Sher Banu A.L. Khan

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

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Several scholars have written about the rule of queens in pre- and early modern Southeast Asia, but none have done as comprehensively as Sher Banu Khan in this fascinating book about the sultanahs of Aceh. In 1641, Sultan Iskandar Thani, successor of the legendary—and brutal and megalomaniac—Sultan Iskandar Muda (r. 1607–1636) died suddenly and under suspicious circumstances. Male candidates for his succession were few and carried little legitimacy. After some debate (how much is unclear), Acehnese nobles (*orangkaya*) decided to accept Iskandar Thani's widow, and Iskandar Muda's daughter, as the new ruler. Sultanah Safiatuddin Syah ruled as queen of Aceh for 34 years until her death in 1675. She was succeeded by three other female rulers: Sultanah Naqiatuddin Syah (r. 1675–1678), Sultanah Inayat Zakiatuddin Syah (r. 1678–1688), and Sultanah Kamalat Zainatuddin Syah (1688–1699). The second and third queen probably died of natural causes. The fourth was forced to abdicate by a faction of nobles who cited an alleged Meccan fatwa declaring female rule to be forbidden in Islam. All subsequent rulers were men.

Colonial-era scholars such as William Marsden and Christiaan Snouck Hurgronje portrayed these queens as ceremonial or weak rulers, puppets who ruled in name only while the *orangkaya* pulled the strings, and whose reign heralded the decline of Aceh. Modern scholars are more appreciative, but they do generally agree that the queens were able to rule by grace of the male elite. According to Anthony Reid, the commercially driven nobles in Aceh and Patani—another place where queens ruled in succession—agreed to putting women on the throne as a counterweight to the belligerence of, and destructive competition between, male nobles. Sher Banu agrees with this view but adds to it in the important sense that the focus on the case of Aceh and the extensive use of hitherto unused sources enables her to reveal the strategies, savviness, achievements, and leadership styles of the queens themselves instead of merely outlining the preferences and interests of male elites.

The book is based for a large part on reports written by Dutch East India Company (VOC) envoys to Aceh. Previous accounts of pre-colonial Aceh rely mostly on travelogues and (to a lesser extent) indigenous texts. Sher Banu is the first to combine this material with a wealth of (old-)Dutch language archival material. She has done so with admirable steadfastness and meticulousness, as well as regard for its biases. Other sources she used include British sources, royal letters, and Malay (court) chronicles and epics. One of the limitations of

the VOC material is that the Dutch closed their factory in Aceh in 1663, causing the stream of information to dry up. As a result, the focus of the book is on the first two decades of Safiatuddin Syah's rule, while little is and remains to be known about her successors, including the exact reasons behind the abdication of Sultanah Kamalat Zainatuddin Syah in 1699.

The book consists of an introduction and seven chapters. The first three chapters are ordered chronologically. They discuss in detail the accession by Sultanah Safiatudin, the first years of her rule and the consolidation of her power in the wake of various crises (particularly the blockade by the VOC of Aceh's vassal Perak and the killing of 30 Dutch men involved in the blockade). The next three chapters are thematic, detailing Aceh's relationship to its vassals, the interpretation of Islamic law and local customs regarding female rule, and the practice of queenship. The final chapter summarizes the findings and main arguments.

Two questions dominate the book. The first is whether, as many scholars have claimed, Aceh in the second half of the seventeenth century was a kingdom in 'decline', and whether this was due (partly) to the fact that the kingdom was ruled by women. The answer to both questions is no. Although Aceh's (political, economic and military) sphere of influence shrunk as a result of the incursions of the VOC and the revival of local rivals (particularly Johor), it remained a key player in the western archipelago in terms of trade, diplomacy, culture, and religion. As Sher Banu points out, part of the problem is that the concept of decline is, in itself, not free from biases. The so-called 'golden age' under Sultan Iskandar Muda came at a cost, namely tyranny, a huge loss of human lives, and a waste of resources. 'Dismantling this arbitrary power and institutionalizing law to protect the rights of both subjects and foreigners were key features of female rule' (p. 264). Reports about the state of the kingdom of Aceh at the end of the century—independent, stable, and wealthy—suggests a polity that is not in decline but, given the context of expanding European power, 'remarkably resilient' (p. 263).

The second question is how and to what extent the queens' position and style of governing was gendered, that is, whether it is imperative to analyze the concept and practice of early modern Malay-Muslim queenship as something fundamentally different from kingship. Iskandar Muda and Iskandar Thani emphasized their (military) strength and their wealth to legitimize their crown. They intimidated nobles and instilled fear in subjects and enemies alike. Their female successors broke with this habit as they sought cooperation with the nobles and a workable relationship with European powers. Their style of rule was not so much a feature of their sex, as it was—in line with Reid's thesis—a gendered style of leadership shaped in interaction with the shifting regional

context and the interests of the commercially minded elite. At the same time, Sher Banu argues, there were other, less context-dependent features that make queenship a 'useful and distinct concept to be studied as another model of leadership in pre-colonial Southeast Asia' (p. 234). For example, while religion for their male predecessors was mostly a matter of laws and injunctions, the queens actively performed their piety as a form of 'moral capital', increasing their legitimacy through exemplary rule. Another feature is that the queens' sex necessarily set them apart from the male elite, enabling them 'to function as something of an outsider/stranger' and thus to 'act as arbiters in managing the different male elite factions at court' (p. 235).

The chapter on Islam left me with some questions. Like their male predecessors, the queens of Aceh presented themselves as *khalifah*, God's representative on earth, a claim seconded by the religious scholars who enjoyed their patronage. This control of religious opinion ended with the forced abdication of Sultanah Kamalat Zainatuddin Syah in 1699. Sher Banu calls it a 'paradoxical situation where Islam was used to legitimize the accession of the first sultanah, and used again 59 years later to end the reign of the last female ruler' (p. 209). However, while there are few sources to tell us about this event and the circumstances in which it took place, this is not a very satisfying conclusion. As Sher Banu indicates, the second half of the seventeenth century was a period of fierce theological debates (about, among others, the nature of the ruler and his/her government) and the beginning of a gradual but dramatic shift of power from the court to the political and religious elites presiding over rural areas and smaller ports. Was female rule aborted when, as Reid (1988, p. 642) argued, 'Patani and Aceh ran out of credible candidates who still had the charisma of monarchy about them, and when the orangkaya of the port-capital themselves began to lose their influence to forces less interested in trade'? Or did the emerging new balance of power also strengthen a new and dominant Islamic orthodoxy that prevented a consolidation of the option of female monarchy in subsequent centuries? Here, I feel the analysis could have benefited from a stronger engagement with the literature on the history of Islam in Southeast Asia and Islamic connections across the Indian Ocean, as well as the field of Islamic studies more generally.

That said, there is much to admire about this book. Sher Banu stays close to her sources and is careful and precise in her interpretations. The portrait she draws of the Acehnese court is vivid and convincing. She has eye for curious detail as much as the complex and shifting context in which indigenous rulers and the emergent European powers operated. The logical next step, Sher Banu indicates with reference to a maturing literature on queenship in medieval and early modern Europe, would be a more comparative study. Besides a

significant contribution to the history of early modern Southeast Asia, this book should serve as a major inspiration for the important work that lies ahead.

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Reference

Reid, Anthony (1988). 'Female Roles in Pre-Colonial Southeast Asia', *Modern Asian Studies*, 22:3, 629–645.