

# Women and Islam in Pre-nineteenth Century Aceh



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## INTRODUCTION

The discourse on gender in Aceh has always been a site of tension. This paper seeks to understand how gender relations have changed and continue to be transformed by the dynamism of Islam's interpretation in Aceh. Considerable research<sup>1</sup> has already shown that women in Southeast Asia, including those in Aceh, enjoyed a higher level of economic autonomy and personal freedom prior to the colonisation period compared to those from West, East and South Asia. After the December 2004 tsunami however the discourse included how women may have been responsible for the disaster<sup>2</sup>, and consequently how they should be controlled. How is it possible to rationalise these seemingly incongruent facts? In what ways and to what extent can this 'high status' of women be observed in Aceh historically and at present?

## TRANSITION TO ISLAM IN ACEH IN THE EARLY MODERN PERIOD

While the exact period of Islam's entry into Aceh is highly contested<sup>3</sup>, recent discoveries of tombstones in Kuta Lubhok, Aceh Besar district give evidence of a Muslim community as early as the 12<sup>th</sup> century (McKinnon, 2006, pp. 30-32). The initial stage in this expansion and adoption process had been marked by intense interaction between Islam and local belief systems, culminating in the *wujuddiyah* doctrine of Hamzah and Shamsuddin made popular during the reign of the great Iskandar Muda. Here, Islam provided a powerful rationale for state-building under the authority of a mortal, but God-endowed, sultan. When Iskandar Muda<sup>4</sup> died however what followed was a tumultuous era of Islamic renewal and reformism. Aceh as a sultanate under the reign of Iskandar Thani was by then already a consolidated empire that had nothing more to prove. The entry and popularity of a more legalistic and scriptural brand of Islam promoted by Nur al-Din ar-Raniri<sup>5</sup> exhibited a more 'modern' and innovative sultanate, one that was increasingly intolerant of local influences, and more importantly had the end-view of pacifying the numerous and increasingly powerful foreign Muslim traders in Aceh (Reid, personal communication, 5/09/2008). The culmination of this stage was a 'fierce heresy-hunt' led by ar-Raniri against the *wujuddiyah* doctrine (Ito 1979).

By the 17<sup>th</sup> century, Aceh's power was waning. The sultanate was shrinking fast following the loss of many of its territories and the weakening of trade in its ports. Traditional power had shifted away from the sultan into the hands of *orang kayas*, who subsequently put four queens on the throne from 1641 to 1699 (Reid, 2005, p. 94-111).<sup>6</sup>

By 1675, with the death of Safiyyat al-Din, the first of Aceh's queens, the sultanate was confined only to north Sumatra (Djajadiningrat, 1979, p. 62). A more tolerant Islam, advocated by Abd al-Rauf al-Sinkili who had supplanted the increasingly unpopular ar-Raniri who had begun to lose favour with the court, characterised the long reign of the four queens. This period was marked by a return to 'syncretism and inclusiveness', however with *adat* gaining more ground in the countryside (Reid, personal communication, 5/09/2008).<sup>7</sup>

These 'waves' of Islamic adoption, reformism, and renewal had profound consequences to gender relations in pre-19<sup>th</sup> century Aceh. They raise some pertinent questions: to what extent had Islam become entrenched in the Acehnese sultanate during the early modern period, and to what degree was Islamic law actually observed? Which segments of the population fell squarely within the ambit of Islamic piety and practice during this time? Answers to these questions will hopefully clarify what it means for women during this period to enjoy 'high status.'

## PATTERNS IN THE ADOPTION OF ISLAM AND THEIR CONSEQUENCES TO GENDER RELATIONS

Following the patterns of intensification and weakening of Islamic influence in Aceh, it is not surprising to encounter observations like those made by Francois Martin, who wrote in 1602 of women who could walk about openly with breasts exposed, or had ears adorned, heads uncovered, and who were even able to bathe naked in the river without fear of being accosted. Adultery received a high penalty – execution or the cutting off of body parts. By 1621, Augustin de Beaulieu noted that caning, a ubiquitous Islamic practice, was also a popular way to administer punishment (Reid (Ed.), 1995, pp. 57-60 & 66-67). Yet, Martin also recorded that sexual promiscuity appeared to have been acceptable in the early 17<sup>th</sup> century (Reid (Ed.) 1995, p. 58). This was corroborated in the 19<sup>th</sup> century by Hurgronje, who, even while stressing the social importance of a bride's virginity before marriage, also noted that there existed "comparative freedom of intercourse between the sexes in Aceh" (1906, pp. 328-346).

The early to mid-17<sup>th</sup> century was characterised by behaviours that may not have been acceptable to a more legalistic and scriptural interpretation of Islam. There prevailed a relatively permissive environment where 'hermaphrodites' abounded and prostitution was tolerated. The king of Aceh could keep more than 300 concubines, and women could literally venture into the masculine 'outside' world of commerce and trade. This kind of behaviour was not condoned



Note the relative ease of gender intermixing in this late 19<sup>th</sup> century photo. Photo reproduced from C. Snouck Hurgronje. 1906. *The Atjehnese*. All rights reserved, Leyden: E.J. Brill, 1906.

among the elite classes, however, as notions of morality in their circles would certainly have been much higher.

Regarding the issue of female concealment, contemporary debate has been rife as to whether it is a traditional, and therefore 'indigenous', practice<sup>8</sup>. In many areas in Southeast Asia since the 16<sup>th</sup> century, the evolution of sovereign states and the economic gains from trade had produced increasingly stratified social structures. In 1602, for instance, the *orang kayas* in Aceh began to sport long fingernails on the thumb and little finger, a sign that they did not need to do work by hand (Lombard, 1991, p. 58). Their women, in turn, were also freed from labour, removed from the "sexually dangerous and aggressively masculine 'outside'", and thus concealed from the public gaze (Andaya, 2000, p. 241).

In Aceh, female concealment appears to have acquired a mystical quality during the era of the four queens (c. 641-1699). While Aceh is not unique in having placed four queens on the throne<sup>9</sup>, it appears to be the only sultanate that had strict requirements for a queen to be "a maiden, advanced in years, and connected by royal blood with the ancient royal line" (see Marsden, 1986, p. 453-454). Unlike Hindu Java in the early 16<sup>th</sup> century, which Pires observed had numerous unmarried women (1944, p. 177), Aceh certainly did not have a comparable traditional regard for maidens who did not marry (Hurgronje, 1906, pp. 295, 343).

As in many Muslim societies, the notion of 'outside' (*keluar*) versus 'inside' (*dalam*) to delineate masculine and feminine spheres of activity appears to have been influenced to a large degree by the principles of Islam. Andaya (2000, pp. 231-253) has argued that the higher the social class of a woman and her family, the higher the societal constraints placed on her to withdraw from the 'outside'. As monarchs, however, the queens straddled both the 'outside' world of politics traditionally occupied by men, and the 'inside' world of mysticism and the home allotted to the female. While women could never be *caliphs* (the Prophet's deputy as the Messenger of God) because they belonged to the wrong sex (Mernissi, 1994), conditions of emergency may warrant their political ascendancy. In such circumstances, seclusion acts to balance the already dangerous situation of crisis, which precipitated female ascendancy in the first place. Indeed, this 'asexualisation', or the process by which one is rendered virtually sexless, is heightened by the insistence on a queen being an 'old maid,' the life stage when a woman is often regarded as least desirable. Having passed the childbearing stage, she is also considered to be wiser and "gender neutral" (Andaya, 2000, p. 236). At the same time, because royal power is held as highly masculine, these queens maintained large harems, like their male counterparts (Andaya, 2000, p. 244). For a male monarch, the possession of a large harem was obviously a symbol of prestige and

potency<sup>10</sup>. A sexless and undesirable female monarch, therefore, assumes mystical power through the display of a large retinue of women under her protection.

These notions about female power however were never static; they signalled the foregoing ideologies of the time. The deposition of sultana Kamalat Syah at the end of the 17<sup>th</sup> century due to a *fatwa* from the Chief Qadi of Mecca, for example, is very much reflective of the waves of Islamic reformism and renewal and the religious turmoil sweeping across Aceh.

One other issue complicated by gender is that of inheritance, which highlights the tension between Islam and *adat*. Beaulieu in 1621 noted that, "The king is heir to all his subjects if they have no male children." Thus, among the aristocracy, having a son appears to have been critical to ensure that wealth does not revert to the sultan upon the family patriarch's death, as a "father cannot bequeath any inheritance to his daughter" (Reid (Ed.), 1995, p. 70). While such an observation may have been applicable only during particular reigns of despotic rulers such as al-Mukammil and Iskandar Muda, it is still markedly different from the *adat* custom characteristic of Aceh, where parents pass on house and rice lands to their daughters. In the late 19<sup>th</sup> century for instance, Hurgronje (1906) observed that the pattern of inheritance regarding immovable property was through daughters.

On the matter of polygamy as sanctioned by Islam, it is commonly the upper classes, notably the aristocracy, royalty and state officials, who practiced numerous marriages, while the common man married a second wife only when he was divorced or widowed (see Hoesin, 1970, p. 56-57). When polygamy did occur, the man must give some of his property as inheritance to the new (and usually younger) wife in order to convince her parents to agree to the second (or third) union (see Lombard, 1991, p. 70).

The debate on *adat* and Islam has focused on the harmony and tension between the two, the alleged misogyny of Islam, and the bilaterality purportedly inherent in *adat*<sup>11</sup>. While 17<sup>th</sup> century Aceh did not yet have a tradition of codified laws as sophisticated as that which existed in 15<sup>th</sup>-century Melaka<sup>12</sup> (Hadi, 2004, p. 217), *adat* has been observed to govern the system of landholding and inheritance. However, unlike the development of *adat* in other areas of maritime Southeast Asia, *adat* Aceh has allegedly been imposed by the rulers rather than originating from the people themselves (Riddell, 2006). Both the village head (*keucik*) and the hereditary district chief (*uleebalang*) adjudicated using *adat*, while the *ulama* administered Islamic law when appropriate (Reid, 2006a, p. 9). Consequently, the tension between the two systems is not just theoretical or ideological in nature, but rather, strikes deeply at the core of their rationale. Such a consideration has implications on what 'indigenous' practices and laws mean vis-à-vis what are alien to the society, and more importantly, on how 'Acehneseness' may be defined (Reid, 2006a, p. 9).

As for their impact on women, Wazir (1992) believes that the major difference between *adat* and Islam is that generally the former provides the basis for women's power and autonomy, while the latter supports male power. The "overall pervasive norm of 'bilaterality'" (Wazir, 1992, p. 5) endowed in *adat* is most obvious in matters relating to land, economics, kinship and marriage, which reduces hierarchical differences based on gender. Thus, young unmarried women may be marginalised just as much as young unmarried men

because of age, marital status and class, rather than simply on the basis of biology or sex (Wazir, 1992, p. 10).

#### FEMALE ROLES IN PRE-NINETEENTH CENTURY ACEH

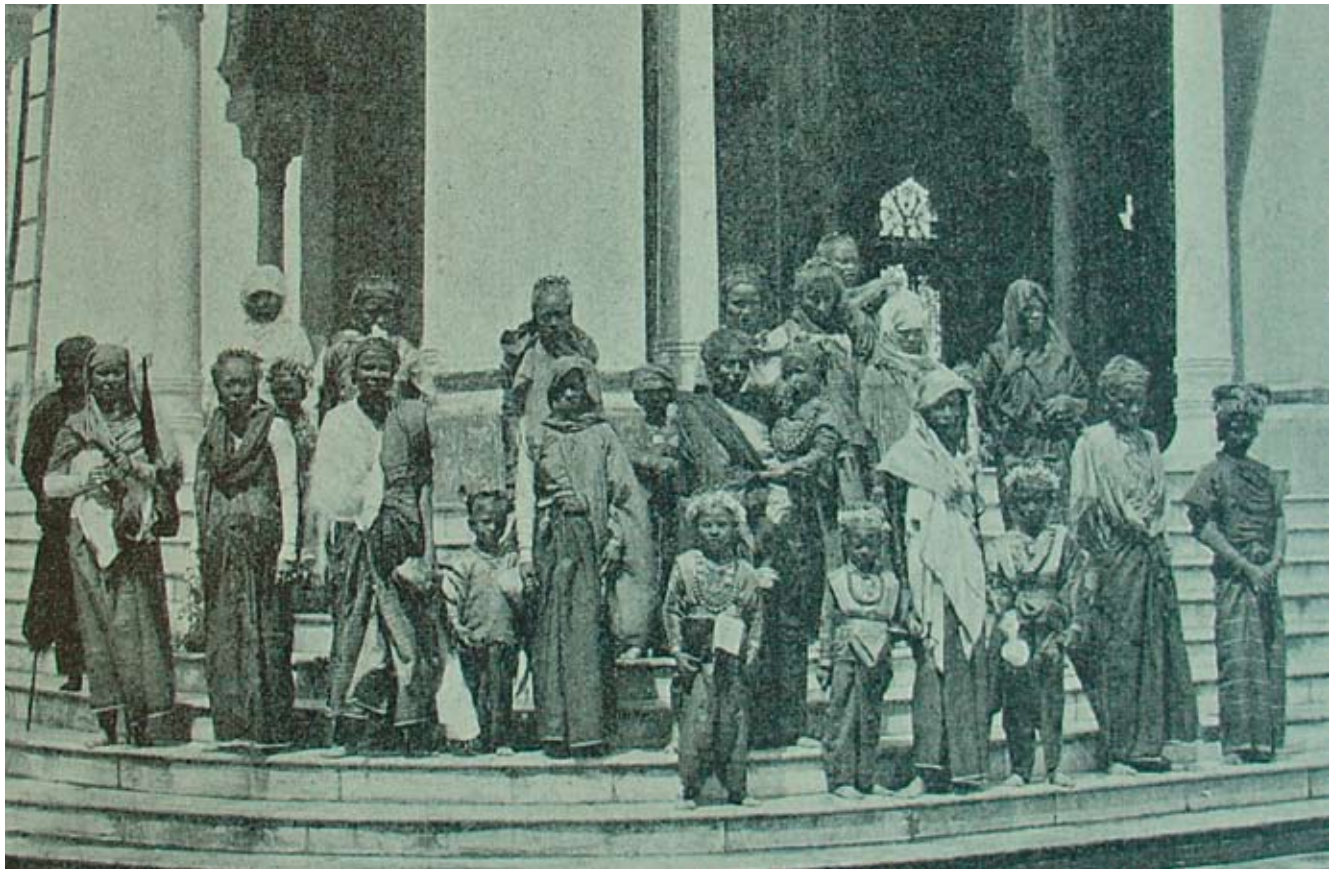
The diversity of female roles in pre-19<sup>th</sup> century Aceh reflects the relatively active participation of women in society. Andaya (2006, p. 48) emphasised the role of wives and even concubines, not only in perpetuating royal bloodlines, but also in legitimating rule and brokering peace through intermarriages<sup>13</sup>. Unlike Melaka, however, where the wives of sultans were clearly supplied by the *bendaraha* line (Wazir, 1992, pp. 38-43), there is no clear indication about the origins of royal wives and even concubines in Aceh. Nonetheless, women's involvement in palace intrigues, rebellions and conspiracies have been numerous. The queens themselves are far from being mere figureheads. Indeed, the longevity of the reigns of the queens (Safiyat al-Din ruled for 35 years, and both Zakiyyat al-Din and Kamalat Syah for 11 years each), with the exception of Nakiat ad-Din (1676-8), is comparable to the long reigns of earlier Acehese sultans (see *Adat Aceh*, 1958).

Like other kings in Southeast Asia, notably Sultan Agung of Mataram and the king of Angkor, the sultans of Aceh have followed the practice of surrounding themselves with many women (Reid, 1988, p. 637). These women have played the roles of royal entertainers who were "not usually seen of any but such as the king will greatly honour" (Foster, 1940, p. 93, 131), "ambassadors of goodwill"<sup>14</sup>, and guards. Women guards and attendants certainly enjoyed a reputation as being more loyal and trustworthy than men, and less likely to conspire against the king. Some sultans also observed the practice of giving away these women as 'partners' to their favourite allies<sup>15</sup>.

Other sources of income for women came from being money-changers and funeral 'criers'. From Francois Martin, we learn that some women were hired to weep and grieve at funerals (see Reid (Ed.), 1995, p. 61). In addition, similar to accounts documented in places such as early Pasai, Cambodia, Siam, Cochin China, the Moluccas, and Melaka, women in the urban areas of pre-19<sup>th</sup> century Aceh ruled the markets (Reid, 1988, p. 634). Although there is a dearth of materials that address directly the role of women in the context of early modern markets, observations made by William Dampier in 1688-9 give anecdotal evidence of their involvement in the economic life of the sultanate<sup>16</sup>. Along the streets of Aceh, women 'money changers' sat and hawked cash. However, as most of them were slaves, these women were not entitled to keep any of the money traded.

In 17<sup>th</sup> century Aceh, slaves comprised those who were either too poor, or those who were brought back to Aceh as war booties. Being a slave, however, did not mean total bondage to the owner (Reid (Ed.), 1995, p. 114). A slave can theoretically pay off his bondage, otherwise whatever he owned reverted to his master upon death. However, it is unclear whether a woman bonded for labour can seek to redeem her freedom the same way as a man. The *Undang-Undang Melaka* (Liaw, 1976), on the other hand, is clear: the debtor can only be a man, and his onerous debt responsibilities did not extend to his wife and children if he dies. *Adat* Aceh demands that children borne of female slaves had the same rights as those of free women (Hoesin, 1970, pp. 51-52). In contrast to Islamic law, which





*Women and young girls in late 19<sup>th</sup> century Aceh.  
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considers the children of female slaves as slaves themselves, *adat* Aceh treats them as free. However, their names bear reminders of their shackled origins, and are dropped only after a generation or two later (Hurgronje, 1906, p. 22).

#### **THE 'HIGH-STATUS' OF WOMEN**

While it is certainly difficult to view women as one cohesive group in pre-19<sup>th</sup> century Aceh, it is very clear that those born into a higher class family enjoyed greater social status than lower-ranked men, both in terms of material wealth and social prestige (Errington, 1990, p. 7). However, high-born women had more social constraints placed upon them than low-born men or women. The waves of Islamic adoption, interpretation and implementation, as well as the historical processes that occurred during specific periods, resulted in a continuous process of clarifying social expectations, behaviours, and even aspirations among different groups of women bound together within particular social classes. Thus, in this sense, social 'status' as indirectly rationalised and supported by the different interpretations of Islam throughout Aceh's history appears to have been a double-edged blade for women.

Reid (1993b, pp. 71-72, 74) estimates the city population in 17<sup>th</sup> century Aceh to be at least 100,000, with the urban area measuring approximately 12km<sup>2</sup>. If we consider this number conservatively, given that the sultan's palace itself housed at least 3,000 women (certainly during Sultan Iskandar Muda's reign), we could suppose

that the direct impact of Islam would be highest on those who lived in the palace or the walled area, next among those residing within the general urban areas, and weakest in the rural or marginalised areas.

What is clear regarding gender relations in pre-19<sup>th</sup> century Aceh is that the advancement of urbanisation and modernisation brought with them concomitant social changes. That women actively participated in these changes is unquestionable. Bound within the expectations, constraints and opportunities accruing from their particular social classes, women are shown to have contributed to and gained from the perpetuation of prevailing social conditions.

#### **CONCLUSION**

Pre-19<sup>th</sup> century women in the Islamic sultanate of Aceh were certainly products of their specific time periods and circumstances. Although they did not necessarily experience either complete equality or inequality with men, they did enjoy relative economic leverage and self-autonomy that enabled them to live fairly independent lives. Of course, this statement has to be tempered by the fact that as the sultanate was progressing to become a highly stratified urban area, women from different classes enjoyed varying degrees of 'high status'. In addition, it is true that throughout cycles of social adoption and interpretations of Islam, social expectations also encounter change, to reflect prevailing notions. These changes, in large part, have contributed to the ambiguity inherent in Acehese gender relations, which manifests until today.

Islam is shown to have flourished in Aceh's urban areas. Thus, it is not surprising that the most 'devout' are to be found in urban areas, where historical processes involving key figures emerged first, with consequences that subsequently reverberated to the rest of society. In contemporary Aceh, the use of the *jilbab* is ubiquitous in the cities, notably Banda Aceh, rather than in the more remote interior regions. In relation to the delineation between masculine and feminine roles, this would not necessarily have been a problem in areas where the need for labour was critical, regardless of gender.<sup>17</sup> In urban areas where social status and class freed some segments of the population from manual labour, gender differentiation became more stringent. Thus, it is not surprising to learn that community members and religious leaders around urban areas are the ones who generally blamed women for the 2004 tsunami.<sup>18</sup> After all, urban areas are fertile ground for both devotion and decadence,

and the processes that start in the center typically lose intensity as they spread outward. Women themselves have been shown to actively support these discourses and ensure that social norms are followed. From the 16<sup>th</sup> to 17<sup>th</sup> centuries when Aceh emerged as an Islamic state, women were actively involved in the processes of social and political change. Far from being mere pawns in the life of the sultanate, they had contributed to the perpetuation and development of social expectations between men and themselves. It remains to be seen where these conflicting and ambiguous discourse on gender lead, and how Aceh today is able to balance Islam and societal expectations.

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## ENDNOTES

1. See Andaya (2006 and 2000); Ong & Peletz (1996); Peletz (1996); Errington (1990); Reid (1986).
2. See, for instance, Cuevas (2006: 17), whose work for an international non-government agency encompassed gender issues in the aftermath of the 2004 tsunami.
3. See, for example, Iskandar's Hikayat Aceh (2001).
4. For a comprehensive and intriguing discussion of Aceh's 'golden' age under the reign of Sultan Iskandar Muda, refer to Hadi (2004), Lombard (1991), and Djajadiningrat (1979).
5. See Azra (2004) and Ito (1978) in their treatment of ar-Raniri in his capacity as inspired Muslim scholar and court adviser.
6. Also see Azra (2004) and Hurgronje (1906).
7. See also Reid (2007, p. 8) and Azra (2004). Reid (Ed.), 1995, pp. 55-63.
8. See, for instance, Noerdin (2002).
9. Mernissi (1993) counts at least 18 who had exercised considerable political authority over their kingdoms.
10. See, for example, The Ship of Sulaiman (1972, p. 178).
11. See, for instance, Hurgronje (1906, pp. 10-16); Wazir (1992); Peletz (1996); Rahman (2006).
12. For Melaka laws, see Liaw (1976).
13. See Andaya (2006, pp. 63-64); Hadi (2004, p. 13); Siapno (2002, pp. 55-59); Iskandar (2001); Davys (1970, p. 148).
14. See, for instance, Dampier (in Thomas Bowrey, 1905, pp. 308-309, Footnote 4): "she [referring to Taju al-alum?] sent also two Dancing Girls to shew him [a Captain Thwait] some pastime there". Francois Martin (in Reid (Ed.), 1995, pp. 56-57) wrote: "They [referring to the French delegation] were very well received by the King [of Pedir, son of the King of Aceh]....He asked if they wanted women".
15. More accounts of women guards may be found in Reid (Ed.), (1995), pp. 51-53, 64-80.
16. See Lombard, 1991, p. 67; Reid (Ed.), 1995, p. 114.
17. Hall (1992, pp. 183-272) points to the existence of abundant land and demand for additional labour, regardless of gender, as possible reasons. Religious and socio-cultural customs, traditions and practices must have mirrored prevailing social realities, and vice versa. Nonetheless, while women may have actively participated in agriculture, home, trade, diplomacy, warfare, entertainment, literature, and even statecraft (surely including those in early Lamri/Aceh), epigraphic records of female roles in early times are limited (Hall, 1992, p. 190).
18. Cuevas (2006) presents data from focus group discussions in Banda Aceh.

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