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weakling (see Loureiro, pp. 150, 155) could go back to Javanese (and Malay) “propaganda” ultimately accepted by Pires for whatever reason (see Alves’ article in Francisco Roque de Oliveira, *Percepções europeias da China dos séculos XVI a XVIII. Ideias e imagens na origem da moderna Sinologia* [Lisbon: Centro de Estudos Geográficos da Universidade de Lisboa; [Mafra:] Palácio Nacional de Mafra, 2017]). Needless to state, such ideas are apt to pave the way for fresh investigation.

To round off my remarks: Loureiro’s presentation of the Paris manuscript – jointly with his work on the Lisbon version – will help us to gain a better understanding of the *Suma Oriental*. The punctuation of the text itself greatly facilitates its reading. The technical arrangement is straightforward and very clear. The notes are not as copious and complex as the bulky comments prepared by Cortesão; rather, Loureiro has limited his explanations to essential observations. Moreover, unlike Cortesão he gives no references to secondary sources in the notes. There is a simple reason for this: Experts are familiar with the relevant material anyway; also, secondary works abound and one can hardly consider all possible sources in each case. Put differently, Loureiro’s book does not push readers into a philological labyrinth; it is arranged in such a way that both specialists and historians with general interests will be able to digest Pires’ account. Finally, the introduction is very informative and contains a well-balanced bibliography. There is also a detailed and reliable index at the end of the book. In sum: Libraries and historians dealing with maritime Asia ought to acquire this item for their collections.

RODERICH PTAK

Sher Banu A.L. Khan, *Sovereign Women in a Muslim Kingdom: The Sultanahs of Aceh, 1641-1699*. Singapore, NUS Press, National University of Singapore, 2017, 318 p., gloss., bibl. index. ISBN 978-981-4722-20-9

Sher Banu A.L. Khan, assistant professor at the Malay Studies Department, National University of Singapore, begins by pointing out that although the reigns of the four sultanah of Aceh, ranging from 1641 to 1699 (Sultanah Tajul Alam Safiatuddin Syah – r. 1641-1675, Sultanah Nur Alam Naqiatuddin Syah - r. 1675-1678, Sultanah Inayat Zakiatuddin Syah - r. 1678-1688, Sultanah Kamalat Zainatuddin Syah, r. 1688-1699), have been amply commented upon, so far this period has never been the focus of an in-depth study devoted to the origin, nature and impact of these reigns. Yet the contrast between nineteenth and twentieth centuries scholarly opinions on the one hand —neutral at best—, and a number of contemporary positive comments on these reigns on the other hand, raises numerous questions, in particular regarding the socio-economic context in 1641, the reasons leading to an unprecedented succession of four sultanahs, the authority of each in relation to Islam and adat, how they related to a predominantly male economic and political elite, their diplomatic roles and strategies, as well as the reasons which led to the interruption of the experience in 1699.

The main sources used are VOC archival records (manuscripts and published materials), followed by EIC archival records (manuscripts and published materials), contemporaneous accounts of foreigners who sojourned in Aceh for varying lengths of time, as well as Malay sources (manuscripts and published materials). After the VOC shut down its Aceh factory in 1663, documentation became scarcer, leading to a study focused on the reign of the first sultanah. Moreover EIC records from Indian ports, as well as Portuguese, French, and Danish sources have not yet been exploited. In addition to this, Sher Banu A.L. Khan has made use of about 300 published studies.

The first chapter is devoted to the context in which the first sultanah acceded to power. The author notably raises the question of the existence of a debate about the legacy of female rule in Aceh following the death of Iskandar Thani. Stressing that no such debate is mentioned in contemporaneous foreign accounts, she observes that a number of present-day Acehnese historians state that the period of three days between the death of the sultan and the crowning of the sultanah should be interpreted as an indication of a problem related to the prohibition of female rule in Islam, a problem solved by the acceptance of Safiatuddin as temporal ruler only without religious authority. Yet Sher Banu A.L. Khan notes that these historians offer no evidence to support this hypothesis, and that the first sultanah assumed the title of *khalifah*. She rather points to reasons explaining a peaceful succession: firstly, a section of the *Taj us-Salatin*, a political treatise written in Aceh in 1603, which explicitly mentions the legitimacy of female rule in the absence of a male heir and in order to prevent a crisis in the kingdom, secondly a passage of the *Bustan us-Salatin*, a chronicle of the sultanate written between the end of the 1630s and the beginning of the 1640s, describing Safiatuddin as enthroned the very day of the previous ruler's death. In the absence of any written rules of succession, both texts would reflect a localised interpretation of Islamic leadership doctrine, based on a non-gendered approach, taking into account the existence of female rulers in the region well before the beginning of the seventeenth century. The first sultanah clearly benefited from a favourable initial context due to the serious political crisis initiated by the unexpected death of Iskandar Thani as well as the absence of any male heir. Moreover, as Iskandar Muda's daughter, she was a native-born royal, and through the combination of neutrality and legitimacy she obtained the consent and support of the majority of the *orang kayas* and *ulamas*.

It is rather surprising that in this first chapter, Sher Banu A.L. Khan refers only to old scholarly studies, especially Djajadiningrat, Lombard and Stutterheim, when it comes to her reflections on the rulers of the northern tip of Sumatra up until 1641. Yet recent studies by Claude Guillot and Ludvik Kalus (cf. the book *Les monuments funéraires et l'histoire du Sultanat de Pasai à Sumatra*, Paris, Association Archipel, Cahier d'Archipel 37, 2008; the articles published in *Archipel* between 2009 and 2017), as well as Willem van der Molen (*BKI* 163 -2/3, 2007) on the epigraphy of funerary monuments provide new insights on the political history of the Pasai and Aceh sultanates.

In the second chapter, Sher Banu A.L. Khan analyses two accomplishments during the early years of Sultanah Safiatuddin's reign, in order to demonstrate her effective authority, her organisational aptitudes, and her diplomatic skills. They are her husband's burial, Iskandar Thani, who had several enemies at his court, and the "Jewel Affair" also inherited from her husband. Based on the *Bustan us-Salatin* and

Nicolaus de Graaf's account, the author argues that Safiatuddin "managed to organise one of the grandest funerals the kingdom had ever witnessed." The "Jewel Affair" refers to the VOC officials' attempts to pressure the sultanah and her *orang kayas* to accept and pay for some very expensive jewels ordered by the late Iskandar Thani. This issue gives Sher Banu A.L. Khan the opportunity to comment on the sultanah's strategies to manage the constantly shifting main factions at court, pro- and anti-Iskandar Thani factions on the one hand, pro- and anti-Dutch factions on the other. In addition, the "Jewel Affair" highlights the general misunderstanding between Aceh and the Dutch regarding the nature of agreements signed between Europeans and local rulers. In fact, Acehese rulers did not see the need to recognise agreements signed by their predecessors. Unlike the authoritarianism practised by her predecessors, Sultanah Safiatuddin reached a collaborative and consensual decision-making process with her elites in order to accommodate the Dutch. Her practical and pragmatic style aimed at maintaining good relations with the VOC, at a time when the strength of the company was increasing in the Straits of Malacca.

Chapters 3 and 4 are focused on Sultanah Safiatuddin's diplomatic action regarding dominated territories. They explore especially the dynamics between the sultanah, her *orang kayas* and the VOC officials relating to Perak and the pepper and gold ports on the southwest coast of Sumatra in the first two decades of her rule. Her position and life were then threatened as the VOC became increasingly audacious in its demand for tin from Perak and pepper from the southwest coast of Sumatra. Aceh conquered Perak in 1620, placed a chosen ruler on the throne, and reaped the profits of the lucrative tin trade. After the conquest of Malacca in 1641, the Dutch wanted to ensure that they inherited what they believed were Portuguese rights on Perak tin, precisely half of its production at a fixed price. Sher Banu A.L. Khan argues convincingly that her strategy to act as a useful counterweight to the different factions led to a situation in which she was recognised as a source of stability for the kingdom, while no faction was strong enough to place one of its own candidates on the throne and support him by force. Moreover, despite the blockade of Perak and the massacre of VOC officials there in 1651, she was the only one able to deal with the Dutch and maintain friendship with the VOC.

Contrary to the commonly accepted idea that the rule of Sultanah Safiatuddin resulted in the decline of Aceh and the loss of her vassal states, Sher Banu A.L. Khan argues that a closer examination of the events that unfolded between Aceh, Perak and the VOC, discloses a dynamic of resilience as well as stronger and more binding overlord-vassal ties than is commonly believed. Regarding the southwest coast of Sumatra, Iskandar Muda managed to control Pasaman, Priaman, Tiku, and Padang, by appointing Acehese *panglimas*. When Sultanah Safiatuddin came to power, she faced a company increasingly interested in obtaining pepper, especially on the southwest coast of Sumatra. The author argues that Aceh's control over her vassals there had begun to weaken before Sultanah Safiatuddin's reign. By the time of her death in 1675, Aceh's political and commercial control of the southwest coast of Sumatra had weakened, but the kingdom managed to keep spiritual and cultural ties to the region, whereas the VOC's influence was restricted to commerce. More importantly, Aceh's continued independence was ensured, and independence maintained by her successor, Sultanah Zakiatuddin.

In chapter 5, the author examines the practice of Islam at the court and the relations between female rulers and *ulamas*, arguing that Muslim notions of piety and “the just ruler” formed the basis of their power and authority. She compares royal letters since Iskandar Muda’s reign to show the contrast between the modesty, humility and religious tolerance of the first sultanah and the emphasis on the possession of material goods and the depiction of power of the previous two male rulers. She also compares the administration of law, often at the discretion of the male ruler, with many cases of cruel punishments reported by foreigners, and a greater institutionalisation of justice with penalties checked by moral and religious values under the female rulers. Sultanah Safiatuddin moved towards deferring to the *ulamas* and the Islamic courts for arbitration. She welcomed religious scholars to Aceh but never supported any *ulama* faction, contrary to her predecessors, and her generosity is praised in several local and foreign sources. Sher Banu A.L. Khan ends this chapter with a discussion of the visibility of the queens. Without being secluded or invisible, they probably did not take part in religious festivals and festivities as manifestations of pageantry, material wealth and prowess.

In chapter 6, the author discusses the style of leadership and royal-elite relations under the sultanahs. She again emphasises the opposition between previous reigns marked by coercion and fear, and the peaceful and protective attitude of the sultanahs, which resulted in Aceh’s longest period of peace and prosperity. Regarding the internal administration of the sultanate, Sher Banu A.L. Khan illustrates the authority of the queens and their collaboration with the nobility through examples of land redistribution, appointments and institutionalisation of the *sagi*, a territorial jurisdiction. She argues that during the seventeenth century Aceh evolved from a despotic monarchy into a monarchy in which the decision-making process was based on consensus, leading to a stronger political system and greater stability, as the queens were able to keep the various factions in check. Sultanah Safiatuddin also managed to build a network of powerful women and eunuchs to assist her and act as intermediaries with the male elites. As regards trade, Sultanah Safiatuddin strived to protect royal wealth and her *orang kayas*’ interests while welcoming foreign traders and managing their various demands. She notably successfully protected the strategic elephant trade from foreign interference.

This section would have benefited from a more detailed analysis of the economic situation during the second half of the seventeenth century, especially as regards Aceh and the Indian Ocean trade. Several events and tendencies had an impact on trade in the sultanate at the time.

Thus, except for the conquest of Malacca by the VOC in 1641, the 1640s saw in several regions of India an increasing involvement of ruling elites in trade with maritime Southeast Asia, the revival of the long distance trade in Bengal, the shifting of the textile industry from Gujerat to Coromandel, the treatise between the VOC and Mataram in 1646. Another turning point occurs around 1660 with the reopening of Banten to international trade, the end of the blockade of Aceh by the VOC, the rise of Johor, the withdrawal of the Moghols from the high-seas trade, and finally the fall in the consumption and prices of spices from the Moluccas in India and Europe. The treaty of Painan signed in 1663 between several ports on the southwest coast of Sumatra and the VOC, which secured the monopoly for pepper purchases there, probably had a greater impact on the economy of Aceh than that assumed by Sher

Banu A.L. Khan. Aceh may have lost major appeal to South Asian traders, in that by losing access to the pepper ports on the southwest coast, it lost its dual function as pepper supplier and main entrepot for Indian textile traders active along this west coast. However Aceh was not completely deserted and the most active traders then were the Kelings from Porto Novo and Nagapattinam. But Indian traders were increasingly attracted by Banten and Johor. Following the conquest of Banten by the VOC in 1682, the Chulias remained the only South Asian traders to maintain a significant presence and role in maritime Southeast Asia until the end of the century at least. They certainly took advantage of the Gujeratis' withdrawal to increase their market shares, not only in the Malay Peninsula, but also in ports such as Aceh, where the transaction volume remained attractive enough and where they appear to enjoy some influence at the highest level of the administration. Lastly, the annexation of Golconde and Bijapur by the Moghols in 1686-87 led to the disappearance of ships owned by the former ruling elites in both sultanates. The new power withdrew from maritime transportation. Connections between the political and merchant worlds were thus broken apart, as well as the links between both states and their former "partners" in maritime Southeast Asia. In Bengal, the withdrawal of the elites from all activities related to maritime transportation towards maritime Southeast Asia became dramatically confirmed a few years later, leading to a traffic collapse.

Chapter 7 deals with the last sultanah and the reason for her removal in 1699. The author suggests the influence of foreign-born Arabs as a possible explanation for this decision. Opposition to female rule became more pronounced in the 1680s and the death of the moderate local *ulama*, Abdul Rauf al-Singkel, in 1693, followed by the arrival of a letter from Mecca stating that female rule was against Islam, led to the replacement of Sultanah Kamalat Syah by an individual of Arab descent. However, Sher Banu A.L. Khan argues that the real reason for her deposition was more political than religious, as a group hostile to female rule had become powerful, notably because of the marriage of the sultanah to a man of Arab descent.

In a general reflection on this 59-year-long run of female rulers in Aceh, the author argues that following the successful experiment with the first sultanah, the three other sovereigns were chosen because they were female. Female rule created an environment where cooperation between nobility and royalty primed over conflict, but the final say lay in the sultanah's hand. Aceh remained an independent and important kingdom through their good governance and skilful diplomacy. She concludes that the common view according to which royal power declined under female rule and precipitated Aceh's decline is not supported by contemporaneous foreign and indigenous sources.

In reading this effort to provide a counterweight to all previous scholarly opinions about female rule in Aceh during the seventeenth century, one may have the impression that Sher Banu A.L. Khan, who characterises the reigns of the sultanahs as "the real golden age in Acehnese history" (p. 22), has swung the pendulum too far to the positive side, especially as regards the economic record. But, as the first in-depth study on the topic, this book has the great merit of opening up an entirely new perspective on a so far neglected period in the political history of the Aceh sultanate. More generally, it suggests new perspectives for the study of female roles in the political sphere in Muslim Southeast Asia at the time.

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