

Women as Rulers Phenomenon in Southeast Asian Islamic Society: The Queens of Aceh

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Abstract: This paper provides a brief explanation about the Era of the Queens (1641-1699) during which four female rulers were raised in succession to the throne of Aceh Darussalam Sultanate. The era in question has not been a resounding research subject either in the context of Southeast Asian Islamic studies or general Islamic history. The Era of the Queens is worthy of study due to its contributions in terms of anthropological and cultural differences from the perspective of the Muslim world. Within this study, reasons for their placement in the power structure appeared to have influential elements in terms of education, socio-political environs and affiliations. This is a study that focusses on the role of women as ruling figures in an Islamic society which appears to be a very stimulative situation in that era. The queens were successful and played their roles well in order to continue retaining their power relations with other structural bodies within the sultanate. By possessing the required politically applicable opinions, the queens secured their places against the oppositions who persistently challenged them in the quest to wrestle for power. In relation to this context, this process of sustenance of power can be observed by the distributions of rights and incentives to various groups among the oppositions, in exchange for the Sultanah to continuously rule the state. Although women rulership during the second part of the seventeenth century in Aceh is considered by some circles as aberrant, however, it is a fact that these women rulers were in control of the power for nearly sixty years. This is seen as one of the unique practices in the Muslim world. Their accomplishment is the reason why these Acehnese female rulers ought to be regarded as political agencies who were subject to various challenges from the various entities allied with the different political, cultural and religious circles during these queens' reigns. In addition, this issue of power should be scrutinized based on the concept of reliance on relations between the center and periphery concept of distribution of power. This distribution seems to be under the control and direction of the former. The writer emphasizes the roles of these Acehnese queens in the context of remoulding the political structure in the Sultanate which is claimed to be a global constructive power entity during its heyday.

Key words: Aceh Sultanate % Queens of Aceh

INTRODUCTION

The purpose of the article is to engage with the period of the reign of Sultanah or Queen in the Sultanate of Aceh Darussalam, briefly taking into account: their education, support of religious scholars and managing of political disputes among the nobility. It is vital to revisit the Sultanah era since this period is regarded as the commencement of drastic changes in the sultanate. In this paper, present writer highlights women issues from various aspects.

The reign of Sultanah from the beginnings of 1640s until the end of the century requires to be addressed not only in the context of Aceh-Malay history and civilization

but should include global Islamic civilization. The four Acehnese sultanah are among the 34 sultanah who ascended the throne throughout the history of Islam [1]. This period is called the "Sultanah Era" derived from the ascendancy of these queens to the throne in succession for nearly sixty years namely: Taj al-Alam Safiyyat at-Din (1641-1675), Noor Alam Nakiatuddin (1675-1678), Inayat Shah Zakiatuddin (1678-1688) and Kemal Shah (1688-1699) [2,3]. The historical experiences in the Aceh region and the phenomenon of sultanah is not new, but there was a continuity due to the presence of two sultanah who reigned between 1405-1434 in the Sultanate of Samudra-Pasai [4]. Pertaining to this, this era might be considered as a revival of women rulership after the Sultanah of

Samudra-Pasai in the 15th century. However, there is minimal detailed information about the era of these four sultanah, though, some data could be found in local sources and European travellers books [5-7].

There is a prevailing tendency for contemporary historians to define this sultanah period in Aceh as a period of decline due to the loss of power during the reign of these four Sultanah. However, this phenomenon should be revisited because other causal factors which are not only internal but external ones should be taken into consideration. Despite all these criticisms of the Sultanah period, it is arguable that the stagnation and decline are also the facts as much as the accomplishments of the golden era in the state based on Ibn Khaldun's cycle theory pertaining to natural developmental stages of growth and decline. It appears that during the reign of the sultanah, there was a transition from a golden era to a period of stagnation and decline. Notwithstanding, this situation does not necessitate deriving a conclusion that the stagnation commenced because of these female rulers.

Beyond this presumption of the cause for the decline, the experience of the sultanah constitutes a distinct period in the history of the Sultanate. First, there was a differentiation from the political tradition which was dominated by male Sultans. Second, the sultanah maintained social cohesion and unity among different levels of nobility and citizens, though, during that period, Aceh witnessed a continuous process of political oppositions. The trying situations stemmed from both religious and political reasons; increasing its dose from time to time, until the beginning of the 18th century. Third, even though women as the head of the state could not find a place in the mainstream orthodox commentary of Islam, because as a general tendency, this is perceived as a violation of traditional religious teaching. However, leading scholars such as Ar-Raniri and Abdurrauf as-Singkili supported the enthronement of the four Sultanah. Even though concrete religious decrees have not been discovered with regards to the scholars' support, but, their support allowed the Sultanah to become rulers of the Sultanate [8].

Transition Too Female Rulership: from Monarchy to Oligarchy: In the origins of the reigns of the Sultanah, lies internal and external factors. It began during the reign of Iskandar Sani, who passed away in January of 1641 at a relatively young age and did not leave any male heir, thus causing disputes among the nobility as to whom should ascend to the throne [9,10,]. The untimely death of Iskandar Sani is claimed to have led to a long-lasting

power struggle between arch rivals, although the nobility could have managed to restore the power and take the responsibility in the decision making process by enthroning a new sultan. However, the fact was that the nobility were not united among themselves, instead they were divided into at least two factions recognized as the ones who settled in Banda Aceh and the hinterland or vicinity of the capital city..

The fact that an alliance could not be materialized on the issue of finding a new Sultan as this might have been a result of the political and economic competition among themselves. Besides that, another factor pertaining to the tradition of protection of the power of dynasty since the establishment of a descendant of the sultans would be considerations that complicated matters in the decision making process as to who should be enthroned. To appoint one of the nobles as the head of the state, might have resulted in expansion of hostility and division. In this case, at least among the nobility, it seems some circles continued to show respect and loyalty to the traditions of the dynasty, as the preference is to enthrone someone who is accepted by the majority. Otherwise, a selection of a noble without these criteria would have lead to factions and political chaos in the state. In the selection of a new ruler after the death of Iskandar Sani, influential policy-makers agreed on the appointment of the daughter of Sultan Iskandar Muda as the ruler. On the other hand, in response to the objections from secular circles, the authority was transferred to four leading noblemen as compared to the previous political authority which was imminent in the personality of Sultan Muda.

One other distinguishing reason for adopting this unorthodox selection for a new ruler, is the unique approach of referring to contemporaneous religious scholars known as ulama. It should be acknowledged that ulama played a significant role in the appointment of female rulers. With reference to this situation, there appears to be a very unique and unconventional commentary in a classical Malay work entitled *Taj us-Salatin* written by Bukhari Jauhari in 1603 in Aceh on interpretations of women rulership in Islam. The book mentions that, in principle, there is no place for women to be rulers in an Islamic state according to historical orthodox commentary. Thus, the study of women as rulers adds something exceptional to conventional practices whereby in the condition of extraordinary cases, a female member of the dynasty could be enthroned [11-14]. *Taj us Salatin* was written about forty years before the enthronement of the first sultanah and this is a striking reference that places the importance of women in the

context of political and religious situation in Aceh at that time. Notwithstanding that, the writer has not seen any references related to the works of these contemporaneous religious scholars referring to such matters. Since women as rulers is a very unique issue, it is important to study how local sources and ulama solved and contributed towards resolving the rulership issue. In particular, two distinguished ulama set out the nature of the relations with the political center as the determinative and contributive element for the existence of the sultanate throughout the 17th century.

After Iskandar Sani passed away, there was a discussion among the political elites as well as the ulama to decide on who was going to be raised to the throne. There were strong objections, particularly, from the representatives of Wahdet al-vucud who rejected the idea of a reign by a woman ruler. However, Nureddin ar-Raniri, as the leading ulama of the period, overcame this difficulty. Besides that, the selection committee also supported the idea that a new ruler is selected based on lineage and leadership, thus, Safiyyat at-Din was raised to the throne [15]. It seems that Ar-Raniri had a very important historical role as a religious scholar in Aceh who gave his support to women rulers. Beyond the religious factor, this appointment was also dependent on the socio-political situation. In this situation the position of Safiyyat at-Din as the daughter of Iskandar Muda and wife of Iskandar Sani, appear to have been influential considerations that led to her appointment as the Sultanah.

With reference to the discussions presented above, the question to be discussed further would be if it was appropriate and why was a woman was raised to the throne. Another issue of importance would be, should this situation be given recognition as the first Sultanah was the daughter of the sultan Iskandar Muda. Within the context of her appointment, the political aspirations of her supporters ought to be determined as well. Based on these issues, it can be concluded that the socio-political environment in Aceh at that time did create a necessity for identifying the best possible person as a ruler regardless of gender as the main priority was to sustain unity in the state. This was done by appointing someone from the dynasty even though they were female members in order to prevent the country from facing a potentially deepening political crisis.

C Summary of the factors which were significant in the appointment of the female rulers is as follows:

- C The daughter of Iskandar Muda, a sweet-natured, compassionate and benevolent personality, had the ability to communicate with the different factions and sects [8];
- C The situation was on the verge of a political crisis if the appointment of a ruler was someone outside the palace circle, which would have caused the separation of the state. Thus, the enthronement of a person must be connected to the dynastic lineage and traditions for the sake of unity in the state;
- C As a daughter to the late Sultan Iskender Muda, who was distinguishingly successful during his reign in every aspect of ruling the country, his daughter was believed to be have the capability to repeat or at least, continue to maintain the structured state tradition. Besides that, respect was shown to her due to her ancestry and extraordinary qualities [13].
- C There were a few responsible individuals among the aristocracy who truly considered the future of the state, even though they were looking after their own eco-political aspirations at the same time. Due to their honesty and sincerity in putting matters of the state first, they put aside their disputes among themselves and supported a female member as the new ruler of the dynasty [16,17,].

Exclusive Education: According to the available references, the first three sultanah were educated in the palace compound of *Dar al-Dunia* by prominent scholars living in Aceh. Among the scholars were Nureddin Ar-Raniri, Sheikh Kemaleddin and Sheikh Abdulkahhar, who were the imams of Bait ar-Rahman mosque. Their private education did not only include various Islamic sciences, Arabic and Persian languages but also secular subjects such as law, administration, history, philosophy, literature which might be observed in other Islamic dynasties in the same era. Beyond this classical education process, there are some references which mentioned their study of English and Spanish with the help of a Dutch lady living in Aceh. Such an advanced education inevitably benefitted them to the extent that the skills acquired included having a role in politics, handling international policies and interacting with foreigners. By studying foreign languages, this demonstrates that the royal family gave much attention to the socio-political relations with Western countries and their representatives in the region [2,7,13,15,18-20,] Another interesting fact was that, although Zakiatuddin was a member of the sultanate family, but she had held the position of a private secretary to the former sultanah [15].

Support of Contemporary Religious Scholars: In this era, one of the the forces behind the power is the approaches and arguments of religious scholars. In addition to a distinguished education that the Sultanah received, the support of well-known religious scholars ought to be considered as a salient factor in influencing the ruler. In this context, in some other Islamic states such as the Ottoman State, the Acehese sultanah acquired full support from the Syeikh al-Islam whom the former appointed [21]. Such a support cannot be ignored since there were rivalry and factions among nobility and religious scholars in various degrees. There were those who were against the female rulership and might have caused not only political disturbances in the state authority, but also social ones, affecting the larger sections of the society. Ar-Raniri stresses on some features of Safiyyat at-Din in his work *Bustan us-Salatin*. He claims that she supported and encouraged the implementation of Islamic law. This was demonstrated by her actions that she cared alot and showed her affection as that of a mother towards her son in terms of her attitude towards the Acehese [10,13,22]. In addition, Safiyyat at-Din was not only a women ruler in an Islamic world but was also acknowledged by the European kingdoms as it was a unique monarchy in that era [2,6,19].

In this ruler selection process, the Chief Qadi of Mecca in particular, took a position, though indirectly, in the discussions between Acehese scholars which made the situation even more crucial and binding, from a global Islamic perspective. It is known that there were two opposing groups against the female rulers. The first group emerged among the conservative scholars and the second one formed the nobility from Sagi XXII, which will be elaborated below [23]. Even though, they were known as opposition groups, they openly expressed their opinions and challenged the female rule in the face of the support by Abdurrauf as-Singkili, a distinguished religious scholar, who was widely respected by both the ruling circles and the larger sections of the society. However, they continuously opposed the decision to select another female to be the head of the state, particularly during the transition period upon each sultanah's passing [24]. However, the support ended for the Sultanah ended after the death of Abdurrauf as-Singkili and this meant that the opposition factions became stronger and tried to dethrone the fourth sultanah. This was done through an attempt of obtaining a religious declaration from the Chief Qadi of Mecca in 1699 [25].

In previous eras, the roles of the sultans and the Syeikh'ul Islam had been determined and there were clearly drawn boundaries between them. This might be

understood as a type of social contract at the administrative level in the state and it reduced the role of the sultan to be limited to protecting the adat. On the other hand, Syeikh'ul Islam was regarded as having full authority in the domain of religion. This social contract has become a proverb even used in contemporary Aceh context as "*Adat bak Po Teumereuhom, hukom bak Syiah Kuala*" since the time of Iskandar Muda.

Era of Sultanah (1641-1699) as the Era of Female Rulers in Aceh: Surviving the political and theological disputes and attempts of some nobles to influence the political power as well as being able to hold on to the power as the center for a long time is proof that Safiyyat at-Din had the qualifications on how to manage political disputes among the factions [13]. She was in control for more than 34 years and this makes it worthy of discussion about the era of her reign. Though the nobility did get some political mileage from the central authority at the expense of decreasing the authority of the palace circles, Safiyyat at-Din, who was raised to the throne by the support of various circles, should be regarded as successful in her attempts to maintain stability in the state [14,16,26].

She was enthroned because of the support given by four aristocrats as well as possessing the dignity and powerful image as the daughter of Muda. Despite being enthroned with the support of the leading circles of the Acehese society, it is difficult to interpret that the era of Safiyyat at-Dinn was free of political crisis. Most of the time, the power struggle took place between the nobles, which Safiyyat at-Din had continuously observed and supervised as to sustain the balance of power [13]. It can be presumed that she negated entirely the opposition's threat as she was able to sit on the throne for nearly 34 years. This duration of being in power proves that she was capable of maintaining the balance between political elites and at the same time, secured her own position.

If the intense political disputes on the enthronment of a new sultan, which immediately reappeared after the death of each sultanah are overlooked, this long period under the oligarchic structure of the nobility would seem relatively quite. Features that ought to be addressed are as follows:

- C A new political paradigm based on mutual understandings and benefits for foreigners in particular the Dutch presence during the long reign of Safiyyat at-Din because this had encouraged commercial activity.

- C Routine proceedings of current laws and the operation of state mechanism without any major disruptions functioned well and this was continued during and after the reign of of the four Sultanah.
- C It is stressed that the above conditions concerning the oligarchic structure of the nobility might be misleading if rivalry among the nobility is overlooked. It means that there is no discussion on political integration of the nobles among themselves, instead they were divided into factions. This is a very unique aspect of the period which allowed the female rulers to become stronger by taking advantage of the situation through the creation of alliances with certain groups and pitted them against each others to guarantee their own political future during the internal disputes among the nobles [15].

Institutionalization by Restructuring the State: There was a contradiction in terms of the era of the Sultanah whereby, at that time, only male leaders had been considered as the protector of adat. This contradiction appeared to be a new paradigm, not only in the state rulership but also in the protection of tradition. With regards to this, religious scholars did not give their credence solely to males but considered females as well [27]. The reason behind this crucial religion-political decision seems to indicate that the religious scholars did not find a capable male descendant within the Aceh dynasty and they did not look for anyone out of the dynastic structure.

The crucial development during the reign of the second sultanah, Noor Alam, was a major change in the administrative structure. This change was not of a reform initiative that would possibly lead the sultanate to regain its golden era. Under normal circumstances, attempts of change in the administrative structure infer some positive developments, but these had caused more refractions in the central power which embodied the personality of the sultan [13].

Changes in the administrative structure that affected the hinterland were divided into three federative bodies called *sagi* which were located near the capital city, Bandar Aceh [28,29]. There are some various beliefs among historians about, when this administrative change occurred. Snouck Hurgronje argues that this happened long before the period of the female Sultans [17]. Veltman, a Dutch researcher who is against the claims felt that that the administrative was in operation during Safiyyat ad-Din era [8,13]. He adds that this change could not have materialized during Iskandar Muda, since the sultan was the champion for the centralization of state apparatus.

There is a reference in Bustan as-Salatin that Noor Alam established this new administrative body under the supervision of Syeikh al-Islam Abdurrauf [30]. A practical view might claim that the establishment of this federal body was aimed at controlling the opposition groups under each federal administration. It is true that the process of the leadership among the *Sagi* initiated political competition against the central power.

The presence of the opposition groups has been known since the enthronement of the first sultanah. However, this politico-religious opposition structure acquired and institutionalized as a significant power in line with the formation of the *Sagi* regional administrative body materialized during the second sultanah, Noor Alam's reign.

Noor Alam established a center-periphery relations in a changing balance of power, since the focus of this communication between two factions began to weaken. Federative administration in the three settlements surrounding the center of the Sultanate, had their own independent structure which was different from each other. These structures were at the same time, relaying the expression of the opposition of wanting to become institutionalized. One of the driving forces of the institutionalization of opposition was the tax policy decreed by Nur Alam. This was needed due to the increasingly weakening political and military power and the impact of the economic downturn. This type of tax collection is known as *hase rinjeun* which means charging each person based on some criteria. In this sense, each year, the prosperous circles would pay 'one Ringgit', the poor ones '0.21 real. In other words, during the Sultanah's reign, a new source of revenue such as the implementation of the poll tax was initiated in the face of economic reduction in revenues [2].

Contribution to Malay Civilization: This era during the reign of the Sultanah is also known for creating a proper environment for the development of a range of socio-cultural initiatives. For example, scholars of the Malay language and literature enjoyed the support of the Sultanah and began to be more prolific day by day [31]. One of the significant works produced in period was Adat Aceh, which is known as the compilation of *sarakat* which were given by the Sultans to distinguished nobles due to their services to the sultanate and authorized them to be in control of certain fields. Adat Aceh is also regarded as the basics of Aceh administration and laws [13,30].

Attention to General Education: Safiyatüddin as a resemblance of her ancestors provided a special place for Islamic education in her policies. She fully supported the missionary activities of the scholars by sending a group of scholars to disseminate Islamic education to Siam in 1668. In addition, she funded some scholars to improve their knowledge at distinguished Islamic learning centers for them to produce samples of the works of Islamic sciences [4,26].

Safiyat at-Din, just like her father Iskandar Muda, dignified religious scholars and education. During her development years she was educated by distinguished scholars and during her reign, she promoted the implementation and propagation of Islamic law which supported the ulama to lead the society by exhibiting their works and deeds in the name of the development of an Islamic religious life [18]. In addition, Zakiatuddin as one of the Sultanah in this review had asked as-Singkilif to write a book about fiqh dealing with common problems of the Muslims in Aceh society. At the same, he had translated a Hadith book called 'Erbain' into Malay language [32,33].

Political Aspirations: This era witnessed some paradigmatic change in state policies regarding foreign policy and economic development when compared with the founding fathers' era. Previously these aspects could not be separated and were uniquely related each other. However, starting from the era of Safiyat at-Din policy change, these fields were differentiated from each other. In this process, the Sultanah did not proceed nor encourage the same foreign policy as the one conducted and executed during the time of the founding fathers. If the existing economic relations were led to continue, the Aceh Sultanate would not escape decreasing its power in the face of the Dutch military presence in the political and economic domains. Internal unity was related to the original territory of Aceh located in the northern part of the Sumatra Island. External unity included the Malay Peninsula and Minangkabau. This territorial delimitation was caused by either the new paradigm of the Sultanah or the expansion of western powers or both at the same time. Aceh first lost its sovereignty in the rich tin mining area of Perak, then its whole existence eroded in the Malay Peninsula. Not only did the Aceh lose all the economic existence in Malaya, but after a short while, it became ineffective in the pepper-rich areas of Minangkabau, the Western Sumatra and eventually lost all due to the monopoly tactics of the Dutch [13,14].

Safiyat at-Din made continuous efforts to structure the centralization of the government established by her father. Due to internal factors and developments and finding solutions to political crisis, she seemed to be under pressure to give away some of her rights and autonomy to the local authority, which led to decentralization. This development itself reveals that the power relations between the opposition groups became radicalized, causing some significant changes to occur and restructuring to take place in the political domain [13,23,34]. On the other hand, the contraction began and the state gradually lost some of its territorial sovereignty, first, in the Malay Peninsula followed by the Sumatra Island, as seen in examples found in Johor and Pahang, these were the vassal regions of Aceh Sultanate that regained their independence [8,34]. Such occurrences had led the sultanate to become more of a symbolic presence rather than having the real power in the mid and long term rule; reflecting the diminishing economic power.

In the political life of the Sultanate, oligarchic structure provides a significant role for the nobility [13]. Though she tried to reconstruct the administrative mechanism founded mainly by her father, she introduced some innovations by creating official positions, particularly to address the needs of the management of ports throughout the Western Aceh in 1660s. Under this new administration initiatives, new positions such as clerk (*kerkun*), technician (*penghulu dacing*) and security (*penghulu kawal*) were created [35]. On the other hand, some differences in practice began to emerge in the state organization as a result of these political power relations. This is particularly true of a council, which included twelve prominent nobles who were given more authority [8,19]. These nobles were previously subject to the strict sanctions during the reign of Iskandar Muda but they began to be dominant players mainly in the trade business in their respective regions. In particular, the nobles who controlled the agricultural economy were becoming stronger in the political domain and at the same time began to be involved and getting more revenues from the trade business [4,6]. The nobles in the political settlements such as *mukim* and *nanggroe* gained autonomy and appeared to establish a new power structure which led to the decentralization, inferring implicitly of political as well as economic sharing. This development had a direct impact on the decentralization process [8].

The era of Safiyat at-Din also witnessed a unique representative institution, established under the name of

People's Assembly (*Majelis Mahkamah Rakyat*) which was headed by the Syeikh al-Islam. It included one member from each mukim in Aceh Besar which was the nearest political settlement around the captial city. A striking feature of this parliament is seen because it had a total of 73 members and 17 of them were women [2,7,15,19,27,30,]. Sultanah Safiyatuddin, though, did not lose her political power totally during this process, but the gradually increasing efforts of her competitors and her relatively alienation from the state administration due to her being aged caused the aforementioned developments.

Noor Alam, the second sultanah, handed over completely her authority to a council comprising twelve orang kaya and she became a symbolic power. During her reign,, the political opposition movement against the Sultanah was gaining momentum. The opposition challenged the authority of the Sultanah by burning parts of the palace (Dar al-Dunia) including the significant education center of Bait ar-Rahman Mosque and its library in 1677 [13].

During the third sultanah's reign, Zakiatuddin, the opposition movement in Aceh politics took external measure to hinder the sovereignty of the Sultanah by corresponding with the Ameer of Mecca. Their insistence resulted in an envoy from Mecca visiting Aceh. This unique experience ought to be taken into consideration and analyzed from various aspects with regards to Islamic history. This visit was very crucial because the third Sultanah personally welcomed and met the envoys, Sheriff Husein and Ibrahim from Mecca. The education of the sultanah during their young ages gave her the skills of being being able to challenge the exceptional political developments including the Meccan envoy. By conversing with the envoy in Arabic language, it seemed she might have changed the prejudicial convictions of the guests, since, they were invited by the opposition group. Besides this, the Sultanah presented precious gifts such as camphor and gold materials, to be used in the Kaaba, Masjid Nabi in Madina and the Ameer of Mecca. These presents must be seen as evidence that the Sultanah had political affiliations with the Ameer of Mecca [15].

One other significant issue during the sultanah reign, is that each of them legitimized her reign by minting gold coins after being enthroned. Historically, minting coin was one of the official tools which proved the sovereignty of the rulers, in domestic governance and in international circles. Nur Alam minted coins which were 17 carats and 0.59 grams with her name written on one side [7,8,15,32,33]. Zakiatuddin Sultan Shah, just like other

sultans, preserves a tradition of political gold struck coins that were made in her own name. They were 17 carat and 13 mm gold coins whereby on one side of the dirham was 12:55 gram itself and the other side, the seal of Shah Inayat who was was the previous sultan. After ten-year reign, Zakiatuddin passed away on 3 October 1688 (8 Dhu al-Hijja 1098) [7,15,37].

Religious Implimentation as a State Policy: At the beginning of the 17th century, Aceh was known as Serambi Mekkah due to reasons of the implementation of Islamic law and its people's strong affiliation to Islam and its practices. This seemed to be the tradition as special efforts were made by the Sultanah to preserve Islam within the ruling system. Islamization of the state was encouraged by making various efforts including Islam being the role model for the people of Aceh. Furthermore, Nureddin Ar-Ranirî mentions in his renown book *Bustan as-Salatin* that Safiyyat at-Din was a pious sultanah and made great efforts to implement Islamic laws in the state [22]. Though Ar-Raniri just stayed a few years after the death of his protector, Iskandar Sani, he was appointed as Syeikh al-Islam [19,32,38,39]. This appointment is significant as a distinguished ulama's position would not only be raised to become the religious leader of the sultanate but also had a political role and this is seen as a direct impact of the enthronment of Safiyyat at-Din. To show the relations between the ulama and the Sultanah, Ar-Raniri wrote a book on the matter entitled *Hidayat al'Iman bi Fadhli'l Mannan* based on the request of Safiyyat at-Din [7].

Abdurrauf as-Singkili's long term visit to improve his religious education in Arabia was initiated by the Sultanah, Safiyyat at-Din [2]. After studying for nineteen years, he was invited back to Aceh by Safiyyat at-Din to take the position of Syeikh al-Islam [18,19,27,42,40]. The existence of Abdurrauf in Aceh was a direct influence of Islam on the political stabilitiy in the Sultanate. Throughout these years, the opposition circles, particularly, the wahdat al-vucud movement increased its criticisms of the ruling power. In this matter, Abdurrauf, succeeded in settling the socio-political problems as he was a moderate who chose neither the wahdat al'vucud nor the orthodox beliefs of Ar-Ranirî which threatened the stability and social peace of the state. It is known that Abdurrauf justified the enthronement of female rulers [39,40]. His indirect support for female rulers was inferred by his ideas regarding arbitration that did not include gender criteria. In addition, he defined the government as

a type of khilafah and described Safiyyat at-Din as a khalifah who tried to implement Islamic laws in the country [22].

As-Singkilî, like his predecessor Ar-Ranirî, was requested to write books by Safiyyat at-Din. For instance, in the year 1663, Singkili wrote a jurisprudence book entitled *Mir'at al Tullab fi Tashil Ma'rifat ahkam al-syar'iyah li al-malik al-wahhab'*. Abdurrauf mentions in the introduction of the book that he wrote *Mir'at al Tullab* at the request of Safiyyat at-Din [20,31,43,44]. This book is the first work in its field to provide solutions as practical ways of adopting an Islamic way of life across the Malay world.

CONCLUSION

The era of the Sultanah (1641-1699) is noteworthy to be identified as a unique period in the history of the Sultanate of Aceh Darussalam. The sultanah reigned the throne of Aceh successively for a number of glorious years, even though they were challenged in almost all aspects of politics. Then, the sultanate tried to maintain the social cohesion as much as possible and save the country against the continual threat of the newly developing presence and expansion of the Dutch in the region. In this context, the Sultanah should be regarded as the saviour of the state from wracking with conflict. During this period, the sultanah had qualifications beyond the traditional education, as the basis of their education was to have the ability to rule a country. The fact was, as female rulers in an Islamic state, certain factors such as gaining the support of high-ranking nobles and distinguished religious scholars were crucial in sustaining and retaining the power to rule. The Sultanah strived hard to protect the country from being divided and persevered to keep a balance among the disputed factions in the capital and vicinity. Although they were not allowed to be involved in military expansion in the region, but, they prioritized in terms of retaining peaceful relationships with foreign elements in the region. In terms of political and military success, this period might be regarded as a period of degradation leading to a decline of power among the rulers [45].

These women had the ruling power as sultans for nearly sixty years but the nobility gradually appeared to have acquired the power by being the ruling elite behind the scene as to decide on who would be enthroned or dethroned. This power transfer from the center to the periphery was due to the restless desire of the nobility to

be in control, particularly, the nobility in the interior regions who became autonomous in the trade business. They acquired economic power from their interactions with foreign elements in the region [46].

This era strikingly proves that the efforts of the sultanah saved the state from degradation and division in the form of having various separate city states and that they had taken care of the balance of power among the nobility. The fact that these Sultanahs had exceptional educational backgrounds and almost all of them gave priority to the development of an Islamic civilization as stated in the Malay publications by respected religious scholars. Many of these scholars were sent overseas to study in Islamic centers to improve their knowledge in Islamic sciences by the Sultanah. At the same time, as rulers of the state, they also made the effort to continue having bilateral relations with foreign components such as the Dutch.

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