

become an important text for various courses related to migration and development studies.

Diotima Chatteraj

Room 1.62, Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences, Universiti Brunei Darussalam, Jalan Tungku Link, BE1410, Brunei Darussalam; email: diotima.chatteraj@ubd.edu.bn.

DOI: 10.1355/sj34-2o

Sovereign Women in a Muslim Kingdom: The Sultanahs of Aceh, 1641–1699. By Sher Banu A.L. Khan. Singapore, NUS Press, 2017, xvi+318 pp.

Sher Banu's *Sovereign Women in a Muslim Kingdom* is the most comprehensive account of Sultanah Safiatuddin to date. Banu utilizes a rich stock of source materials to shed light on the contributions of this powerful and wise sultanah in early modern Islamic Aceh. One of the great *ulama*, Nuruddin al-Raniri, stated that "Safiatuddin was a great and generous queen" (p. 8), and this assessment was echoed by European travellers—including William Dampier and Thomas Bowrey, who lived in Aceh from 1669 until 1689, were interested in the region and transmitted their knowledge of Aceh back to the West.

Although there were several sultanahs who also ruled Aceh between 1641 and 1699, Banu chose to focus her attention on Safiatuddin as she ruled Aceh for the longest period—thirty-four years—of all sultanahs. By comparison, the tenure of the other sultanahs—such as Sultanah Nur Alam Naqiatuddin Syah (1675–78), Sultanah Inayat Zakiatuddin Syah (1678–88) and Sultanah Kamalat Zakiatuddin Syah (1688–1699)—were short. The longer period of Safiatuddin's reign (1641–99) meant that more accounts of Safiatuddin and her kingdom were made by European travellers and by the Dutch East India Company (VOC), which conducted business in Aceh. In contrast, fewer reports were made about the other queens, especially after the VOC ceased operations in Aceh in the 1660s.

Banu writes that “Sultanah Safiatuddin’s ascension to the throne as the first female ruler of Aceh Dar al-Salam in 1641 was not opposed by the *ulama*” (p. 188) and, in fact, she enjoyed significant support from these clerics. For example, Abdul Rauf al-Singkel, a prominent moderate *ulama* in Aceh in the seventeenth century, recognized Safiatuddin as a *khalifah*, a person who has become the deputy of God and executes the Lord’s order (p. 188). Safiatuddin treated the *ulama* well in return, and many *ulama* from Pidie were also allowed to work with her. Banu also argued that Safiatuddin and the other queens were accepted by and garnered respect from the people because “they adopted a different leadership style from that of their male predecessors. The sultanahs of Aceh chose to be more collaborative than coercive, preferring to gain the loyalty and respect of the elites rather than their fear” (p. 17). Safiatuddin’s move away from the despotic rule of her father and her husband, the powerful Sultan Iskandar Muda and Sultan Iskandar Thani, respectively, ensured her political and religious authority (p. 188).

The Dutch East India and British East India companies, which went to Aceh during the era of the sultanahs, studiously recorded their encounters with individual Malay polities. The author’s commitment to a year of intensive training in learning Old Dutch and palaeography is commendable, as it enabled her to read and understand the voluminous source materials, which include indigenous manuscripts, VOC documents and documents written by European travellers of the time. As a result, Banu should be considered the leading expert on the sultanahs of this era.

While the book is well researched, there are some areas that would have benefitted from more extensive coverage. For example, the background or context of how these queens rose to their positions of authority, and information about their childhood or family background, would certainly have enriched our understanding of how they were so easily accepted as leaders. The relations of Safiatuddin’s kingdom with other polities such as Perak, Johor and Turkey could also have been further explored. Research on early modern Aceh’s international relations is still limited and would benefit from further research.

On a final note, Banu has successfully shown that the women in her book were not puppet rulers. They were confident leaders, demonstrating that there were few restrictions on women becoming leaders at that time. This is something that appears to be missing from the modern era of Aceh.

Rosnida Sari

UIN Ar-Raniry Banda Aceh. Jl. Syeikh Abdul Rauf Darussalam, Kopelma Darussalam, Syiah Kuala, Kota Banda Aceh, Aceh 23111, Indonesia; email: rosnida.sari@ar-raniry.ac.id