

ACEHNESE WOMEN (A history of Acehese Women leaders)

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Abstract

In Acehese history, many women held significant positions. However, the history of female Acehese rulers is hardly written in Acehese history, even though they give many contributions to develop Aceh as we seen now. Safiatuddin is one of very famous female ruler in Aceh and she also creates a policy that still use until now. She also was invited to other countries in Southeast Asia to give lectures and she was a queen who believe in democracy and science by not arrested the ulama who want to make coup d' etat. She even not put them in jail but only exiled because those ulama do not sabotage, subversive, burning, killing and other criminal things. There are others female rulers and heroines who also give their contributions in developing Aceh. However, their contributions seem forgotten in Acehese history lesson. It becomes worst when the fatwa from Mecca saying women cannot be a leader. The New Order also contributes in making women only in domestic sphere.

Key words: *female Acehese rulers, heroines*

Introduction

This writing talked about women in Aceh history who give an inspiration for Acehese women movement today. The work of women ruler in Aceh history is very important to see why not many Acehese women in these days can do the same as what these rulers did in the past. Also, I link it with the Indonesian women movement after the reign of Suharto which shaped Acehese women movement.

Prominent Acehese Women in History

During teaching "Gender in Islamic Perspective", I found that few students know about female rulers and heroines in Aceh history. Most of them only know Cut NyakDhien, Cut Meutia and Keumalahayati. That make this work very important to make Acehese people aware that they have many heroines. The history of women ruler is very rare written in Aceh. There are some researchers who tried to write about them. However, most of them are foreign scholars. For example Zenntgraaf or Ploss in this writing who describe their admiration for Acehese women heroines. That is why very important for local scholar also to write what they think about their heroines and female ruler. The local writer can track from Rahmatillah and Santoso (GerakanPerempuan Aceh MengawalPerdamaian, no date, p. 3). They mentioned mention that for almost 567 years (1353-1920), there were women in Aceh in decision-making positions. For example,

from 1400-1428 Nihrasiyah became queen following the reign of her father, Sultan Zainal Arifin. Safiatuddin changed her husband's position to Sultan Iskandar Thani, after her husband passed away. Pocut Limpah was a woman leader of the secret agent agency at that time. Admiral Keumalahayati became the first woman who ruled a ship to fight a war at sea. These historical figures are evidence that the Acehnese were not ruled only by men.

In the literature there is little about the rule of the queens, except for the rule of Safiatuddin. Safiatuddin was not a queen merely sitting on her throne, but was involved in making policy for women. For example, she made a *Qanun Meukuta Alam* which guarantee that women who divorced were entitle to property inheritance. The important point is that, at that time, there were no strong opponents of women if they wanted to become leaders.

In Acehnese history, many women held significant positions. This table shows the heroine and female leader in Aceh.

Female Leader in Aceh History

Name	Position	Period	Place
Putri Lindung Bulan	Prime Minister	1333-1398	Perak Sultanate
Nihrasiyah Rawangsa Khadiyu	Queen	1400-1428	Samudrapasai Sultanate
Malahayati	Admiral	1589-1604	Aceh Darussalam Sultanate
Meurah Ganti	Admiral	1604-1607	Aceh Darussalam Sultanate
Cut Meurah Inseuen	Rear Admiral	1604-1607	Aceh Darussalam Sultanate
Taj'al Alam Safiatuddin	Queen	1641-1675	Aceh Darussalam Sultanate
Cut Nyak Keureuto	Head of the autonomous regions	1641-1675	Aceh Darussalam Sultanate
Cut Nyak Fatimah	Head of the autonomous regions	1641-1675	Aceh Darussalam Sultanate
Seri Ratu Nurul Alam Nakiatuddin Syah	Queen	1675-1678	Aceh Darussalam Sultanate

Name	Position	Period	Place
Sultan InayatZakiatuddinSjah	Queen	1678-1688	Aceh Darussalam Sultanate
Seri RatuKamalatsyah	Queen	1688-1699	Aceh Darussalam Sultanate
PocutMeuligo	Uleebalang; a war advisor and a General	1857	During war with Dutch
TengkuFakinah	A General and an uleema	1856-1933	
Cut NyakDhien	A General	Died 8 November 1908	West Aceh
Cut Meutia	A General	Died 25 October 1910	North Aceh
PocutBarenBiheue	A General in West Aceh	Early 19th Century	West Aceh
DatuBeru	Members of the council in the era of Ali Mughayatsyah	1470-1500s	Lingee kingdom, BenerMeriah
InenMayak Teri	A soldier who fought Dutch soldiers	1880-1920	Central Aceh

Sources: Noerdin, Edriana, *Politik Identitas Perempuan Aceh*; Rahmatillah, Syarifah, *Gerakan Perempuan Aceh Mengawal Perdamaian*; Hasjmy, A. *Ratu Aceh: 59 tahun Aceh Merdeka dibawah Pemerintahan Ratu*. Information about DatuBeru and InenMayakTeri, is from personal correspondence with Sri Wahyuni.

Noerdin (2005, p. 28) and Rahmatillah (nd, p. 3) listed 16 queens and heroines who inspired other Acehnese women. In relation to these inspiring women, Siapno (2002, p. 1) reflects that 'Aceh is represented by Acehnese Muslim nationalists as having a long tradition of 'strong, fighting women'.

The involvement of women (heroines) in the fight with the Dutch gets attention from some historians. The Indonesian historian Jakobi (cited in Noerdin 2005, p. 28) wrote:

Dutch officers talked about Acehnese women with a sense of admiration and respect for their courage. Valiantly, the Acehnese women never felt angry about

risking their lives in order to defend something that was seen as of religious and national importance. They took up roles and immediately became involved in the 80 year war between Aceh and Holland. Because of their admiration, the Acehnese women were spoken of as 'de grootes Dames' (Noble/Great women) who played a significant role in Aceh's political struggle.

In the book *Aceh* (H.C Zentgraaf, 1983, p. 109) a Dutch journalist who followed the Dutch soldiers to war, wrote his impressions of Acehnese women:

bahwa tidak ada satu bangsa yang begitu bersemangat dan fanatic dalam menghadapi musuh selain bangsa Aceh dengan wanita-wanitanya yang jauh lebih unggul daripada semua bangsa lain dalam keberanian menghadapi musuh.

Zentgraaf (1983, p. 110-111) was writing about the war for the benefit of the Dutch government; however, his impressions of the Acehnese women who also followed the fight during the war were strong:

Teuku Mayet in Tiro was able to free himself, but his wife fell into our hands with severely injured. When the troops cleared the area, they realised they were in the presence of a woman. She wore black pants and a black shirt, her body was sturdy and she was about thirty years old. She slept recumbent due to a gunshot wound in her abdomen. Even in her suffering she put on a brave face. Although she suffered in pain, she did not groan, and in silence she waited for death. Schmit came to her with water politely asked in Acehnese if she would like her wound bandaged. She turned her face away and scolded: "bekkamatkee, kapheebudok!" (do not hold me, infidel with leprosy). She would rather death than to lie at the hands of a 'kaphe' an infidel dog. That woman's name was Cut Gambang, the daughter of the famous Teuku Umar.

This tradition of strong women can be traced back to one early queen. Said (1961, p. 192), in *Atjeh Sepanjang Abad*, describes Tajul Alam Safiatuddin, a queen who was on the throne for 34 years (1641-1675), a very long time for a regent during that era, especially for a woman. At that time, women faced many obstacles. For example, Hadi (2010, p. 130; Said, 1961, p.215) noted the case of Kamalat who replaced Inayat on the throne. Most people, especially rich people, refused to accept her as their queen. Her many opponents wanted only men on the throne, a demand that was realised in 1699. Inayat was replaced by Kamalatsyah. While Inayat got much support from her people, this did not happen to Kamalat, who was opposed by others, especially the rich (*uleebalang*) who wanted a male king. What is interesting is that this queen resigned not because of the coup d' etat, but

because there was a 'fatwa' from Mecca, which said that leadership under a woman's rule is contrary to Islamic teaching. After Kamalat resigned, the Acehese Kingdom was ruled by an Arab descendent, King Badr al- Alam Sharif Hashim Jamal al- din (ruled in 1699-1702) (Hadi 2010, p. 130).

Intrigue and struggles for power were common occurrences. That is why being queen for 34 years is very special; it could not have happened if the queen was not wise and able to accommodate people's needs. Said (1961, p. 192) noted:

TajulAlam was not only successful in proving that she could rule just as well as a man, but she was also successful in carrying out reforms in Government, expanding the meaning of democracy which to date, many men do not understand.

Said's appreciation of TajulAlam is interesting because it is a man commenting. In a society which hardly appreciates women's work, Said's recognition of TajulAlam is meaningful. Under her government, TajulAlam sent religious leaders to study in India and the Middle East. One of those religious leaders was SyechNurrudinArraniry. She also appointed an *ulama* as one of her advisors. This tradition is still exists today.

Hasjimy (1977, p. 121-123) also focused on this queen, noting that TajulAlam believed that both men and women had the right to an education. Even though some historians highlight the setbacks of her kingdom in the fields of economy, politics and the military, her education policy should be appreciated. Supported by two great *ulama*, HamzahFansuri and NuruddinAr-Raniry, TajulAlam created the opportunity for both women and men to study. She believed that the status and degree of women could be changed through education. She also allowed women to sit in government and in the army and had a division named *KeumalaCahaya*, whose job was to protect the palace. The guards were all women. She also had female soldiers at sea who were led by Keumalahayati. TajulAlam was very good at languages, including Arabic, Farsi, Spanish and Urdu, and was also an expert in Islamic laws and their derivations such as constitutional law, philosophy and logic (Hasjimy 1977, p.95). Because of this, she was invited to other countries in Southeast Asia to give lectures¹.

Safiatuddin had a policy to put women in the People's Assembly. At one stage, of the 72 members, 26 were women (Husein 2011, p. 20)². Even today in Aceh there are not this many women holding seats in parliament. Safiatuddin also created a royal regulation, *QanunMeukutaAlam*. This regulation tried to guarantee that women who divorced were entitled to property inheritance. Also, when a daughter married, the father would prepare

¹A discussion in Unifem Aceh, 2006.

² Meanwhile in Said's book, *AtjehSepanjang Abad* he mentions that there were 18 women in that council

a house and a paddy field for her. This happened as well for a man getting married. The groom should give a paddy field (*umongPeunuwo*) to the bride (Husein 2011, p. 20)³. In this case, women had bargaining power with men because they had also given their contribution to sustain the family.

The policies made while she was queen also faced resistance from some *ulama*. Hasjimy (1977, p. 50) notes that “those who followed Wujudiyah sect⁴ said that it is forbidden if a kingdom is ruled by a woman”. This challenge came from three hundred *ulamas* who did not agree that a Kingdom should be ruled by a woman. Instead of banning these *ulamas*, Safiatuddin sent them to Tiro and let them spread their teaching there. It is a mystery why she did not arrest them. According to Hasjimy, it is because Safiatuddin believed in democracy and science and, most importantly, ‘because those *syechs/ulamado* not do sabotage, subversive, burning, killing and other criminal things’ (Hasjimy 1977, p.98).

During Safiatuddin’s reign, science progressed. Many books were written not only because the Queen asked the *ulamas* to write them, but also because the *ulamas* wanted to write. This is why many history scholars recognise Safiatuddin. Said (1962, p. 192) said:

As a woman, her accomplishments were many and great. Other than Queen Elizabeth of England, during that era there was no other queen heard of who was as remarkable as Tadj'al – These days it is interesting to discuss women’s position in Aceh, which is already considered to be high, indeed as high as a queen. Two centuries ago a woman ruled who had capabilities that were no different to those of men. Tajul Alam was not only successful in proving that she could rule just as well as a man, but she was also successful in carrying out reforms in Government, expanding the meaning of democracy which to date, many men do not understand.

Zainuddin (cited in Hasjimy 1977, p. 53) mentioned that:

An astute and wise princess, she loved poetry and writing. Her poetry teacher was

³ However, this tradition is only in Acehnese communities in the coastal area. Those who are from others ethnic such as Gayo, Alas or Aneuk Jamee, they do not have this tradition.

⁴Wujudiyah is a Sufisect brought by IbnuArabi. In Aceh, this sect was followed by HamzahFansuri. The idea of this sect is that human beings can be merged with God, because a human being has both a ‘spiritual’ and material dimension. NurudinAr-Raniry is another religious leader who brought another sect. He refused the idea that human being and God can be merged. However, he agreed that human beings ‘can see’ God in symbolic way. It is different with the Sufism follower who believes that human beings can see God in the true sense. In the IskandarTsani era, Nuruddin got power as the first religious leader in Aceh. He had the power to demolish the sect that has no similarity with his own thoughts, such as the sect brought by HamzahFansuri and the student of HamzahFansuri, Syamsuddin as-Sumatrani. In Nuruddin’s era, he burnt all books written by HamzahFansuri and Syamsuddin Al-Sumatrani. When Syiah Kuala, another religious leader, was in power, he tried to merge these two sects, the Sufism and the Tareqat. Syiah Kuala was religious leader who can put his position for two differences thoughts in Aceh. Perhaps, this is the reason Syiah Kuala was accepted by the Acehnese people. As information, Syiah Kuala has been enshrined as the name of state University in Banda Aceh and Ar-Raniry as the name of Islamic State University in Banda Aceh. (personal communication with SehatIhsanSadiqin (11/10/2012)

Hamzah Fansyuri and her Islamic law teacher was Nuruddin Ar-Raniry. When she was not yet an adult, a lot of money was donated to help Hamzah Fansyuri to build his literature. She also donated money to Abdurrauf As Singkili to write books about law. Both of these authors were sent outside of Aceh to broaden their knowledge base, namely in Malaysia, India, Kudus, Baghdad, Medinah and Makkah.

These writers show what Safiatuddin, as a woman ruler, was able to achieve and the many benefits her reign gave to society.

Jacobs (cited in Said 1961, p.193) noted that it was common for women to become leaders in Aceh. He said that when the Dutch attacked Samalanga there was a woman leader in Samalanga who acted as a queen. She threatened all men with caning if they did not go to battle. Jacobs, writing of another time, said that there was an *uleebalangan* Keureutu, her name was TjutNyaKerti. Another woman leader was Tjut Ma Fatima in West Aceh. Ploss (cited in Said 1961, p. 193) said that 'Aceh is an example that in the Indonesian Archipelago once in a life time women can give many influences in the field of politics'.

The phenomenon of a queen as the leader is not something unusual in history. Reid (1988, p. 639-641) notes that many Polynesia, Austronesia and Madagascar societies, as well as Indonesian and Philippines societies, were ruled by women. There were queens in many places. Between the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, there were two queens in Pasai Kingdom in Sumatera. In Burma, a woman called Shinsawbu ruled (1453-1472), in Jepara, Indonesia, there was one women queen, Kali-Nyamat, who ruled in sixteen centuries. She contributed to make Jepara very well-known for its craft (Khutniah & Iryanti, 2012, p. 2). Pattani, in Southern Thailand had four queens during the years 1584-1635 which called 'The Raja Ijau, Biru, Ungudan Kuning' (http://www.geocities.ws/prawat_patani/queenspatani.htm). Having women rulers was not unheard of, in Aceh or in the Southeast Asian region.

In the 17th century, Aceh experienced what is considered to be a Golden Era when a succession of *sultanah* governed the kingdom. Amiruddin (2004, p. 257) in his international seminar paper "Women in the Acehnese Society" mentioned that at the end of the 17th century, four sultanahs had governed Aceh. However, the roles of these *sultanah* are not deeply understood. Cut Nyak Dhien, Cut Meutia and Admiral Keumalahayati are women who have become national icons. Ironically, many Acehnese women do not know about these women who have contributed to Aceh in the past. Noerdin (2005, p. 29) has made a list of very important women in Acehnese history as I had mentioned earlier. These are names that are never heard of in history lessons at schools, even in Aceh.

Amiruddin (2004, p. 526) states that Acehnese women had high status and powerful positions for many years and the *Sultana* demonstrates a 59 year tradition of women's

governance and leadership. Moreover, Said (1961, p.191) in his writing in *AtjehSepanjang Abad* explains that the reign of TajulAlam lasted 34 years. This was a very long time for anyone to reign, let alone a woman. Thirty four years was a time which cannot be passed without much wisdom, especially in the context of continual intrigues against the sultans. For this reason, Acehnese people are very proud of their history because they have a strong history of women leaders.

Acehnese culture is in line with Islamic teaching, which is contrary to Arabic culture, which does not allow opportunities for women to be involved in public spheres. Acehnese culture has always enshrined women's work in the public sphere, and indeed, in the same spirit as Islamic teachings, which adapted to the local Acehnese traditions in order to effect a smooth transition into the region. Mernissi (cited in Siapno 2002, p. 51; Amiruddin 2004, p. 531) argue that Indonesian people generally (and Acehnese people in particular), are very moderate Islamic people in terms of recognizing women's activities and contributions compared to other Islamic countries. Kingsbury (2006, p.20) has also expressed a similar view. He said the change that happened in Acehnese society since the Islamic culture from Saudi which practiced Islamic doctrine and strict has been spread to Aceh.

In Aceh, a fatwa from Mecca was declared, stating that "it is forbidden by law for a woman to rule". This meant that the right of women to become leaders in Aceh was no longer supported. In the past there was a religious leader, Abdurrauf Al Singkili (1615-1693), who was an adviser of the *Sultana* and was supportive of women leaders. It is evident that the religious leader at that time gave support for women to be leaders. Said (1961, p. 192) mentions that in the era of TajulAlam, there were two religious leaders, NurudinAr-Raniry and AbdurraufAssingkili, who supported the *Sultana*. However, Amiruddin (2004, p. 531) and Reid (2006, p. 42) explain that following the death of those *ulamas*, and the decree from Mecca being issued, there were no more women leaders appointed.

Within the New Order regime, the importance of being a good mother and wife was emphasized. Ongkhokham (2004, p.320) states that Dutch values were adopted from Victorian morals which shaped the English nobles' morality. The reflections of Ongkhokham are also similar with those of a Bengali academic, Hussain, who wrote that the 'Bengali middle class men's concept of the ideal wife was based on the British concept of the wife as 'helpmate' (i.e. one who helps her husband). Although middle class men allowed education for women, their anxieties about women's proper moral behavior were heightened. Bengali middle class men endorsed several advice manuals for women, which taught women to be 'good wives' and 'wise mothers' (Hussa 2010, p. 4; in

<http://www.sciencedirect.com>

[/science/article/pii/S0277539510000154](http://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S0277539510000154), accessed 12/01/2012. Ongkhokham argues that in the era of Alexandria Victoria (1837-1900), Queen Victoria of England introduced a strict code of public morality. Living with one's husband and children became the representation of the ideal family. This value spread all over Europe in the 19th century, and because Indonesia was occupied by the Dutch, this value also gained influence. Furthermore, TienSoeharto came from a noble family in which Dutch values were similar to those of the Indonesian nobility. Mies and Djajadiningrat (cited in Suryakusuma 2004, p. 169) contend that *ibuism* was dominant during the Suharto era, and became an official ideology in Indonesia, which remains highly influential even today.

The contemporary change in Indonesian politics, particularly after the reign of Suharto in 1998, has opened up opportunities for people in Indonesian society. After the fall of Suharto, and the process of *Reformasi*, people became far more involved politically, expressing their views in both society and in the media. In addition, this contemporary change gave an opportunity for Indonesian women to establish organization. In Indonesia, the *Reformasi* period provided the opportunity for women to become more active in the political arena. This reform started in 1998 when a group of mothers demonstrated on the roundabout of the Hotel Indonesia in Jakarta asking the government to decrease the price of food and baby necessity such as milk. This group, named the 'concerned mothers', spread their ideas and, followed by students demonstrations, impacted significantly to create political reform in the Indonesian government.

Conclusion

This writing has shown about the women rulers in Aceh history. They have given evidence that women also can give their contribution for Aceh politics and shape the policy for making Aceh better, as shown by Safiatuddin who make policies. However, women as a ruler in Aceh should be stop because of a decree from Mecca which said women is forbidden to be a ruler.

The absent of women in Acehese politics also adopted in national level, when New Order banned women to be more involve in organization. Since this regime adopted Victorian public morality, the energy of women is more to be in domestic area rather than in public.

However, after the New Order regime step down, the reform brings new hope for women activity in public. But it is still need more energy to make more women want to be involved in politics and in women movements.

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