

## *Female Roles in Pre-colonial Southeast Asia*

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Relations between the sexes are one of the areas in which a distinctive Southeast Asian pattern exists. Even the gradual strengthening of the influence of Islam, Christianity, Buddhism and Confucianism in their respective spheres over the last four centuries has by no means eliminated this common pattern of relatively high female autonomy and economic importance. In the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries the region probably represented one extreme of human experience on these issues. It could not be said that women were *equal* to men, since there were very few areas in which they competed directly. Women had different functions from men, but these included transplanting and harvesting rice, weaving, and marketing. Their reproductive role gave them magical and ritual powers which it was difficult for men to match. These factors may explain why the value of daughters was never questioned in Southeast Asia as it was in China, India, and the Middle East; on the contrary, 'the more daughters a man has, the richer he is' (Galvão, 1544: 89; cf. Legazpi, 1569: 61).

### **Marriage**

The dominant marriage pattern was one of monogamy, with divorce relatively easy for both sides. Chirino (1604: 319) said that he 'was in the Philippines almost ten years without knowing of a man married to several women'. Although there were spectacular exceptions to this rule among rulers, the overwhelming majority of ordinary people had one marriage partner at a time, but readily dissolved an unsatisfactory union through divorce. In the Philippines, 'marriages last only so long as harmony prevails, for at the slightest cause in the world they divorce one another' (Chirino, 1604: 321; cf. Morga, 1609: 275). In Siam, similarly, 'Husband and Wife may part again at pleasure, dealing their

goods and children without further circumstance, and may re-marry if they think good, without fear of shame or punishment' (Schouten, 1636: 146; cf. La Loubère, 1691: 53; Van Vliet, 1636: 86). It was noted at a later date of both the Chams of southern Vietnam (Aymonier, 1891: 30–1) and the Javanese that women were particularly inclined to initiate divorce. 'A woman may at any time, when dissatisfied with her husband, demand a dissolution of the marriage contract, by paying him a sum established by custom' (Raffles, 1817, I: 320). Throughout the island world the rule appeared to be that the wife (or her parents) kept the bride-wealth if the husband took the initiative to end the marriage, but had to repay it if she was primarily responsible (Plasencia, 1589: 813; Boxer Codex, 1590A: 410–11; Pires, 1515: 267; Beaulieu, 1666: 100; Polanco, 1556: 209). At least in the Philippines (Chirino, 1614: 321) and Siam (La Loubère, 1691: 53; Van Vliet, 1636: 86) the children of a marriage were divided at divorce, the first going to the mother, the second to the father, and so on.

The court diary of seventeenth-century Makassar provides a glimpse of the pattern of frequent divorce as it operated at the very top of society, where political and property calculations cannot have been absent. Even here, where it might have been expected, we do not find divorce described as a decision by powerful male 'X' to exchange his marriage partner, but rather that 'X and Y separated from each other' (*sikattoi*, from root *katto*, cut off). A not untypical female career in this elite group is that of Kraeng Balla-Jawaya, who was born in 1634 to one of the highest Makassar lineages. At the age of 13 she married Kraeng Bonto-marannu, later to be one of the great Makassar war-leaders. At 25 she separated from him, and soon after married his rival Kraeng Karunrung, the effective Prime Minister. At 31 (in 1666) she separated from him, perhaps because he was in exile, and two years later married Aru Palakka, who was in the process of conquering her country with Dutch help. At 36 she separated from him, and eventually died at the age of 86 (*Lontara'-bilang Gowa*: 95–199). Another high-born lady, Kraeng Tangngalla, was betrothed as a child to the future Sultan Mohammad Said, separated from him, and then at the age of 17 married him. Later, aged 28, she separated from him again. She next appears in this court diary in 1649, marrying Kraeng Leengkese, the brother of the Balla-Jawaya mentioned above. Six years later she separated from him, but in 1657, at the age of 43, she returned to him until her death in 1661 (*Lontara'-bilang Gowa*: 87–119; cf. *Sejarah Goa*: 66).

The fact that the majority Muslim population of Indonesia and

Malaysia had divorce rates in excess of 50% as late as the 1960s is sometimes attributed to the influence of Islam itself in sanctioning easy divorce for men. Much more important until very modern times, however, was the pan-Southeast Asian pattern of female autonomy which meant that divorce did not markedly reduce a woman's livelihood, status, or network of kin support (Van Vollenhoven, 1981: 79; Nash, 1965: 253). In noting the acceptance Javanese gave to women of 22 or 23 living with their fourth or fifth husband, Earl (1837: 59) attributed this entirely to the freedom and economic independence enjoyed by women (cf. Crawford, 1820, I: 78-9).

Christian Europe was until the eighteenth century a very 'chaste' society in comparative terms, with exceptionally late age of marriage (in the twenties), high proportions never marrying and by later standards a low rate of extra-marital conceptions (the rate in England rose from only 12% in 1680 to 50% by 1800, Stone, 1979: 46; Wrigley and Schofield, 1981: 254-60). Southeast Asia was in many respects the complete antithesis of that 'chaste' pattern, and thus it seemed to European observers of the time that its inhabitants were preoccupied with sex. The Portuguese liked to say that the Malays were 'fond of music and given to love' (Barbosa, 1518, II: 176; cf. Barros, II, vi: 24; Eredia, 1613: 31, 40), while Javanese, like Burmese, Thais and Filipinos, were characterized as 'very lasciviously given, both men and women' (Scott, 1606: 173—on Banten). What this meant was that pre-marital sexual relations were regarded indulgently, and virginity at marriage was not expected of either party. If pregnancy resulted from these pre-marital activities the couple were expected to marry, making illegitimacy uncommon.

Within marriage, on the other hand, the fidelity and devotedness of Southeast Asian couples appears to have surprised Europeans. The women of Banjarmasin, for example, were 'very constant when married, but very loose when single' (Beeckman, 1718: 41; cf. Low, 1848: 196; Finlayson, 1826: 309-10). Even Spanish chroniclers who took a dim view of the sexual morality of Filipinos sometimes conceded that 'The men treat their wives well, and love them according to their habits' (Legazpi, 1569: 61). Galvão (1544: 89) marvelled at how Malukan wives, 'although they always go round among the men, and then nearly naked, . . . do not fail to be very chaste and good, which seems to be quite impossible among such a debauched people'. A nineteenth-century observer (Cameron, 1865: 131) was probably correct in positing a connection between the ease of divorce in rural Malaya and the affection which appeared to characterize Malay

marriages. The economic autonomy of women and their capacity to escape from unsatisfactory unions obliged husbands as well as wives to make some effort to keep the marriage intact. One example of how such a pattern operated to constrain foreign men accustomed to different patterns is given by Scott (1606: 127), who commented on a Chinese beating his Vietnamese wife in Banten that this could not have happened if the wife was a local woman, 'for the Javans will hardly suffer them to beat their women'.

### Sexual Partners for Itinerant Traders

The pattern of pre-marital sexual activity and easy divorce, together with the commercial element potentially involved in the paying of bridewealth, ensured that temporary marriage or concubinage rather than prostitution became the dominant means of coping with the vast annual influx of foreign traders to the major ports. As the system was described in Patani,

when foreigners come there from other lands to do their business . . . men come and ask them whether they do not desire a woman; these young women and girls themselves also come and present themselves, from whom they may choose the one most agreeable to them, provided they agree what he shall pay for certain months. Once they agree about the money (which does not amount to much for so great a convenience), she comes to his house, and serves him by day as his maidservant and by night as his wedded wife. He is then not able to consort with other women or he will be in grave trouble with his wife, while she is similarly wholly forbidden to converse with other men, but the marriage lasts as long as he keeps his residence there, in good peace and unity. When he wants to depart he gives her whatever is promised, and so they leave each other in friendship, and she may then look for another man as she wishes, in all propriety, without scandal. (Van Neck, 1604: 225.)

Exactly the same pattern is described for Javanese traders in Banda for the nutmeg season ('Tweede Boeck', 1601: 77), for Europeans and others in Vietnam, Cambodia, Siam and Burma (Dampier, 1697: 268; Dampier, 1699: 40–1; Symes, 1827, I: 253; Navarrete, 1676: 268). Hamilton (1727: 28) described in loving detail how the system worked in Pegu, where an elaborate marriage ritual was held for these temporary relationships, to which both parties were bound by legal obligation. Like Chou Ta Kuan (1297: 27) in Cambodia, he appreciated the double advantage of such local wives as not only bedmates but commercial partners—'if their Husbands have any goods to sell, they

set up a shop and sell them by retail, to a much better account than they could be sold for by wholesale'.

The boundary between such temporary marriages and durable ones cannot have been clear, and interracial unions were a feature of all the commercial cities of Southeast Asia. Europeans found it strange and reprehensible that religion was also no bar to marriage: in Melaka 'heathens marry with Moorish women and a Moor with a heathen woman' (Pires, 1515: 268); in Makassar 'Christian Men kept Mahometan women, and Mahometan Men, Christian women' (Navarrete, 1676: 122-3). Only when women close to the court sought to marry foreigners did it provoke strong opposition, as in the case of the ill-fated romance of Dutch factor and Siamese princess which probably gave rise to King Prasat Thong's 1657 decree prohibiting Thai women from marrying foreigners (Smith, 1974: 285-7).

In some of the Muslim ports of the Archipelago it may have become the practice to restrict such explicitly temporary marriages to slave women, who differed from the free in that they could be sold by one 'husband' to another and had few rights over children. In Banten the practice of Chinese traders was described as 'to buy women slaves . . . by whom they have manie children. And when they returne to their owne countrey . . . they sell their women, but their children they carrie with them' (Scott, 1606: 176). The English in places may have had a similar practice if we can believe their great enemy Coen (1619: 478), who rejoiced that the English factors in Sukadana (West Borneo) were so impoverished that 'they had to sell their whores' to pay for their victuals.

Prostitution was much rarer than the relationships described above, but began to appear in the major cities in the late sixteenth century. In every case it was slave women belonging to the king or nobles who were so used. The Spanish described such slave women offering themselves in small boats in the water-city of Brunei in the 1570s (Boxer Codex, 1590B: 14); the Dutch described a similar phenomenon in Patani in 1602, though less common and less respectable than the temporary wives (Van Neck, 1604: 225). In the 1680s a particular Thai official was licensed by the King to run a monopoly of prostitution in the capital, Ayutthaya, using for the purpose 600 women bought or enslaved for various offences. This appears to have been the origin of a Thai tradition of drawing significant state revenue from prostitution (La Loubère, 1691: 74, 85; Pallegoix, 1854, I: 311). Eighteenth-century Rangoon similarly had a whole 'village of prostitutes', all slaves (Symes, 1827: 252-3). It seems probable that the development of this

type of slave prostitution in the major port-cities of the region was primarily a result of a demand from Europeans and Chinese with different expectations. It may also have been stimulated by a growing sense, at least among Muslims, of the impropriety of temporary marriages especially with foreigners and unbelievers.

### Women in Trade

Since we have mentioned marketing as primarily a female domain, this is the place to start discussing the economic roles of women. Even today Southeast Asian countries top the comparative statistics assembled by Ester Boserup (1970: 87–9) for female participation in trade and marketing. Fifty-six per cent of those so listed in Thailand were women, 51% in the Philippines, 47% in Burma, and 46% in Cambodia. Although Indonesia had a lower rate at 31%, this still contrasted sharply with other Muslim countries, particularly in the Middle East (1%–5%). A famous Minangkabau poem first written down in the 1820s exhorts mothers to teach their daughters ‘to judge the rise and fall of prices’ (cited Dobbin 1983: 50). Even today Southeast Asian women are expected to show more commercially shrewd and thrifty attitudes than men, and Chinese and European traders are apt to be derided for having the mean spirit of a woman on such matters.

While the casual visitor to Southeast Asia today might not be aware of the female trading role now restricted to rural and small-scale markets, this was not always the case. Early European and Chinese traders were constantly surprised to find themselves dealing with women:

In Cambodia it is the women who take charge of trade (Chou Ta Kuan, 1297: 20).

It is their [Siamese] custom that all affairs are managed by their wives . . . all trading transactions great and small (Ma Huan, 1433: 104).

The women of Siam are the only merchants in buying goods, and some of them trade very considerably (Hamilton, 1727: 96).

Money-changing is a great profession here [Tongking]. It is managed by women, who are very dextrous and ripe in this employment (Dampier, 1699: 47).

In Cochinchina every man is a soldier. The commercial operations are performed by women (White, 1824: 261; also Chapman, quoted Yu, 1978: 102). Women in the Birman country . . . manage the more important mercantile concerns of their husbands (Symes, 1827, I: 255).

It is the women [of the Moluccas] who negotiate, do business, buy and sell (Galvão, 1544: 75).

Melaka has so much [tax revenue] per month from the women street sellers . . . because in Melaka they sell in every street (Pires, 1515: 274). [In Melaka] women hold a market at night (Hwang Chung, 1537: 128).

The prominence of foreigners and the ruling circle in the trade of most Southeast Asian cities ensured that most of the larger-scale merchants and shipowners were male. A significant number of local women did, however, join this circle. A famous one was Nyai Gede Pinateh, whose tomb is still honoured at Gresik as a promoter of Islam and 'foster-mother' of Sunan Giri. She was a foreign-born Muslim whose origins are placed by different traditions in Palembang, China, or Cambodia. Around 1500 she appears to have been acting as *shahbandar* (harbour-master) of Gresik and reportedly sent her ships to trade in Bali, the Moluccas and Cambodia (Raffles, 1817, II: 115–20; Meilink-Roelofs, 1962: 108; Lombard and Salmon, 1985: 74). Some royal women used their access to capital to good effect. In the 1660s the wife of Sultan Hasanuddin of Makassar, Lomo' Tombo, owned ships which she sent on very profitable trade missions to Johor (Speelman, 1670: 111). The women who occupied the thrones of Aceh, Jambi, and Indragiri in the seventeenth century similarly traded and speculated at least as vigorously as their male counterparts (Coolhaas, 1960–68, II: 21, 93, 257, 775).

Besides these privileged royal women, the Dutch and English dealt with some formidable female traders. In Cochin-China they haggled over pepper prices with 'a great woman merchant (*coopvrouw*) of Sinoa [Hue]' who had made the journey to the capital of Cochin-China in order to check the market. She represented a firm comprising two sisters and a brother who could deliver much pepper, and although she travelled with a male companion 'the woman did the talking and the man listened and agreed' (Wonderaer 1602: 80). One of the Patani *orangkaya* who had debts with the English was a woman, Datu Newanan (Browne, 1616: 108), while the Dutch in Aceh were buying up tin for export from 'another Acehnese woman' (Compostel, 1636: f. 1200).

## Diplomacy

From trade it is not a major step to diplomacy, especially perhaps for those who had been both commercial and sexual partners of foreign traders. Such women frequently became fluent in the languages needed in commerce. Thus the first Dutch mission to Cochin-China found the King dealt with them through a Vietnamese woman who spoke

excellent Portuguese and Malay and had long resided in Macao. She, along with another elderly woman who had had two Portuguese husbands as well as one Vietnamese, had been the principal translator for the Cochin-China court for 30 years (Wonderaer, 1602: 22, 38). Similarly the elderly Burmese wife of the shahbandar of Rangoon who had earlier been married to the French commander of the Burmese royal guard, was an indispensable intermediary between foreigners and that royal court in the eighteenth century (Cox, 1821: 319–21). Later the Sultan of Deli, in Sumatra, ordered ‘a most extraordinary and eccentric old woman’ named Che Laut to accompany John Anderson on his embassy to various Sumatran states. She was ‘a prodigy of learning’, spoke Chinese, Thai, Chuliah, Bengali and Acehnese and knew the politics of all the Sumatran coastal states intimately (Anderson, 1826: 44–5).

In some parts of the island world there appears to have been a positive preference for using women as envoys, particularly in the peace-making process. Unfortunately our most explicit source for this is not the most reliable. Mendes Pinto sometimes inclined to embellish his narrative for dramatic effect. After describing the embassy of an old woman named Nyai Pombaya from the ruler of Demak to Banten while he was in the latter port in 1540, Pinto explained that the rulers of Java had always been accustomed

to treat of the most important matters of their state by mediation of women, especially when it concerns peace . . . and all the reason they give for it is, ‘that God has given more gentleness and inclination to courtesie, yea and more authority to women than men, who are severe, as they say, and by consequent less agreeable to those unto whom they are sent’ (Pinto, 1614: 375).

While Pinto may not have personally visited all the places he claims, there is usually a basis of fact in his stories. In this case confirmation is available from a more careful reporter who lived in Banten for several years half a century later.

If the King . . . send a man [to fetch someone] the parties may refuse to come; but if he once send a woman, he may not refuse nor make no excuse. Moreover if any inferior bodie have a suit to a man of authoritie, if they come not themselves, they alwayes send a woman (Scott, 1606: 170).

Women frequently appear as negotiators or witnesses on earlier Javanese inscriptions (Casparis, 1981: 147). Elsewhere, in Sulawesi, the Torajans sent an old, blind, aristocratic lady to negotiate for peace with the attacking Bugis forces of Aru Palakka in 1683 (Andaya, 1981: 260).



Of course, men were also used as envoys, and overwhelmingly so as the international norms of Muslim and Christian states took greater effect in the seventeenth century. What the above comments suggest is that the preoccupation of elite males with ordering the political system in terms of hierarchies of status, and the obligation for them (especially in Java—Pires, 1515: 176) to avenge any infraction of that status, made them dangerous emissaries for those who really sought peace. Men could not bargain as women were expected to, nor subordinate their own sense of honour to the need for a settlement.

### Warriors

This peace-making role is difficult to reconcile with a tradition of female warriors. Since warfare is normally an exclusively male business, every culture is probably inclined to romanticize and celebrate those exceptional women who emerge to save a desperate situation. Vietnam has no heroes more renowned than the Trung sisters who rose up against the Chinese in A.D. 43. Thais remember two sisters who led the successful defence of Phuket in 1785, Queen Suriyothai who was killed defending Ayutthaya in 1564, and Lady Mo who rescued Khorat in 1826 after leading several hundred captive women to escape (Gerini, 1905: 179–83). Women were also said to have played a spirited part in the defence of Madura against Sultan Agung of Mataram in 1624 (de Graaf, 1958: 90). If such militant heroines played a larger role in Southeast Asia than elsewhere it is probably because status was more prominent than gender, and women were not excluded from taking the lead if the occasion required it.

More specific to the region was the habit of powerful rulers to surround themselves with large numbers of women, of whom some had the role of bodyguards. The King of Angkor was said to have had four to five thousand women in his palace (Chou Ta Kuan, 1297: 15–16), Iskandar Muda of Aceh three thousand and Sultan Agung of Mataram ten thousand. At least in the two latter cases these palace women included a corps trained in the use of arms, who mounted guard on the palace and took part in royal processions (Beaulieu, 1666: 102; Mundy, 1667, III: 131; Van Goens, 1656: 256–60). A women's corps (*prajurit estri*) drilling regularly with rifles was still maintained in late eighteenth-century Java by the first Mangkunegaran ruler (Kumar, 1980: 4–6). Even as late as the 1880s the Siamese palace guard was supervised by the King's aunt, who determined access to the royal enclosure (Bock, 1884: 11).

This pattern appears to have stemmed from the distrust which autocratic rulers felt towards any men close to them. As suggested above, in the island world at least men were expected to respond immediately, with the arms they always carried, to any slight to their honour. Indonesian history has many tragic examples of where this could lead (*Sejarah Melayu*: 98; *Sejarah Goa*: 40). An unusually autocratic Aceh ruler, Sultan al Mukammil (1584–1604) evidently even had a woman as commander of his navy, ‘for he will trust no other’ (Davis, 1600: 150). There appears to be no evidence that the confidence the rulers placed in these women was ever betrayed by a murder, as happened frequently at the hand of males. Nor is it established that the female corps took part in major battles. Their existence therefore tends to confirm the assumption that violence, the use of arms, and the defence of a touchy sense of honour were fundamentally men’s business, and that women could be trusted not to use the arms they carried. Nevertheless such corps probably gave rise to exaggerated traveller’s tales of amazon warriors in Southeast Asia (e.g. Ibn Battuta, 1354: 279–81).

### Literature and the Arts

It is not surprising to find women prominent in entertainment. They were strongly represented in dance, music, and drama groups throughout Southeast Asia. In Cebu Magellan was entertained by an orchestra of girls, and in Banten there was a mixed group of jugglers and actors for a royal circumcision (Pigafetta, 1524: 154–5; Scott, 1606: 155). Among the few non-royal women celebrated in the chronicles are a spectacular singer and dancer at the court of Majapahit, and Dang Sirat, a Malay opera star in Patani who turned the head of the prince of Johor (*Nagara-kertagama*, 1365: 107–8; *Hikayat Patani*: 115–17). The female singer has continued to be almost as central a figure in the Javanese *wayang kulit* traditions as the male puppeteer (Sutton, 1984). In Brunei as late as the nineteenth century the professional story-tellers were women, moving from house to house to recite *hikayat* and *sya’ir* to audiences who were also largely female (St John, 1862, II: 260).

Since most pre-modern Southeast Asian writers are anonymous, we cannot know what the share of women was either in composing verses for recitation or in writing them down. In the eighteenth century there were outstanding women poets in Hanoi (Ho Xuan Huong) and Surakarta (Nguyen and Huu, 1973: 170; Kumar, 1980), while the

Malay woman who tutored John Anderson about Sumatran politics in the 1820s, Che Laut, was also a poet and historian. The best-known Thai epic romance of the Ayutthaya period, the *Lilit Phra Lo*, describes from a female viewpoint (whether or not that of a female author) how two court ladies lure the male hero into the palace for their amusement (Diller, 1983).

The association of learning with the formal religious systems probably increased literacy for men but reduced it for women. Already in the seventeenth century Thai boys in Ayutthaya went to the monasteries at about their sixth year to acquire a basic literacy, whereas girls 'very seldom learn to write and read' (van Vliet, 1636: 88). Islam provided less universally for boys, but had a similar effect on girls. There was, however, an older literate tradition for both sexes, which survived longer in some places than others. According to Zollinger (1851: 532), for example, most Balinese women could still read in the nineteenth century. In sixteenth-century Luzon the Spanish friars claimed there was 'scarcely a man, still less a woman, who cannot read and write' in the old Filipino script (Chirino, 1604: 280; also Colin, 1663: 51; Morga, 1609: 269). One source explained that Philippine women wrote not books and histories but 'missives and notes to one another' (Dasmarinas 1590: 424) which provides a clue to the reason for this high literacy. The South Sumatran province of Lampung had the highest literacy for both sexes in Indonesia early this century. The 1930 Census recorded 45% of adult men and 34% of adult women could read, most of them in an ancient local script related to the Philippine one. The reason for this survival was that an essential part of Lampung courtship was the exchanging of poetic notes in the old script (*Volkstelling*, 1930, IV: 74-5; Loeb, 1935: 279-80). Whatever the explanation, the existence of a more widespread female literacy in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries makes it necessary to leave open the gender of the anonymous authors of many of the early classics.

### Female Rulers

Female monarchy is anathema alike to Hindu, Buddhist, Islamic, and Chinese traditions of statecraft. Austronesian societies, on the other hand, which include Polynesia and Madagascar as well as Indonesia and the Philippines, have been more inclined than perhaps any other major population group to place high-born women on the throne. Sulawesi, where birth always took priority over sex in succession, may

be an extreme case. Six of the 32 rulers of Bone (the largest Bugis state) since its fourteenth century origins have been women. When James Brooke visited the neighbouring Bugis state of Wajo he found that four of the six great chiefs (*arung*) were female (Brooke, 1848, I: 74–5). Where Indian (or Chinese in Vietnam) influences had been stronger, especially in the more exalted courts of the Mainland, female rule was rare. Siam has never put a woman on the throne, and Vietnam and Burma very seldom. In Muslim Southeast Asia the Islamic model of male kingship seemed finally to prevail by about 1700, and there are few women rulers thereafter.

Between the fifteenth and seventeenth centuries, however, there is a remarkable tendency for just those states participating most fully in the expanding commerce of the region to be governed by women. For many states the only period they raised a woman to the throne was the peak of their commercial importance. Pasai, the first major Muslim port in Southeast Asia, had two queens in succession in 1405–34—just before it was eclipsed by Melaka as the main Melaka Straits port (Cowan, 1938: 209–10). The only woman on a Burmese throne in our period was Shinsawbu (1453–72), who presided over the emergence of Pegu as a major entrepot in the Bay of Bengal. Japara, on Java's north coast, was a significant naval and commercial power only under its famous queen, Kali-nyamat, in the third quarter of the sixteenth century. Similarly the women rulers of the diamond-exporting centre of Sukadana in Southwest Borneo (*c.* 1608–22), pepper-rich Jambi in East Sumatra (1630–*c.* 1655), and the sandalwood base of Solor, to the East of Flores (*c.* 1650–70), were on the throne during the brief period these states were important commercial centres. Banten never had a female sovereign, but became the major port of the Java Sea during the long minority of Sultan Abdul Kadir (1596–1618). In the first five years of the seventeenth century the dominant figure was Nyai Gede Wanagiri

the old woman that commands the protector and all the rest . . . although she be not of the kings blood, but only for her wisdom is held in such estimation among them of all sorts that shee ruleth as if shee were solelye queene of that countrey (Scott, 1606: 130; also Djajadiningrat, 1913: 153–4).

This pattern grows too striking to be put down purely to the accidents of succession, particularly as the periods of female rule in Pasai and Solor involved two successive queens. When we turn to Aceh and Patani a deliberate preference is quite clear. In each of these cases four successive women occupied the throne, only the first of whom was especially well qualified by descent. The century of female rule in

Patani (1584–1688) embraced the whole of the period when it was a major entrepot for the China trade. In Aceh the four queens (1641–99) witnessed a military and political decline after the conquests of Iskandar Muda (1607–36), but nevertheless maintained Aceh as the most important independent port in island Southeast Asia.

Female rule was one of the few devices available to a commercially-oriented aristocracy to limit the despotic powers of kings and to make the state safe for international commerce (Reid, 1979: 408–12). Iskandar Muda had been a particularly frightening example of the dangers of absolutism, seeking to monopolize trade with the English and Dutch while killing, terrorizing and dispossessing his own *orang-kaya* (merchant aristocrats). Having experimented with the female alternative these aristocrats of Aceh and Patani sought to perpetuate it. In Patani the first queen

has reigned very peaceably with her councillors . . . so that all the subjects consider her government better than that of the dead king. For all necessities are very cheap here now, whereas in the king's time (so they say) they were dearer by half, because of the great exactions which then occurred (Van Neck, 1604: 226).

Similarly Aceh in the time of its first queen was noted by its greatest chronicler to be frequented by international trade because of her just rule. The capital 'was extremely prosperous at that time, foodstuffs were very cheap, and everybody lived in peace' (Raniri, 1644: 59). In contrast, 'the very name of a kinge is long since become nautious to them . . . through the Tyranical Government of their last kinge' (Bowrey, 1680: 296). Theft was strictly punished under the queens, and property rights respected. 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.

This was not simply a case of powerful males making use of a powerless female as a figurehead. As we have seen women were also active in both Aceh and Patani as traders and *orangkaya*. In Patani the level of official tribute was lowered under the fourth queen because she was said to have been independently wealthy from her inheritance and her extensive trade (*Hikayat Patani*: 114). In choosing to put women on the throne the *orangkaya* were opting not only for mild rule but for businesslike rule. As we have seen in other fields men were expected to be concerned to defend a high sense of status and honour on the battlefield but to be profligate with their wealth. It was women's business to understand market forces, to drive hard bargains and to

conserve their capital. In general these expectations of women as rulers were not disappointed. Female rule eventually failed when Patani and Aceh ran out of credible candidates who still had the charisma of monarchy about them, and when the orangkaya of the port-capital themselves began to lose their influence to forces less interested in trade.

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