Gendered Temporalities in the Early Modern World

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6 Genealogical memory

Constructing female rule in seventeenth-century Aceh

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Abstract

Four queens ruled Aceh, Sumatra (present-day Indonesia) from 1641 to 1699; the first, Ṣafiyyat al-Dīn Taj al-Alam (1641–75), for 35 years. This essay analyzes similarities between her symbols of royal power and her father Iskandar Muda’s, especially their claim to Alexander the Great as a legendary ancestor. Contesting the genealogy her husband crafted, Taj al-Alam reinscribed a continuous genealogy from her father. Continuity in the rhetoric of royal power shows a daughter’s appropriation of paternal as well as royal power. By the end of the seventeenth century, the myth of queenship was so prevalent that some English visitors believed Aceh had always been governed by queens, testifying to the power of Taj al-Alam’s reworkings of genealogical memory.

Keywords: Aceh; Taj al-Alam; queenship; memory; genealogy

Female rule was often deplored—for instance, Mary Queen of Scots was denounced by John Knox as ‘abominable’—and associated with disorder and a topsy-turvy world. Despite this cultural prejudice, there were a surprising number of early modern queens exercising supreme political authority. William Monter found 30 such female rulers, including the Scottish Mary, across Europe between 1300 and 1800. Studies of European queens far outnumber those of female rulers from outside Europe, but Monter’s introduction also notes scattered examples of regnant queens around the world while Merry

1 In his First Blast of the Trumpet against the Monstrous Regiment of Women (1558), John Knox aims to show ‘how abominable before God is the Empire or Rule of a wicked woman’ (4.365); for the response to female rulers see Jansen, Monstrous Regiment of Women.

2 Monter, Rise of Female Kings in Europe, 1300–1800.
Wiesner-Hanks’s global survey suggests that women wielding political and religious power were found both inside and outside Europe. In early modern archipelagic Southeast Asia, regnant queens were unusually abundant. Anthony Reid’s list highlights this remarkable elevation of women: 6 of 32 rulers of Bone since the fourteenth century; 2 queens between 1404 and 1434 in Pasai; one in Burma (1453–72); several at Sukadana in Borneo (1608–22), Jambi in East Sumatra (1630–55), and Solor in East Flores (1650–70); a century of female rule in Patani (1584–1688) and more than half a century in Aceh (1641–99). He suggests, ‘Austronesian societies, which include Polynesia and Madagascar as well as Indonesia and the Philippines, have been more inclined [...] to place high-born women on the throne.’ Given increasing scholarly attention to queenship in premodern Europe and the issues raised about sovereignty, power, and representation, it is worth taking a more global view of gender and power by bringing non-Western examples into discussion. For Southeast Asian studies, Europeanists’ attention to gender would be equally salutary: Sher Banu A.L. Khan has called for Southeast Asianists to take up O.W. Wolters’s conjecture that his analysis of spiritual or charismatic aura in ‘men of prowess’ could also be applied to women when the discipline ‘becomes a field for extensive gender studies’. Southeast Asian Islamic states offer an interesting perspective on gendered negotiation of power: while indigenous traditions accord women more authority, Islamic teachings prohibit female rule. In this regard, the state of Aceh in Sumatra, the focus of Khan’s own studies as well as those by Barbara and Leonard Andaya, is particularly pertinent, with four regnant queens in the seventeenth century. Its port-capital was an important early modern trading center for spices, visited by foreign traders from India, the Middle East, China, and Europe. The succession of four queens on the throne from

3 Wiesner-Hanks, ‘Gender and Cultural Power in Global Perspective’. The plethora of studies on European queens include those of individual rulers as well as more wide-ranging surveys, such as Hopkins, Women Who Would Be Kings; and Woodacre, Queens Regnant of Navarre; and essay collections such as Orr, ed., Queenship in Europe 1660–1815; Levin and Bucholz, eds., Queens and Power in Medieval and Early Modern England; and Woodacre, ed., Queenship in the Mediterranean.
4 Reid, ‘Female Roles’, pp. 640–41.
5 Ibid., p. 639.
6 There are too many studies to cite; for surveys of the field and articles on theoretical issues, see Wolf, ‘Reigning Queens’; Nelson, ‘Medieval Queenship’; and Adams, ‘Renaissance Queenship’.
8 B. Andaya, ed., Other Pasts; eadem, Flaming Womb; L. Andaya, ‘A very good-natured but awe-inspiring government’.
1641 to 1699 testifies to the sustained power of Acehnese queenship in this period, its longevity due in no small part to the length of the reign of the first, Ṣafiyyat al-Dīn Taj al-Alam (1641–75), who ruled for 35 years.

Aceh’s period of female rule has been considered one signifying the weakness of the crown since 1783 when William Marsden declared that the era of female rule allowed nobles (orang kaya) unrestrained power and ‘thereby virtually changed the constitution into an aristocracy’.9 Female rule is understood as a decline from Aceh’s golden age of Taj al-Alam’s father Iskandar Muda, who expanded Aceh’s territories through conquest and whose reign is considered ‘a true peak of royal power and centralization’ with ‘a particularly masterful ruler’.10 Even when queens are accorded power, they marked the loss of royal authority with the increasing influence of a (male-dominated) aristocracy. Noting the correlation of queenship and port-kingsdoms, Reid argues that the aristocracy used it as a mechanism for limiting royal despotism to foster foreign trade.11 Following Reid, Amirul Hadi argues that the death of Iskandar Muda signified ‘the beginning of a corresponding process of decentralization’ and a ‘crisis of succession’.12 Even Ito Takeshi suggests there was a ‘shrinkage of political power under the four successive female rulers’, who were ‘figureheads’, though he concedes they ‘exerted, to a certain extent, an influence on Aceh’s political life’.13

Other scholars, however, see female rule as indigenous practice.14 In the renewed debate, some scholars praise queenship’s more democratic features. Leonard Andaya suggests that Taj al-Alam’s ‘strict adherence to [...] Islamic prescription’ on good female behavior ‘explains her style of government and the misconceived notion of the weakness of her rule’; in enforcing Islamic law, she ‘took bold measures to assure that she would maintain control’.15 Sher Banu Khan’s revisionist work argues that ‘a more accommodative and consensual approach based on the law and the ability to keep foreign diplomats and merchants happy’ ensured Aceh’s prosperity and independence.16 Distinguishing queenship from charismatic and absolutist male rule encapsulated by Wolters’ term ‘men of prowess’, Khan

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10 Reid, ‘Trade and the Problem of Royal Power’, p. 103.
11 Reid, ‘Female Roles’, p. 639.
13 Ito, ‘World of the Adat Aceh’, p. 120.
14 Veth, ‘Vrouwenregeeringen’.
16 Khan, ‘Sultanahs of Aceh’, p. 8; see also Khan, *Rule Behind the Silk Curtain*. 
argues, ‘legitimacy relied less on notions of sacral and charismatic power based on prowess than on Muslim notions of piety and the just ruler whose leadership is based on consensus [muafakat] and accommodation’, with ‘soft power’ an effective force. 17

Whether deplored or celebrated, female rule tends to be treated as falling outside normal political and social systems. Queenship is often understood as departures from tradition. The scholarly recuperation of Acehnese queenship consciously separates it from the long shadow of Iskandar Muda’s reign. The breaking of old frames allows for a more accurate perspective on queenship’s relative strengths and weaknesses. In practice, of course, female rule, like male rule, comes embedded in a context. The female ruler constructs her royal image out of the same cultural elements as her male counterpart, even if the elements are deployed differently. While Taj al-Alam’s reign departed in several ways from her male predecessors’, there was also continuity. Claiming paternal heritage, she redeployed her father’s imperial symbols, especially the legendary lineal descent from Iskandar Zulkarnain, the Islamic name for Alexander the Great. Given how fraught female rule was in an Islamic context, the conservative use of genealogy—family lineage and tradition—to construct her monarchical image makes possible the radical innovation of a woman on the throne. Continuity in the rhetoric of royal power from Iskandar Muda’s time to that of his daughter Taj al-Alam shows a daughter’s appropriation of royal and paternal power.

**Fashioning royal image**

A late sixteenth-century English visitor, John Davies, testified to genealogy’s importance to the Acehnese: ‘These people boast themselves to come of Ismael and Hagar, and can reckon the Genealogie of the Bible perfectly.’ 18 While biblical genealogy was important for Muslim Acehnese as descendants of Adam, just as important was the myth of lineal descent from Alexander the Great (Iskandar Zulkarnain) a legendary ancestor claimed by the Acehnese and other Southeast Asian kings. Taj al-Alam’s father’s name, Iskandar Muda, literally means Alexander the Younger, and, in her self-fashioning, Taj al-Alam linked herself to forefathers, not only to her father Iskandar Muda but also to Alexander. Deploying genealogical memory, she constructed a powerful image of female rule. Taj al-Alam’s appropriation of paternal power

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18 Markham, ed., *Voyages and Works of John Davis*, p. 151.
is seen in the elaborate diplomatic letters sent to foreign kings. Trading relations left extant a few royal letters from Aceh in the period to European monarchs, letters that reveal something of Acehnese royal self-fashioning in their ‘compliments’ (puji-pujian) section, which serves as an extended and elaborate address and praise of the letter’s sender. More so than her father’s, Taj al-Alam’s letter defines royal identity genealogically.

Sultan Iskandar Muda’s illuminated letter to King James I of England in 1615 is a spectacular example of a Malay golden letter. Its beauty belies the negative contents, denying the English trading rights requested for Tiku and Priaman in western Sumatra. Annabel Teh Gallop shows that the English merchant John Oxwick, who offended Iskandar Muda and alienated his fellow merchants, expended more effort in securing a formal reply in the beautiful presentational letter than the mundane trading permit the English needed. The substance of the denial is quite short but the ‘compliments’ delineating the royal image is rather extended. It emphasizes the sultan’s wealth and power, dilating on his martial prowess, his vassal states, and all the territories he conquered. This extended description is in striking contrast with the abbreviated ‘compliments’ section of only two sentences for James I. Although lacking any direct reference to Alexander, the praise of Iskandar Muda’s sovereignty over the eastern (pihak mashrak) and western (pihak maghrib) countries, with cardinal directions left untranslated in Arabic, suggests his universalist ambitions. The Alexandrian connection becomes explicit in the letters of his successors, his son-in-law Iskandar Thani and Taj al-Alam.

Sher Banu Khan sees a signal difference between Iskandar Thani’s and Taj al-Alam’s mode of rule. Arguing that Acehnese queens are pragmatic women practicing ‘piety politics’ based on ‘moral force, a consensual style of decision-making based on musyawarah [consultation], and sanctioned by adat [custom] and Islam’, she points to letter’s extended praise of Taj al-Alam’s piety. Comparing the description of royal attributes in the compliments section of Taj al-Alam’s letter to that of her husband Iskandar Thani’s 1636 letter to the Prince of Orange, Fredrik Henrik of the United Provinces, Khan argues that she ‘represented herself as a moral and righteous ruler.’ Noting the absence of reference to religious roles in Iskandar Thani’s

22 Ibid., p. 213.
letter, Khan finds Iskandar Thani ‘arrogant’ in contrast to what she calls Taj al-Alam’s ‘modesty and humility’. 23 Annabel Teh Gallop’s reading of the letters both disputes and confirms this assessment:

There is a remarkable degree of correspondence with the puji-pujian in Iskandar Thani’s letter written over 20 years previously. Of the 26 distinct sets of attributes in Iskandar Thani’s letter, all but five are repeated in Taj al-‘Alam’s, which also includes several new formulations, giving a total of 32 sets of attributes. In some cases the correspondence is word-for-word, while in other cases there are potentially significant differences in phrasing. 24

However, while Iskandar Thani’s justice is compared to that of the Persian king Nusyirwan Adil and his liberality to that of Hatim Tai, a figure whose generosity is proverbial, Taj al-Alam’s justice, as Gallop notes, is compared to that of Sultan Ibn Abd al-Aziz, ‘a reference to Umar ibn Abd al-Aziz, the fifth Umayyad caliph (r. 717–720), traditionally viewed as “an exemplar of the Muslim virtues of piety, equity and humility.”’ 25 The ‘compliments’ underlines Taj al-Alam’s piety, but many of the same references to the ruler’s piety were also used to describe her husband.

Taj al-Alam and Iskandar Thani’s letters share more similarities with each other than with her father Iskandar Muda’s. They show particular concern with genealogy. While the letter praises Iskandar Muda’s descent from kings with monuments of gold alloy (turun-temurun daripada raja bernisyan suasa), 26 it emphasizes his military strength. Iskandar Thani’s letter also extols his wealth and power, with loving detail about his elephants, horses, and jewels. But these references, Gallop notes, are repeated in Taj al-Alam’s letter, including those to her ‘elephants caparisoned with gold and lapis lazuli [...] and hundreds of war elephants’ (gajah berpakaian mas belazuardi [...] dan beratus gajah peperangan). Like her father and husband, she is described in imperial terms as a ‘queen who possesses kingdoms in the west and the east’ (raja yang mengempukan kerajaan barat dan timur). Since the Malay word for ruler, raja, is ungendered, the phrasing is exactly the same. What distinguishes Taj al-Alam and her husband’s letters from Iskandar Muda’s is the reference to Alexandrian descent, an addition perhaps pioneered by her

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23 Ibid., p. 214.
25 Ibid.
husband. With a name that means the Second Alexander, Iskandar Thani is praised as a ‘king from the lines of kings of Alexander the Great’ (*ialah raja yang raja al-diraja anak cucu raja Iskandar Zulkarnain*).\(^{27}\) Taj al-Alam’s letter uses almost the exact same phrase to highlight genealogical transfer: she is described as ‘king of kings of the descendants of Sultan Alexander the Two-horned’ (*raja al-diraja anak cucu a(l)-Sultan Iskandar Zulkarnain*) and is ‘God’s caliph and the raja who speaks the strange wisdom of God, the raja who pours out the law of God’ (*ialah khalifat Allah lagi raja yang menyatakan hikmat Allah yang ghaib, ialah raja yang melimpahkan syara’ Allah*).\(^{28}\)

In their address to the recipients, both Iskandar Thani and Taj al-Alam emphasize the longevity of diplomatic and trade relations by reference to Iskandar Muda’s time, even though trade relations between Aceh and Europe began earlier. Iskandar Thani’s letter declares: ‘from the time of his late majesty Makota Alam until the time we were appointed as God’s viceroy [*khalifat Allah*], never have the chains of love [*tali rantai muhabbat dan udat*] linking the Captain and our royal presence been broken, and it is our hope that long may this continue’.\(^{29}\) Similarly, Taj al-Alam’s letter frames the relationship between Acehnese and English as one continued from her father’s era: she instructs that the letter be conveyed to Charles II ‘to fulfill all the agreements [*perjanjian*] between the sons of Aceh the Abode of Peace with English sons as it was in the bygone era [*zaman yang dahulu kala pada*] during the time of the late Makota Alam who is honored [*dimuliakan*] by God of all the worlds’.\(^{30}\) The letter contends that her trade agreements with the English reaffirm her father’s as she presents her reign as a continuation of his illustrious one, establishing continuity between past and present. Despite similarities with her husband, her attitude towards the Dutch was rather more hostile. The letter explains that the English have not been able to trade in some of her dominions because ‘they have been apprehended by the accursed Dutch’ (*ditahaninya oleh Wolanda yang celaka itu*) and warns of Dutch duplicity: ‘because the scoundrels are up to treachery and theft, and the English are suffering’ (*karena si celaka itu sangat makar dan pencurian sehingga anak Inggeris pun kesukaran karenanya*).\(^{31}\) While she might have been trying to fan the flames of Anglo-Dutch rivalry—Ito Takeshi notes that in this period ‘the Dutch claimed that as a result of their conquest [of Melaka

\(^{27}\) Leiden University Library, Cod. Or. 4818a.1.3; Gallop, ‘Gold, Silver, and Lapis Lazuli’, app. A, p. 246.
\(^{29}\) Ibid., app. A, p. 247.
\(^{30}\) Ibid., app. A, p. 253.
\(^{31}\) Ibid.
in 1641] they inherited monopoly rights in the region from the Portuguese, a claim that impinged on Acehnese trade—it is also the case that as she tried to link her reign to her father’s, she simultaneously differentiated it from her husband’s. Repeating many of her predecessors’ tropes, Taj al-Alam emphasizes not just piety but also the fame of her ancestors.

Genealogical concerns too frame her understanding of the English. Taj al-Alam’s letter congratulates Charles II on his accession to the throne by reference to his ancestors. Dated October 1661, a little more than a year after Charles’ restoration following the interregnum, the letter does not clearly indicate how informed she was about the English Revolution. The contemporary English translation uses explicit language of return and restoration:

Wherein wee cannot sufficiently express most puissant Prince the Joy that wee received when wee were made acquainted with the happy tydings of your Majesty’s safe returne into your owne country, and that divine providence had restored you to your Crowne and kingdomes and seated you upon your Majesty’s ffather (of blessed memory) his throne.

This is very likely an elaboration added by the English translator. The original letter simply notes Charles’ accession:

when the news reached the mirror of our heart that Sultan Charles the Second had borne upon his head the favour of the Lord of all worlds and had taken the place of his father on the throne of the kingdom and had placed on his head the crown descended from the kings of yore, we were overjoyed.

Whether or not Taj al-Alam was fully knowledgeable about English politics, both versions emphasize the inheritance of a father’s throne. This is especially true of the original Malay in its description of Charles’ crown. The Malay term, turun temurun, meaning descending linearly, is linked to the Arabic

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borrowing *silsilah*, meaning ‘chain’. The Arabic term originally referred to scholarly genealogy, whereby intellectual authority (*ijazah*) vested in the newly certified teacher is confirmed through a verified chain of masters who constitute the intellectual ancestors. This practice of establishing a chain of authority is also used to confirm the authenticity of teachings in *hadith*, the sayings of prophet Muhammad, in which case the term *sanad* (plural *isnad*) refers to the chain of authorities that supports a tradition. In Southeast Asia, *silsilah* is used, as in the case here where it is modified by the word *raja* meaning ‘king’, in the more literal sense of lineage or genealogy, to refer to the royal line. Found also in titles of court chronicles, the word is extended to mean history, alluding to the genre’s origin in king lists. Just as intellectual genealogy confers authority, so does the *silsilah* of an illustrious ancestry.

Genealogical language legitimates rule by claims to antiquity. Taj al-Alam adopted a title celebrating inherited crowns. While her husband imitated her father’s Alexandrian title, she imitated the one he used most extensively in his lifetime. Makota Alam, meaning the Crown of the World, inspired her title, a variant of his: as *makota* is the Sanskrit word for crown, so *tāj* is the Persian word for the same. Moreover, Amirul Hadi notes that Abdurrauf Singkili, an Islamic scholar patronized by Taj al-Alam, gives to her father Iskandar Muda the Arabic title *sayyidunā wa mawlānā* (our lord and master) and to her the feminine version of that title, *sayyidatunā wa mawlatunā*. Like her father she was God’s caliph (*khalifat Allah*). Taj al-Alam forges links to her father’s reign to emphasize the continuity of succession. She fashions her rule not as an anomaly but as a continuation of a tradition. Adopting the same titles as her male predecessors, especially her father, she also distinguished her reign from her most immediate male predecessor, her husband.

**Commemoration and contestation**

The links Taj al-Alam forged with her father, emphasizing familial bonds, were a strategy in her contest with another dead man, her husband Iskandar Thani. Her accession meant a political reconfiguration at court. One royal edict, or court document with the ruler’s seal, called *sarakata*, shows Taj al-Alam reaffirming her father’s policies. Scholars have noted how Taj al-Alam uses land grants to reward supporters. This particular *sarakata* 35

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repossesses lands granted to one party by her husband to return them to another who had previously been granted those lands by her father. The _sarakata_ records that in 1613 in the time of Sultan Iskandar Muda these lands were given to Tok Bahra, which Taj al-Alam returned with the conferral of a new title of Seri Paduka Tuan Seberang and an appointment as Panglima Bandar, administrator in charge of foreign traders. This new position was created as a counterweight to the role of Laksamana, or Admiral, whose incumbent was anti-Dutch.\(^{37}\) Strikingly, the _sarakata_ begins with a long list of titles and attributes of Taj al-Alam’s father Iskandar Muda, functioning as a kind of encomium. Most of the document recalls Iskandar Muda’s grant of these lands in 1613, with Taj al-Alam herself introduced only toward the end. Promulgated in the time of Sultan Jamal al-Alam Badr al-Munir (r. 1703–26), the _sarakata_ links her to her father, and suggests that their joint names were still honored in the early eighteenth century. The document suggests that the lands’ reversion to Tok Bahra would fulfill her father’s wishes. Repeated thrice is the phrase ‘sabda ḥaḍrat Sjāhi ‘Ālam’ (the spoken wish of Shah Alam) or simply ‘ḥaḍrat Sjāhi ‘Ālam’ (the wish of Shah Alam), referencing Iskandar Muda by another of his titles, here meaning ruler of the world.\(^{38}\) In reversing her husband’s commands, Taj al-Alam is justified by reference to paternal authority.

Taj al-Alam’s shift away from her husband’s political position was noticed by contemporary Dutch observers. When the Dutch East India Company (_Vereenigde Oost-Indische Compagnie_) delegation arrived in Aceh in 1642, led by commissioner Pieter Sourij, his account notes that he and his delegation were richly entertained with a feast. During the meal, they were treated to a song, whose subject was no other than Taj al-Alam’s father:

After the first two courses were ended, the previously described players and singers began to sing a song of praise to glorify the queen’s late father. On hearing this, all the great cousins and the other Acehnese hearing this were so moved that they burst out in tears, as if by doing so his virtue would indeed be elevated to the heavens. From this it is evident that although cruel while alive, he has truly left behind among the Achinese people an undying reputation and heritage. On the contrary, of the younger man who was from Pahang nothing is known (as if he never was).\(^{39}\)

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\(^{37}\) Ibid., p. 183.


\(^{39}\) Ito, ed., _Aceh Sultanate_, I, p. 174 (VOC 1143, fol. 567r). The original reads: ‘Na de twee eerste maaltijden geeijdicht waaren, begonnen voorschreven speelders en zangers singen, een lofsangh
The ‘younger man from Pahang’, a kingdom in the Malay peninsula, is Iskandar Thani, Taj al-Alam’s husband, seemingly forgotten only a year after his death. Her father was the focus of courtly memory. The depths of emotion evoked by the song of praise—even if the affect was performed—suggests a political investment not only by Taj al-Alam but also by her court in memorializing and commemorating her father. The passage suggests this commemoration comes with a concomitant forgetting and erasure of her husband. Indicating a distinct shift in the political winds, this may be a deliberate political strategy to legitimize her rule. By emphasizing her blood links to the revered Iskandar Muda, Taj al-Alam crafted a ruling style distinct from her foreign husband’s.

This commemoration of Iskandar Muda would pose problems for Pieter Sourij’s delegation, tasked with delivering jewels ordered by the late Iskandar Thani. The jewels were initially rejected as having been ordered by a previous king, who had since passed away, then accepted by the queen at a value assessed by her own orang kaya, her aristocrats. The Dutch, however, found their valuation too low and demanded their original price since the jewels were custom made and therefore not suitable for resale elsewhere. According to Sourij, the Acehnese dismissed the late king’s authority:

[…] they said since it was the dead king who did this and not this ruling Majesty, […] since he was dead, so too all other things he did were similarly no more, which clearly showed (as repeatedly mentioned before) he was not loved by the Acehnese, and also few remember his name in honor, that additionally is a great cause why they had no attachment to this work.40

The new reign signaled a break from old policies. Dutch observers noted not just a lack of enthusiasm for Iskandar Thani but even an erasure of his memory. The orang kaya negotiating with them, Maradia Sestia,
advised the Dutch to maintain their long friendship, again linking Taj al-Alam to her father:

And just as the director-generals during Makota Alam’s reign had lived in friendship with Aceh, now the same (friendship), with regard to a female reign, must not decrease, but increase.41

The rhetoric of Taj al-Alam’s court, certainly in this first transitional year of her reign, breaks away from her husband’s rule to elevate her father’s memory and emphasize continuity with his reign. It is Iskandar Muda’s name that is often repeated in the archives long after his death. The claim that Iskandar Thani was little loved and forgotten may be part of the Acehnese’s hard bargaining over the sale of the jewels. However, it may also suggest the reason for Iskandar Thani’s short reign. Sher Banu Khan argues that he was ‘most likely poisoned’, due to his extravagance, as evidenced by the ‘jewel affair’.42 Hints from the archive suggest that Taj al-Alam was shaping memories of the past to assert her own rule. Her adoption of an Alexandrian ancestry, as in the letter to Charles II, may also be linked to hints of an erasure of her husband’s rule. A biography of her father written in the latter half of his reign deploys the Alexandrian genealogy, as does a work of world history written in Aceh begun in her husband’s reign but completed in hers. Subtle differences in the deployment of Alexander in these two near-contemporaneous Acehnese texts show a rhetorical struggle over the appropriation of Alexander in the political transition. Taj al-Alam may be reappropriating her husband’s appropriation of Alexander as used by her father.

Her father’s biography, Hikayat Aceh, composed between 1607 and 1636, identifies Alexander the Great, known by his Islamic name Iskandar Dhūlqarnayn (Zulkarnain in Malay), as Iskandar Muda’s ancestor. In giving him this genealogy, Hikayat Aceh follows the Sejarah Melayu, the chronicle of the Melakan sultanate, dominant in the fifteenth century before its fall to the Portuguese. In tracing their ancestry to Alexander the Melakan sultanate followed the legends of the even earlier sultanate of Palembang, located in the Sumatran highlands, to which it traces its origin—legends transmitted through the Malay Alexander Romance.43 With the several removals of the

41 Ito, ed., Aceh Sultanate, I, p. 183 (VOC 1143, ad. 23, fol. 574v). The original reads: ‘Ende alsoo d H’ Generaal bij Macotta Alams regering met Atchin in vriendschap had geleeft, moest nu d’elwe, ten aansien een vroue regeert, niet verminderd; maar vermeerdert.’
43 Ng, ‘Global Renaissance’, pp. 293–312.
sultanate originating in Palembang, the legend of Alexander the Great's sons establishing kingdoms in Southeast Asia also spread through the Archipelago, to the Peninsula, to Borneo, and even to eastern Indonesia in the Spice Islands. In *Hikayat Aceh* Iskandar Muda is paired with his Ottoman counterpart as modern versions of the great ancient kings Solomon and Alexander: the Ottoman Sultan declares,

> [...] in ancient times Allah the Exalted made two most great Muslim kings in this world, one was the prophet Solomon, and the other King Alexander, [...] In our age today Allah the Exalted also made two most great kings in the world. From the western side we are the most great king, and from the eastern side Seri Sultan Perkasa ‘Alam [Iskandar Muda] is the great king and the one who presses the cause of Allah's religion and the religion of the messenger of Allah.\(^4^4\)

Although the claim to Alexander is made only analogically, this text establishes his importance to Iskandar Muda's imperial image, whereby he is depicted as the Ottoman sultan's equal. The claim would become explicitly genealogical for both Iskandar Thani and Taj al-Alam.

The second text, Nuruddin al-Rānīrī's *Bustan as-Salatin* (The garden of kings), is an encyclopedic compendium of seven books: the first book begins with creation and the second covers world history, including stories of the prophets and the genealogy of the kings of Persia, Byzantium, Egypt, and Arabia to close with a chapter on Aceh's history. Despite *Hikayat Aceh* as precedent, this work makes no mention of any Alexandrian ancestry for Iskandar Muda. Instead, the Alexandrian descent is transposed onto Taj al-Alam's husband. *Bustan* tells the story of how Iskandar Muda selected Iskandar Thani as his successor, attributing to the latter elements of sacral kingship, including Alexandrian genealogy, found in *Hikayat Aceh*. Iskandar Muda's conquest of Pahang was said to be divinely inspired so that he could bequeath Aceh to Iskandar Thani, a Pahang prince taken captive at the age of seven. Defeat turned into imperial destiny. *Bustan* portrays Iskandar Muda using the art of physiognomy to find marks of rulership in Iskandar Thani's countenance:

\(^{44}\) *Hikayat Aceh*, ed. Iskandar, p. 96. The original reads: ‘[...] pada zaman dahulu kala juga dijadikan Allah Ta’ala dua orang raja Islam yang amat besar dalam dunia ini, seorang Nabi Allah Sulaiman, seorang Raja Iskandar juga, [...] Maka pada zaman kita sekarang ini pun ada juga dijadikan Allah Ta’ala dua orang raja yang amat besar dalam ‘alam dunia ini. Maka yang daripada pihak maghrib kitalah raja yang besar, and daripada pihak masyrik itu Seri Sultan Perkasa ‘Alam raja yang besar dan raja yang mengeraskan agama Allah dan agama Rasul Allah.’
For he is the king of the descent of kings, and his name will be most famous in all the world, and he is the descendant of King Iskandar Zulkarnain. Therefore I should take him as my son.\(^{45}\)

This act of prognostication marks Iskandar Thani as chosen to carry on the royal line, especially since the omen is interpreted by no other than the legendary Iskandar Muda. Taj al-Alam's strategy was to wrest back her husband's appropriation of her father's memory.

The author of *Bustan al-Salatin*, Nuruddin al-Rānīrī was an Islamic scholar and mystic from Gujarat, who came to Aceh in 1637, after the start of Iskandar Thani's reign, and was patronized by him; in fact al-Rānīrī had previous ties to Pahang royalty.\(^{46}\) Unsurprisingly, his work serves to enhance the reputation of his patron. In transferring Alexandrian genealogy to Iskandar Thani, al-Rānīrī expunges the Alexandrian claim of Taj al-Alam's line. Soon after Iskandar Thani's death, al-Rānīrī fell out of royal favor, and was replaced as chief religious counselor by a local man, Sayf al-Rijal.\(^{47}\) Teuku Iskandar suggests that ‘ar-Raniri was not in favour of a female ruler’, as evidenced by an episode he recounts of a letter from the Byzantine ruler to Harun al-Rasyid in which Nicephorus claimed he ‘deposed the woman ruler of Byzantine (Irene) as she had behaved like a pawn in a chess game, because “women are weak and have less intellect.”’\(^{48}\) However, al-Rānīrī’s *Bustan* includes a flattering description of Taj al-Alam as queen, which praises her good deeds, her fear of God and religiosity, her charity and her justice; moreover, the praise of her charitable deeds is put in terms similar to the praise of her father.\(^{49}\) As Amirul Hadi points out, al-Rānīrī’s *Bustan* portrays her care for her subjects as ‘akin to the love of a mother for her children’.\(^{50}\) Still, it is clear from its shaping of genealogical memory that the work’s primary patron was the late Iskandar Thani, and al-Rānīrī’s revision was not enough for him to retain his position.

Given that Taj al-Alam shaped her image after her father’s, it became politic to appeal to his memory. When officers lodged complaints about their

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\(^{46}\) Iskandar, ‘Aceh as Crucible’, pp. 57–58.


\(^{48}\) *Bustan*, MS Raffles, XLII, p. 172; quoted in Iskandar, ‘Aceh as Crucible’, p. 60.


\(^{50}\) Hadi, *Islam and State*, p. 91.
ill-treatment and wrongful termination by one of her nobles, the eunuch Seri Bidjaja, they couched their petition by reference to Iskandar Muda’s reign:

Wherefore regarding the said treatment, likewise they complained about him, (saying) during the time of Marhum Makota Alam, there was never such treatment or [wrongful] termination, about which they requested from her Highness, who ruled in her father’s place (and as if he lived again in her), that she would therein please provide [a remedy].

From the Dutch report, Taj al-Alam’s subjects followed her lead in using the language of genealogical memory. They appealed to her by reminding her that she ruled by inhabiting her father’s authority. Commemorating her father’s memory, Taj al-Alam fashioned her image as embodying her father and her reign as the revival of Aceh’s golden age.

**Cultural models of queenship**

When examining Acehnese cultural ideals of queenship, scholars have most often turned to a prescriptive text, a mirror for princes written in Aceh around 1603 by Bukhari al-Jauhari called *Taj as-Salatin* (Crown of kings). In doing so, they turn to a text coming out of a generic tradition—the Islamic mirror for princes—that generally views women’s counsel with suspicion. *Taj as-Salatin* itself advises kings to ‘avoid the company of women and minimize conversation with them’ (*hendaklah raja itu kurang duduk serta segala perempuan dan kurang berkata-kata dengan mereka itu*). Thus it comes as a surprise that *Taj as-Salatin* allows for a female monarch. However, female rulers are only permitted when no male heir can be found in order to prevent a ‘political crisis’ (*kesukaran hal kerajaan*). *Taj as-Salatin* goes into considerable detail in laying out the different court protocols that a queen must follow, notably the insistence that the queen cannot be seen publicly but must speak to the court from behind curtains. *Taj as-Salatin* accommodates female rule within the constraints of Islamic injunctions about female modesty.

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51 Ito, ed., *Aceh Sultanate*, I, p. 223 (VOC 1143, Ad.4, fol. 503r). The original reads: ‘Waarom om geseijde bejegeningh, gelickelijck over hem claaghden, (seggende) ten tijde van Morhom Macotta Alam, noijt soodanich bejeegent ofte uitgemaacqt waaren geweest, versochten daarover haare Alteza, die tens in haar s’vaders plaats selffs regeerden (en bij als in haar weerder leefden) dat daar inne geliefdten te versien.’


53 Ibid.
However, prescriptive mirrors were not the only source of cultural models. If we turn instead to romance, we find a wide range of representations, including in the well-known Malay Alexander Romance, *Hikayat Iskandar Zulkarnain*, which influenced royal self-fashioning. With wide circulation, *Hikayat Iskandar*’s importance should not be underestimated as the Alexander legend was incorporated into genealogies of Malay kings in the Archipelago. One of the early Islamic romances transmitted to Southeast Asia in the early period of conversion, the older recension of the text originated in Pasai, Sumatra, the precursor kingdom to Aceh, while the second recension comes from Aceh’s rival Melaka. The work was well known in Aceh in this period: Nuruddin al-Rānīrī mentions a text of Alexander’s story in *Bustan as-Salatin* and perhaps translated it. Offering exemplars of good and bad queens, *Hikayat Iskandar*’s narratives serve as either warnings or models to emulate.

In Iskandar’s journey to conquer the west, a striking episode involves his encounter with a queen of Andalusia. The expected battle does not occur because the queen turns out to be secretly Muslim. Following a prophecy, Queen Radhiah has been waiting for Iskandar’s arrival to reveal her true religion, saying, ‘Although I have the nature of a woman my acts are not those of other women.’ Rather she declares herself a warrior woman, describing herself with military accouterments: ‘my seat with a sword, my carpet the saddle of a giraffe, my shield [crafted in Pandahan?], my mirror a shield, and my drink the blood of all warriors’. In this moment of radical familiarity, the enemy turns out to be Muslim kin—perhaps an allusion to Muslim rule in the southern Iberian Peninsula lasting from around 711 until the Reconquista expelled the last Muslims in 1492—and Radhiah joins Iskandar’s increasingly multinational army to conquer the world for Islam. It is notable that the ruler who has already converted to Islam is a woman, and moreover, she is described as a martial ruler ready to defend her country, even in this text about the world-conquering Alexander. As

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54 Braginsky, *System of Classical Malay Literature*, p. 23. The two recensions arose when in 1436 the third king of Melaka, Iskandar Shah, married a Pasai princess, who might have brought a copy of the work with her (Winstedt, *History of Classical Malay Literature*, rev. and ed. Talib, p. 65).


56 Soeratno, ed., *Hikayat Iskandar*, p. 87. The original reads: ‘Sugguh pun seperti sifat perempuan tetapi pekerjaan hamba tiada seperti perempuan yang lain.’

57 Ibid., p. 88. The original reads: ‘kedudukan dengan hamba pedang, akan hamparan hamba pelana jerapah, dan akan perisai hamba pandahan [sic], dan akan cermin hamba perisai, dan minuman hamba darah segala hulubalang.’
a model, Radhiah is both the heroic warrior in the mold of Taj al-Alam’s father and a model of feminine piety.

The negative exemplum, like the Byzantine Irene from al-Rānīrī’s *Bustan*, is a tyrannical queen Iskandar meets on the way to China. A usurper from a neighboring island kingdom, she killed their true king and took their wealth (*Dan habis segala arta kami dirampasnya. Dan ialah membunuh raja kami*).\(^{58}\) To make matters worse, the kingdom was originally Muslim. Iskandar defeats her to restore the kingdom to the rule of an oligarchy of men. The conflict suggests a parallel to Aceh’s situation with the aristocratic *orang kaya* potentially as a political opposition to the crown, and perhaps serves as a warning to queens who might overreach. After defeating her, however, Iskandar converts the queen to Islam, thus indicating the possibility for recuperation of political sins through religious atonement. This counter-exemplum, a kind of mirror image of Aceh, underscores again the importance of piety. *Hikayat Iskandar*’s varying representations of queenship offer far more possibilities for female agency, even female heroism, than allowed by the prescriptive *Taj as-Salatin*. For despite her defeat, the tyrannical queen rules a technologically advanced kingdom with impressive defenses, including automatons (*patung*) that are robotic soldiers, essentially drones.\(^{59}\) Reformed through conversion, she is another martial woman assimilated into Islam. Both positive and negative exempla present the reader with martial queens who are (or become) suitably pious. In contrast to prescriptive mirrors that present only an ideal, romances offer a range of possibilities. The martial character of the queens of romance, in particular, allows women to inhabit the role of a ruler who is a defender of the state, a ruler, for instance, like Taj al-Alam who presented herself as the embodiment of her all-conquering father.

**Conclusion**

Middle Eastern attitudes toward female rule can be varied. Two visitors to Southeast Asia in the period responded very differently. A Muslim visitor to Aceh from Egypt, Mansur b. Yusuf al-Misri, describes Taj al-Alam as ‘a gracious and perfect Muslim woman’.\(^{60}\) But Muhammad Rabi, secretary to

\(^{58}\) Ibid., p. 448.

\(^{59}\) Ibid., p. 455.

\(^{60}\) Quoted in Laffan, *Makings of Indonesian Islam*, p. 16; MS Sirat al-mutawakkil, fol. 124, in unidentified MS, papers of R.B. Serjeant at Edinburgh University Library.
the envoy of a late seventeenth-century Persian embassy to the Thai court, 
describes the institution of queenship in Aceh as a power grab by councilors:

[...] because the king’s son is little while the daughter is big, they make the 
daughter king, they seize the reins of power into their own hands, from 
now on they are prosperous and autonomous, they rule; and therefore 
the faction sustained such a cowardly policy. They put over their heads 
the wonder of shamelessness and ingratitude. Those men of womanly 
qualities installed the maiden of their virgin thought on the throne of 
deception. From that time to this day they have given the kingdom, that 
territory a paradise discovered, in marriage to Houris of the fairy race. 61

Muhammad’s disparagement of the ‘woman-hearted men of state’ (آن زن صفتان) 
for allowing a woman to sit on the throne is couched in gendered terms; 
O’Kane’s translation is rather more metaphorical than mine—I simply 
render the phrase above as ‘men of womanly qualities’—but it is clear 
that rule by a woman was perceived by the Safavid author as contrary to 
the natural order. 62 Still, much of Muhammad’s own language is highly 
metaphorical. When he derides the greedy and unscrupulous nobles as 
unmanly, he imagines them as veiled women, shrouded not to protect 
their modesty but instead covering themselves with shame. Yet the target 
of his criticism is not the queen herself, described here as a virgin maiden 
and compared to the mythical hourī, the beautiful virgins of paradise, 
which continues his conceit of Aceh being like heaven. Rather, his target is 
the aristocratic statesmen content to submit to female rule. However, his 
erroneous assertion that previous kings were Arabs reveals a second-hand 
knowledge of Aceh. It is evident that Taj al-Alam’s reign was unusual enough 
to be remarked upon. Praise or censure, these comments reflect more on 
the authors than on Taj al-Alam herself.

Taj al-Alam shaped her monarchical image after her father, using titles 
that imitated his, and in turn she sought to disavow connections to her 
husband. Her invocation of Alexander, in particular, contests the genealogy 
her husband crafted, to inscribe one connected instead to her father. This 
Alexandrian genealogy brings with it precedents for considering queens not

For another translation, see O’Kane, trans., Ship of Sulaimān, p. 175. The original reads:

پسر پادشاه خوئن کوچک و دختر او برگشت دختر را پادشاه گردید عنوان اخبار را به درست خویشت گرفته من بعد مرگهاjal مستقل بوده هکومت

ماند و یک مرد ناقص چنان مصنوعت نامهای دیده محرر پر شیری و فکه برامی بر سر گردید آن زن صفتان دوسته فکر گرفت را به خوبی گرفت

نشانه از آن زمانی او از پادشاهان آن ملک بهشت نشان فا به كاری ان حورودان نر زد دامنه.

62 O’Kane, Ship of Sulaimān, p. 175.
as emergency replacements but as rulers in their own right. In contrast to prescriptive mirrors, the Malay Alexander romance features ruling queens, of whom some are tyrants but others are good Muslims. *Hikayat Iskandar Zulkarnain*’s narratives of Islamic warrior women open up imaginative space for a Southeast Asian queen to imagine herself in the martial mold of her father.

Like European women studied in this volume—such as those discussed in Elizabeth S. Cohen’s and Alisha Rankin’s essays—Taj al-Alam actively shaped ideas of temporality as she reconstructed the past to fit her own purposes. While there is not the space here for a full comparison, it is worth noting that Taj al-Alam’s example resembles that of Elizabeth I of England. Anthony Reid suggests that the dynamic between the queen and the aristocracy was similar: ‘The orangkaya found they could govern collectively with the queen as sovereign and referee, and there was something of the quality of Elizabethan England in the way they vied for her favour but accepted her eventual judgement between them.’

Sher Banu Khan contends that both queens used providentialism and religious authority to justify their reigns. I would add that Taj al-Alam also resembles Elizabeth in their parallel claim to their father’s authority. Like Taj al-Alam, Elizabeth had to assert her right to rule. In her case, Elizabeth had the stain of illegitimacy: after the execution of her mother Anne Boleyn, the 1536 Act of Parliament disinherited her though her father Henry VIII reinstated her in the succession in 1543. Whatever her private feelings might be, as queen Elizabeth took care to affirm her associations with her father publicly. Indeed, like Taj al-Alam, she shaped her public representation to emphasize her genealogical links to her father, whether in progresses or in paintings. For both, their genealogical self-fashioning shaped the myth of queenship itself.

By the end of the seventeenth century, the myth of Acehnese queenship had taken such a hold that English visitors believed it to be practiced longer than it really was. Thomas Bowrey, present in Aceh when Taj al-Alam died in 1675, recounted erroneously that she had ‘Reigned Ever Since the Death

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63 Reid, ‘Female Roles’, p. 641.
65 In *Elizabeth I: The Competition for Representation*, Frye notes the genealogical tableau in the 1559 published description of a progress, *The Queen’s Majesty’s Passage* (p. 33), while Louis Montrose’s analysis of a late Elizabethan painting considers how it foregrounds her dynastic inheritance by placing her in parity with her father, even as late as 40 years into her reign (pp. 64–67).
of theire Tyrannicall Kinge, which was noe lesse then Sixty odde years. By then the erasure of Iskandar Thani’s reign seemed complete. Later William Dampier noted,

I think Mr Hackluit or Purchas, makes mention of a King here in our King James I. Time. But at least of later Years there has always been a Queen only, and the English who reside there, have been of the Opinion that these People have been governed by a Queen ab Origine; and from the antiquity of the present constitution, have formed notions, that the Queen of Sheba who came to Solomon was the Queen of this Country.

Myth became more alluring than history. Perhaps the English’s own distance from their own period of rule by a regnant queen led to this mythologizing. Such confusions about Acehnese monarchical succession testify to the power of Taj al-Alam’s reworkings of genealogical memory.

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Note:
66 Bowrey, Geographical Account, p. 311. Bowrey’s confusions seem to find a parallel in those of historians. Both Ito Takeshi and Sher Banu A.L. Khan, authors of dissertations on Aceh, give Taj al-Alam’s dates as r. 1641–75; Khan notes that Taj al-Alam’s successor Sultanah Nur Alam Naqiatuddin Syah reigned from 1675 to 1678. However, the Hakluyt series editor of his travel account, Sir Richard Carnac Temple, believes Taj al-Alam reigned from 1641 to 1669, as a letter from Fort St. George to Surat, 24 August 1669, has the following news: ‘Wee have bin informed that the Queene of Achine being dead they are there embroyled in Civill warrs’ (from Factory Records, Surat, No. 105, cited in Bowrey, Geographical Account, p. 311, n. 1). Temple concludes, ‘The second queen died in 1675, as stated in the text, after a reign of only six (not sixty) years’ (p. 311, n. 1).
67 Quoted in Bowrey, Geographical Account, p. 296, n. 6.


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