not substantiate his claim that Sayf-al-Rijal was banished from Aceh because of his 'unorthodox Wujudiyya views', neither does he specify when al-Rijal was banished. Indeed, when did al-Rijal return, why and how did he gain influence at court, especially when al-Raniri had ensured his victory against Shams al-Din's group (assuming Sayf al-Rijal belonged to this faction)? What happened to Sayf al-Rijal after his appointment, and did his appointment mean a victory for the 'unorthodox' group in Aceh? These are questions that need to be addressed. According to Azra (2004a:61), there is no further information on Sayf al-Rijal after he won the struggle against al-Raniri and was appointed as Sheikh al-Islam by Sultanah Safiatuddin Syah in 1643.

In an attempt to throw some light on this mysterious figure, Michael Laffan too ended up with more questions than answers on Sayf al-Rijal. Laffan (2009:145) argues that Sayf al-Rijal was most likely the same person as Sayf al-Din al-Azhari, but states that 'we are in no position to declare him a Minangkabau, an Arab or an Egyptian', speculating that he might have had mixed blood – the son of a foreign visitor and a Minangkabau mother.

Peter Riddell (2001:118) mentions that Sayf al-Rijal replaced al-Raniri, and Riddell appears to dispense with this ulama even though he writes at length about his successor, Abd al-Ra'uf, when he returned to Aceh in 1661. Why is there this deafening silence about al-Rijal and his writings? It is difficult to believe that his writings did not survive, when the writings of al-Raniri before him and al-Sinkili after him did. So, what happened to Sayf al-Rijal?

The departure of al-Raniri and the appointment of al-Rijal

Through mining and translating a diary written by a Dutch official named Pieter Sourij,³ Takeshi Ito (1978) provides an account of the departure of Nur al-Dinal-Raniri from Aceh to Surat. This account is significant and it remains authoritative in explaining the mystery of al-Raniri's abrupt departure from Aceh. Ito also throws some light on the ulama who replaced al-Raniri – a Minangkabau named Siffor Resial (Sayf al-Rijal) who had recently arrived from Surat. Al-Rijal had studied in Aceh with a certain Secke Maldin (Sheikh Maldin), who was falsely accused during the time of Iskandar Thani and 'was done away with' by Sick Nordijn (Sheikh Nur al-Din al-Raniri). We also learn that Sayf al-Rijal had donated his whole house and adjoining lands to charity. He had a good many followers, especially among the eunuchs, and he was a Malay by birth (Ito 1978:490).

In his 22 August 1643 entry, Sourij reports that the return of Sayf al-Rijal to Aceh caused a stir. There were so many discussions about him and al-Raniri that the whole world seemed to be affected by this confusion, so much so that the Company's business was severely disrupted. All the members of the Council at court and other *bentara* (court officials) requested Sultanah Safiatuddin Syah to use her authority to settle the dispute between the two '*bisschoppen*' (bishops). Sultanah Safiatuddin refused, saying that she had no knowledge of religious matters and she left it to the *uleebalang* (Councillors and notables) to settle the matter. Five days later, on 27 August, Sourij writes that the new '*bisschop*' named Suffel Radjal, was summoned to the palace by Sultanah Safiatuddin Syah and accorded a great royal honour, so that it is to be expected that 'the former Sigh Nordijn's high spiritual status will be irretrievably lost'.⁴

Ito (1978:491) ends his article by wondering who this Minangkabau scholar was, who carried the day in the conflict with the powerful al-Raniri, and confesses that it would be interesting to know more about this person named Sayf al-Rijal. Azra and Laffan in more recent articles attempt to throw some light on Sayf al-Rijal and his teacher. While Ito and Azra speculate that Pieter Sourij's Secke Maldin was the same person as Sheikh Jamal al-din, Laffan shows that he was Kamal al-Din al-Jawi. They both agree with Ito (1978:490) that Sayf al-Rijal was a disciple of this Sheikh (Azra 2004a:60; Laffan 2009:143). Aside from what has been discussed so far, nothing else is known about Sayf al-Rijal.

³ Pieter Sourij was a Dutch VOC official who was appointed Commissioner by the Governor General of Batavia, Antonio van Diemen, to lead a delegation to Aceh twice from 15 May-18 August 1642 and from 30 May-14 November 1643.

⁴ 'Den nieuwen Bisschop van de Mooren genaemt Suffel Radjal, door de Mayt binnen ontboden zijnde, wiert van de grooten conincklijk eer aengedaen, soo dat te duchten staeth den voorigen Sigh Nordijn sijn heijlicheijt geheel verdwijnt sal blijven.' (Ito 1978:490-1.)

It important, therefore, to revisit the records to see whether they reveal anything more about this ulama. As mentioned by Ito, the account of al-Raniri's departure is described by Pieter Sourij in his daily register (*Dagh-register*), where he reports on any matters that might be of interest and importance to Dutch officials in Batavia. This article examines Sourij's report and other Dutch records with the purpose of throwing more light on the elusive Sayf al-Rijal.

The first mystery concerning Sayf al-Rijal's life is what happened to his teacher – Sheikh Kamal al-din. Sourij explains that al-Rijal was a disciple of a certain Sheikh Maldin whom Sheikh Nur al-Din had falsely accused during the reign of the late king (Iskandar Thani) and *om't leven hadde gebracht*.⁵ Ito (1978:490) translates this expression in Sourij's report as 'done away with' while Azra (2004a:60) believes it means he was exiled. I agree with Ito that this Sheikh was actually executed and not exiled, since the phrase in Dutch means to end a person's life.

The next issue regards Sultanah Safiatuddin's role in al-Raniri's departure from Aceh. Ito argues that she played a passive role and implies that she was under the control of the more powerful Orangkaya Maharaja Lela, who headed the Council at court. Ito is of the view that the decision about the choice between the two religious scholars was a reflection of the contest for influence between Sultanah Safiatuddin and Orangkaya Maharaja Lela. Ito states that Orangkaya Maharaja Lela lent a ready ear to the opponents of al-Raniri and therefore al-Raniri had a poor chance of emerging victorious in this doctrinal controversy. Furthermore, Sultanah Safiatuddin did not seem anxious to stand by her deceased Consort's religious mentor and al-Raniri fell into disgrace with the Sultanah (Ito 1978:491).

In contrast to Ito's argument, Ahmad Daudy speculates that al-Raniri's abrupt departure was due to Safiatuddin's actions in getting rid of those who opposed her. Daudy (1978:17) argues that Islamic tradition and law at that time barred a woman from being a Sultan and that al-Raniri would surely have objected to her appointment.

Contrary to Ahmad Daudy's speculations that Safiatuddin played a key role in al-Raniri's departure, Sourij's report shows that she refused to make a choice between the two ulamas. Furthermore, there is no evidence to show that al-Raniri opposed her appointment as ruler of Aceh.⁶ Indeed, Sourij's report reveals that Sultanah Safiatuddin actually supported al-Raniri after her accession to the throne, without which 'his [al-Raniri's] hour would have

⁵ '[...] genaemt Siffor Resial, afcomstigh van de Manecabers, welke een disciple in Atchin bij Secke maldin, die den presenten Sick Nordijn (door valsche beschuldige bij Marrom Daren Salamse tijden) om't leven hadde gebracht.' 'Dagh-register van Pieter Sourij', 30 May-14 November 1643, f. 671v, in: Nationaal Archief (NA), The Hague, Verenigde Oost-Indische Compagnie (VOC), nummer toegang 1.04.02, inventarisnummer 1144.

⁶ For a more detailed analysis of Sultanah Safiatuddin's succession to the throne, see Khan 2009:Chapter 1.

struck long since, as the new one [al-Rijal] has a good many followers'. It was because of her support that al-Raniri held out as Sheikh al-Islam until 1643.⁷ In this regard, until 1643 both were supporting each other.

So why did Sultanah Safiatuddin not continue her support for al-Raniri, instead appointing the newly arrived Minangkabau ulama in 1643? I argue that as she gradually consolidated her position, she began to reverse most of her late husband's policies and reverted to the policies of her late father, Iskandar Muda, instead. Being politically astute, she sensed the mood prevalent at court at the time of the death of the very unpopular Pahang-born Iskandar Thani. There is the suspicion that Sultan Iskandar Thani might have been poisoned, since his death came so unexpectedly.⁸ Pieter Sourij reports that Iskandar Thani was not loved by the Acehnese because he was a foreigner.⁹ Furthermore, he was not liked because he was extravagant and had depleted the Treasury. After his death, the Acehnese *orangkaya* therefore made a secret pact never to allow a foreign prince to claim the throne of the kingdom and never to obey him voluntarily.¹⁰ It may have been this anti-foreign sentiment prevalent at that time that led the Acehnese elite, especially Orangkaya Maharaja Lela and other Councillors at court, to support the newly arrived Sayf al-Rijal, the Minangkabau ulama who was a Malay by birth, instead of al-Raniri, an Arab foreign-born ulama. The *orangkaya* might also have opposed al-Raniri because he had been appointed Sheikh al-Islam by the unpopular Iskandar Thani. Ito argues that the followers of Shams al-Din, reinforced by this Minangkabau ulama, launched a counter-attack against al-Raniri, whose violence cannot have endeared him to the bulk of the population (Ito 1978:491). The strong support for Sayf al-Rijal from both the *orangkaya* and religious scholars was recognized by Sultanah Safiatuddin. Furthermore, in line with her policy of reversing her late husband's policies, it is more likely that she supported Sayf al-Rijal, who was a disciple of Sheikh Kamal al-din and Sheikh Shams al-Din's group, who had been favoured by her father. In any case, she appointed Sayf al-Rijal as Sheikh al-Islam to replace the unpopular al-Raniri.

Her appointment of al-Rijal reflects her typical style of ruling, which was key to her survival as ruler for 34 years. She tended to allow the court Councillors to first debate the issue at hand, stepping in only at the final stages of decision-making to take a stand and issue her final decree. Based on

⁷ 'Dagh-register van Pieter Sourij', 30 May-14 November 1643, f. 668r, in: NA, VOC, 1.04.02, inventarisnummer 1144.

⁸ The *Bustan* reveals a plot hatched by those who were against Iskandar Thani to poison his food. This plot was foiled, however, and the conspirators were executed (Iskandar 1966:46).

⁹ 'Dagh-register van Pieter Sourij', 15 May-18 August 1642, f. 572r, in: NA, VOC, 1.04.02, inventarisnummer 1143.

¹⁰ 'Rapport van Justus Schouten and Johan van Twist in Malacca', July 1641, f. 343v, in: NA, VOC, 1.04.02, inventarisnummer 1133.

Sourij's description of how Sayf al-Rijal was chosen instead of al-Raniri, it is clear that the Sultanah did not use her prerogative as ruler to choose between the two scholars but left it to the majority decision of the Council before making the final formal appointment.

After formally appointing Sayf al-Rijal, the Sultanah, again in contrast to her husband who had allowed a witch-hunt to take place against al-Raniri's opponents, ensured that no harm came to al-Raniri. Al-Raniri and his followers were not persecuted and he was able to return safely to Surat.

What more do we know about Sayf al-Rijal after his appointment as Sheikh al-slam?

We learn from Pieter Sourij that shortly after his appointment Sayf al-Rijal married a Muslim trader's daughter from a holy family. Unfortunately, there is no more information on this Muslim trader's identity. Peter Sourij's entry on 10 September 1643 mentions his request to seek an audience with the Sultanah the next day, but this was denied because of a marriage feast for the new '*bisschop Suffel Radjal*' and his bride, a '*levietse*' Muslim trader's daughter. Since both Maharaja Lela and Maharaja Adonna Lela would be involved in the preparations of the marriage ceremony, Sourij's request was to be postponed until a better time.¹¹

Coup in the palace

After his marriage, nothing else is reported about Sayf al-Rijal to the best of my knowledge, until late 1650 and early 1651. Even then, there is no direct mention of his name. But it is my belief that events in the Acehnese court during this period involved this same Sheikh and can help explain what happened to him. The events below are described by several Dutch officials in both the *Dagh-registers* and *Generale Missiven*. Unfortunately, there is no first-hand account of these events (unlike Sourij's) since the Commissioner who was appointed to lead the delegation to Aceh, Johan Truijtmán, had just left Aceh on 9 November 1650. However, after he left Aceh he warned that there was exceptionally great anger, envy and discord among the *Rijxraaden* and *orangkaya*.¹²

¹¹ I translate the word '*levietse*' to mean holy, '[...] daerop antwoorden de Coninghine den nieuwen aengecomen Bisschop genaemt Suffel Radjal aen eenen Moors coopmans dochter van't levietse geslacht geheijlicht, ende hun beide 't volbrengen der feest van dien bevolen heeft, soodat dagelijx met alles tot de bruijloft te prepareren besich waeren, dierhalven versochtend Hr Commissar haer geliefde 't excuseren, ter tijt sich beter gelegentheijt presenteerden.' 'Dagh-register van Pieter Sourij', 30 May-14 November 1643, f. 678r, in: NA, VOC, 1.04.02, inventarisnummer 1144.

¹² 'Origineel rapport van Johan Truijtmán', 13 January 1651, ff. 326r-326v, in: NA, VOC, 1.04.02, inventarisnummer 1175.

The first mention of a coup in the palace is by Joan Maetsuyker, Governor General of Batavia, in his report to the VOC directors (Heeren XVII) in the *Generale Missiven* of 1651. His report reads (my translation) as follows:

[...] from a freeburgher vessel came the following rumour that the whole court there [Aceh] was in an uproar. The *grooten laximana* [great Laksamana], with two or three of his accomplices together with some members of the Council who did not favour the Company, had rebelled against the *oppersten rijxraet Maradja Siri Maradja* [first Councillor, Maharaja Sri Maharaja], a loyal and exceptional friend of the Dutch nation, and publicly accused him of wanting to seize the throne with the help of the Dutch. This caused such a great revolt at court under the *orangkaya* and their followers that for a long time no audience or access to the court was given and it was uncertain whether the Queen was sick, dead or alive, so that finally the Laksamana with his followers, through sly practices, had gained sufficient control of the court, that in the confusion, *Maradja de Radja* [Maharaja de Raja], son-in-law of Maharaja Sri Maharaja, who was riding an elephant to court, was shot in the head and died. Maharaja Sri Maharaja, with the help of some people, remained alive but he was stripped of his weapons, elephants, charges and authority and was ordered to live as a private person. Sibi d'Indra and Radja Modliaer, who had been in Batavia during the previous year [1650], were accused by the Laksamana of conspiring with the Dutch to sell Aceh to the Company. He accused them of trying to bring soldiers and ships to Aceh to install the Maharaja Sri Maharaja as king. The Laksamana and his followers cruelly tormented the envoys. Finally they were set free but all their followers, women, children and slaves, were confiscated and, like the Maharaja Sri Maharaja, they were stripped of all authority. There was still no news about whether the Queen was alive or not.¹³

Another coup in the palace...

Nothing else is reported from Aceh until a few months later, when Governor General Joan Maetsuyker writes about what happened after the Laksamana's coup:

[...] there was a great calm amongst the *Rijxraaden* after the Laksamana's coup and the death of Maharaja di Raja, the son-in-law of Maharaja Sri Maharaja. The Queen after some time appeared again on the throne; however, on a certain audience day, the Laksamana with a great number of armed men came to court – this time to kill the *oppersten paep* [highest pontiff] being the Queen's *mignon* [sweetheart]. It so happened that on that day the *paep* was absent. It is not certain whether he

¹³ This news was received on 13 and 25 August 1651 (*Generale Missiven* 1639-1655, II:519-20). I believe that this revolt took place at the end of 1650 or early 1651, since it happened shortly after Truijtmans' departure from Aceh on 9 November 1650 and before the Perak massacre of April 1651.

had prior knowledge of the Laksamana's intention. This, however, caused great consternation at court. The Laksamana openly defended his action of attempting to kill the *oppersten paep* by accusing him of committing *boelerende* [adultery] with the Queen, and accusing him of trying to capture the throne. The *orangkaya* Council accepted the decision for the *paep* to be executed.¹⁴ It was only due to Her Majesty's earnest intervention where she swore an oath in public that she had never had any sexual intercourse with the accused and threatened to set fire to the palace and to burn herself alive that the *paep* was kept alive. This time, the Laksamana's bid failed and he was disgraced, his men and property confiscated. It can be seen that the Acehnese kingdom, as people say, was walking on stilts. (*Generale Missiven 1639-1655*, II:647; my translation.)

So who was this individual whom the Dutch referred to as *oppersten paep*? In all probability this was the highest-ranking religious authority in Aceh, the Sheikh al-Islam, who at that time happened to be Sayf al-Rijal. Sultanah Safia-tuddin had appointed him to this position, replacing al-Raniri, in 1643. It appears that there were more than two factions among the *orangkaya* vying for power – besides the pro-Dutch faction of the Maharaja Sri Maharaja and the anti-Dutch faction headed by the Laksamana, a third faction led by the Sheikh.

Was Sayf al-Rijal murdered?

The next account of events at the Acehnese court is found in the *Dagh-register* of Batavia 1653. According to the account in the *Dagh-register*, a letter from the junior trader, Philips Carel de Salengre from Aceh, dated 30 January 1653, mentions a new revolt led by another faction of *orangkaya*.¹⁵ I translate his report as follows:

[...] in the meantime there was a new revolt among the *orangkaya* and it was the work of Paducca Mamentry [Paduka Maha Menteri], royal commander, together with the deposed men, namely Maradja Sire Maradja [Maharaja Sri Maharaja], the Company's friend Laxamana Radja Odane Lella [Maharaja Adona Lella] and Sire Paducca Tuwan [Sri Paduka Tuan]. Paduka Tuan and all his relatives were sacked and removed from court. Maharaja Lella replaced Paduka Tuan as the Governor of Elephants. Seven days after that, an unusually well-manned and [well-] armed [band] broke into the Queen's court and forced her to remove the aforementioned Maharaja Lella, and to replace him with a certain Intchi Rembau, who at one time served as the Panglima of Deli. [The armed band] massacred, beyond the instruc-

¹⁴ Maetsuyker does not specify who in this *orangkaya* Council agreed to this execution and whether they formed the majority in the Council.

¹⁵ *Dagh-register* 1653:39-40.

tion nay even against the express prohibition of Her Majesty, together with 10 to 11 [other] persons, the *grooten priester*, who before he was deposed, with the help of Maharaja Lella would be made king, following a secret oath made to Her Majesty. They [the coup leaders] had forced the governing officials to carry out this massacre. Also Her Majesty had to distribute the *priester's* belongings, especially the king's daggers, *kris*, etc., to her ladies-in-waiting (*bysittende*). She also had to grant the coup leaders renewed access to court, honouring them with elephants, attendants and staff and other privileges.¹⁶

The *Dagh-register* report here is unsatisfactory, and it cannot be clearly ascertained who this '*grooten priester*' was. But it appears that this '*grooten priester*' is the same individual whom the Laksamana had tried to kill, who was rumoured to be close to the Sultanah and had designs on the throne. From the above account, it seems that the Maharaja faction also regarded that individual as a threat to their positions. So if he were the *oppersten paep* and *grooten priester* as described by the Dutch and if these terms referred to the highest-ranking ulama – the Sheikh al-Islam who was Sayf al-Rijal – can we conclude that he was the one who was murdered according to this account?

No other accounts or evidence can be found regarding the alleged amorous relationship between the *grooten priester* and the Sultanah. Only the Laksamana made this charge but not the Maharaja Sri Maharaja, though both accused the *grooten priester* of aspiring to the throne. These charges of adultery against the priest and of sexual intercourse against the Sultanah were the most serious slanders one could inflict in a Muslim society such as Aceh, if one were politically motivated to oust a person from authority or even to get rid of him/her. The Sultanah's position was seriously threatened by these accusations, but surprisingly neither the Laksamana nor the Maharaja faction claimed the throne or deposed the Sultanah after these tumultuous events. Perhaps neither faction was strong enough to accomplish this, and the Sultanah's swift and decisive action of making a public oath and threatening to burn herself proved to be effective in averting this disaster. Her actions must have proved her innocence in the eyes of her subjects.

The most effective political weapon, the fatal charge used by the Laksamana and the Maharaja against the *grooten priester*, i.e. usurpation of the throne, if proven, would be tantamount to *derhaka*, the highest offence a subject could commit. De Salengre's letter mentions a 'secret oath' made to the Sultanah by the *grooten priester* and his accomplice, Maharaja Lella, that he would be made king. Whether this was true or a mere rumour or an allegation concocted by the priest's political rivals remains unknown. Nor do we know anything about the Sultanah's involvement in this alleged plan. We may never know whether the *grooten priester* did try to capture the throne, but he certainly paid

¹⁶ *Dagh-register* 1653:40.

for it with his life.

The account in the *Dagh-register* unfortunately is also rather vague about why the Sultanah was forced to distribute the *priester's* and his followers' belongings and why these were given to her ladies-in-waiting. It is also not explained why the Sultanah honoured the group who executed this counter-coup when she clearly opposed their murder of the *grooten priester*. By examining the context and events surrounding such court politics, however, the honouring of this group is not so surprising, since the Sultanah had always had good relations with the Maharaja faction and had favoured this faction against the Laksamana, in view of their support of her policy of accommodation with the Dutch. Even at times when the Laksamana faction appeared to be stronger at court and openly opposed the trade concessions given to the Dutch, she would continue to work in secret (through her eunuchs) to help the pro-Dutch faction until she could tilt the balance once more.¹⁷ This may explain why she would support the Maharaja faction and accept them in court with honour even though she had forbidden the killing of the *grooten priester*.

To the best of my knowledge, there are no other references to these internal disturbances at the Aceh court. Furthermore, the Company officers were much distracted by the murders of Company officials in Perak and Kedah and they were more focused on the next course of action – to salvage the Company's reputation because of the failures and humiliations they had experienced in these small polities. From 1653 onwards, the disturbances that had threatened the Acehnese court were over. The Sultanah's position was not challenged and she continued to rule until her death in 1675.

Afterthoughts

Not all questions have been satisfactorily answered here. But there is ample evidence pointing to the murder of the person the Dutch called the *oppersten paep* and *grooten priester*. And if these terms refer to the Sheikh al-Islam of Aceh, who was Sayf al-Rijal during that period, then we may conclude that he was murdered. Thus, his short-lived stint as Sheikh al-Islam may well explain the scarcity of information on his role and writings. This conclusion, therefore, must stand until further evidence suggests otherwise.

¹⁷ For a more detailed account, see Khan 2009:113.

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