 Aceh has long been known as both a staunchly Islamic kingdom and a major trading centre for pepper. Pepper propelled Aceh’s ascendancy in the sixteenth century, as it became the main Muslim commercial centre supplying pepper to the Mediterranean via the Red Sea (Boxer 1969:3; Reid 2005:6). Building upon this prosperity, the Achenese sultan Iskandar Muda (r. 1607-1636), inaugurated what is viewed by many today as a ‘golden age’, when Aceh’s influence expanded as far south as Padang in Sumatra and Johor on the Malay Peninsula. During the latter half of the seventeenth century, four female monarchs ruled this Muslim kingdom in succession for half a century: Sultana Taj al-‘Alam Safiyyat al-Din Syah (r. 1641-1675), Sultana Nur al-‘Alam Naqiyyat al-Din (r. 1675-1678), Sultana ‘Inayat Zakiyyat al-Din Syah (r. 1678-1688) and Sultana Kamalat Zaynat al-Din Syah (r. 1688-1699).

There are many contrasting views about their roles in the development of Acehnese culture and the history of that period. The Dutch colonial scholar P.J. Veth saw female rule as part of the indigenous practice of Southeast Asian states. He cited other examples of vrouwenregeeringen in Patani, Borneo, Palembang and Celebes (Veth 1870). He argued that discussions in state councils and consent of the council members did not mean that these monarchs were mere figureheads. Indeed, these were not unique to female rule, but were features of Malay political institutions practised under male sultans as well. Likewise, John Davis mentioned that during the reign of Sultan Ali Mughayat Syah al-Mukammil (r. 1588-1604), ‘his women are his chiefest [c]ounsellars’ (Davys 1880:150).1 According to Anthony Reid, during the Southeast Asian

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1 The Acehnese historian Mohammad Said argued that female leadership in Aceh was not an aberration, as earlier, Aceh already had a female admiral, Laksamana Keumala Hayati, who was empowered by Acehnese cultural conceptions that women could be viewed as being as powerful and as capable as men (Mohammad Said 1961:379).
‘age of commerce’, female rule was one of the few devices available to a commercially-oriented aristocracy to limit the despotic powers of kings and to make the state safe for international commerce (Reid 1988:641). The reign of Iskandar Muda (1607-1637) saw the height of royal absolutism in Aceh.\(^2\) After his death, the nobility no longer wanted to have to endure such threats to their own power again. Reid concluded that after having experimented once with the female alternative these Acehnese aristocrats sought to perpetuate it (Reid 1988:641).

Others, however, have not held such positive views of female monarchs. The British colonial scholar William Marsden, for example, saw female rule in Aceh as an aberration, believing that these female rulers were ‘mere figureheads’ (Marsden 1986). Later writers like Ilyas Sutan Pamenan have continued to assert that female rule was strange (gandjil) and unacceptable to the people. Indeed, Pamenan went even further, arguing that female rule was particularly inappropriate for that time, since Aceh was not economically secure and needed a strong hand to earn the respect of foreign merchants, something that, in his view, was impossible for a woman to accomplish (Iljas Sutan Pamenan 1959:35-6).

This chapter examines an episode during the early years of the reign of Sultana Safiyyat al-Din Syah, in which she was forced to constantly re-negotiate relations with her own court elite (the orang kaya) and the officials of the Vereenigde Oost-Indische Compagnie (VOC, Dutch East India Company). Her work of managing these complex relationships defines her style of leadership, and clearly demonstrates that she was neither manipulated nor merely tolerated by the elite as a figurehead. Her success in balancing the demands of diverse parties illustrates the acceptance and respect accorded to her as a ruler, suggesting that if female rule did indeed start off as an experiment, it came to be seen as a workable solution, and one to be perpetuated over the reigns of three subsequent sultanas.

*The sultan who loved jewels*

The Dutch officials in Aceh reported that Sultana Safiyyat al-Din’s predecessor, Sultan Iskandar Thani (r. 1636-1641), was exceedingly fond of jewels (Van Der Chijs 1887:4). Peter Mundy, who had an audience with Iskandar Thani, observed that the sultan’s clothes were ordinary, following the fashion of the

\(^2\) Iskandar Muda exterminated the old powerful nobility and created new ones entirely dependent on him. A complex administrative and judicial hierarchy developed under his authority, where the slightest display of disloyalty was punished with exemplary severity (Reid and Ito 1985)