

Women's Marginalization and the Androcentric Religious Interpretation in the History of Aceh Kingdom

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Sejarah Indonesia dan agama di Indonesia bersifat androsentrik, yaitu didominasi oleh dan tentang laki-laki, dan dengan demikian telah meminggirkan sejarah perempuan. Model sejarah yang androgenis penting dikembangkan, yaitu model yang mengakomodasi suara dan cerita perempuan dan laki-laki serta memungkinkan mereka untuk memiliki tempat yang sama dalam sejarah tersebut. Tulisan ini menguraikan peran perempuan dalam sejarah Kerajaan Aceh dan mengkaji pengaruh agama dan gender dalam proses peminggiran perempuan. Aceh terkenal sebagai wilayah Islam dimana nilai-nilai agama dominan dan menjadi jantung dari kehidupan sosial dan budaya masyarakat. Di satu sisi, potret Ratu Aceh menarik karena Aceh merupakan satu-satunya kerajaan Islam di dunia yang pernah mengakui perempuan sebagai pemimpin tertinggi kekuasaan politik dalam pemerintahan. Di sisi lain, nilai-nilai agama mewarnaimasyarakat Aceh, dan pada saat yang sama budaya patriarki menjadi jantung kehidupan politik. Budaya patriarki yang dominan menyebabkan perempuan termarginalisasi dalam kehidupan publik dan dalam sejarah. Agama dan gender memainkan peran penting dalam melegitimasi identitas kolektif dan pada saat yang sama diskriminasi terhadap perempuan. Dalam konteks Aceh, perdebatan tentang kelayakan perempuan sebagai pemimpin dalam Islam telah memberikan kontribusi terhadap proses peminggiran perempuan. Peminggiran perempuan di arena politik dan kehidupan publik menjadi masalah serius karena berkelit kelindan dengan keyakinan agama yang androsentris, patrarkhi dan kepentingan politik.

Kata Kunci: Sejarah, Agama, Androsentris, Peran Perempuan, Politik

A. Introduction

The history in the world, including the history of world religions, is male history. It has been androcentric which means was created and dominated mainly by the men. Many centuries of history has produced

a legacy of readings of human's story written almost entirely by and all about men. In the process of understanding and interpreting the "story of human being and of religion," the impact of world view, culture and socially constructed-gender differentiation was significant and determinative. In this situation, the voice and portrait of women remain almost completely disappeared.

In the context of Indonesia long before the twentieth century, women had played significant roles in all aspects of human life including in religious field and politics. Among those powerful and famous women include Rajapatni & Ratu Tribuwana (Majapahit Kingdom), Ratu Kalinyamat (Mataram), Ratu Fatimah and Nyai Gede Wonogiri (Banten), Nyai Gede Petateh (the mother of Sunan Giri), Queens of Aceh Empires, Cut Nyak Dien, Cut Mutia, Kartini, Dewi Sartika, and Haji Rangkyo Rasuna Said. Yet, the history of Indonesia, and more over the history of religion in the country, has been mostly about, written by and within the perspective of men.

JJ Rizal argues that historians generally talk about women's individual or collective story in a brief and superficial way.¹ There seems hesitancy to highlight women's leadership and their significant roles in public, religion and political arenas though women in fact took control over the kingdom or state and occupied the highest position as a leader. He argues that Anthony Reid (*Southeast Asia in the Age of Commerce*) and Denys Lombard² (*Le Carrefore Javanais*) are among the very small number of male historians who pay a great attention to discuss particularly about women and gender issues in their historical account. They gave not only a particular place for women in the history, but also a socio-historical portrait on how women live in the agrarian community could have more freedom than that of maritime-commerce society.

There are several problems concerning the historical writing in Indonesia. Some of those fundamental problems include: 1) there has been only three female historians in 1997;³ 2) both the male and, even, the female historians tend to neglect or disregard "women's stories"⁴ in their "his-story"; 3) the history of Indonesia has been focusing on, or dominated by, political and military themes. Likewise, the history

1 JJ Rizal, "Jejak Perempuan dalam Historiografi Indonesia" (Women's footstep in the Historiography on Indonesia), *Journal Perempuan Untuk Pencerahan dan Kesetaraan*, no. 52 (March 2007), 22-23.

2 Denys Lombard, *Le Carrefour Javanais: L'heritage des royaumes concentriques*, Trans. Winarsig Partaningrat Arifin (Jakarta : PT Gramedia, 2005).

3 Asvi Warman Adam, "Perempuan Dalam Sejarah Lelaki", *Journal Perempuan Untuk Pencerahan dan Kesetaraan*, no. 52 (March 2007), 7.

4 Kuntowijoyo, *Metodologi Sejarah*" (Tiara Wacana: Yogyakarta, 2003),

of religion has been not only all about war and politics, but also perpetuated patriarchal teachings, culture and norms.

In the one hand, the small number of female historians indicates the lack of women's involvement and their "backwardness" in the field of history compare to that of men. In the other hand, it shows the backwardness of the writings on women history in Indonesia, while in country like United States history of woman has become a specific subject matter at schools or Universities (see for example Gerda Lerner's book on *Teaching Women's History*⁵ as a required reference for class on History of women).

Based on such significance mentioned afore, this paper will focus on two different related-issues: theorizing a new model of history and enriching women's portrait in the history of Indonesia. It will focus primarily on the history of Aceh Empire in 1641-1699 wherein four Queens controlled the political power of the kingdom sequentially for about 60 years. It will highlight some following questions: 1) why and how were women in the history marginalized?; 2) how did historically the four Queens of Aceh controlled the highest position of the government?; 3) how was the discourse on female leadership constructed in their time?; 4) to what degree did religion or religious interpretation become the means or give influence in marginalizing women from political power and public arena?

Dealing with those questions, Lombard argues (as cited by Rizal) that the restriction of women's freedom was resulted from the expansion of harbors and of Religion of Islam.⁶ The figures discussed in this paper is hoped to be able to examine the assertion. Portrait of four female leaders in Aceh during 1641-1699 will reveal how women play significant role and possessed freedom and power both in political and religious arenas. On the other side it shows discourse and debate over women leadership in the name of Islamic norms which will be useful in scrutinizing the degree of the influence of religious interpretation in restricting women's public roles more particularly political arena.

5 Gerda Lerner, *Teaching Women's History* (American Historical Association: Washington, 1981).

6 JJ Rizal, "Jejak Perempuan dalam Historiografi Indonesia" (Women's footstep in the Historiography on Indonesia), *Journal Perempuan Untuk Pencerahan dan Kestaraan*, no. 52 (March 2007), 24.

B. Theoretical Framework: Androcentricism in History and Religion

1. From Androcentric to Androgynous

Modern Indonesian historiography was just begun in around 1957 at the same time an Indonesian National History Seminar was conducted in Yogyakarta.⁷ The awareness and emergence of fundamental question on the modern Indonesian historiography, rather than the traditional one, arose during the event in line with the emergency of the nationalization or "*pribumisasi*" (the process of accommodating indigenous values or aspects) of Indonesian historiography. Two fundamental questions became the essential agenda of the seminar, including: a) how to emphasize the historical role of Indonesian people in the history of Indonesia; b) what about the subjectivity and objectivity of historiography, as well as the production of history.

Discussing a new model of history that accommodates women's voices and pictures as well as gives them a specific part and time in the context of modern Indonesian historiography is urgent. It is because the existing model of Indonesian history (the production of history) has marginalized women's historical roles and neglected their rights to be heard. One of evidences has been the difficulty to find a history book depicting the Queens of Aceh or of Javanese empires. Kleinberg S. Jay argues:

*"if history is a collective memory of human being in giving a moral judgment for nowadays, the absence of women in the history is historical misleading and making the history as if it is only men who participated in the praiseworthy events, by representing false depiction on what actually happens."*⁸

According to Kuntowijoyo, the male dominated-history of Indonesia is resulted from the existing "androcentric" characteristics of the history.⁹ It has been all about male activities as it reveals the history of politics and military, two fields that relate primarily to the discourse of power and physical strength, and have been culturally and generally men's domain. To uncovering women's existence in the history, Kuntowijoyo proposes what

7 Kuntowijoyo, *Metodologi Sejarah* (Tiara Wacana. Yogyakarta. 2003), 1.

8 As quoted by Lolly Suhenty, "Menemukan Sejarah Perempuan yang Dihilangkan", *Journal Perempuan Untuk Pencerahan dan Keadilan*. no. 52 (March 2007), 37.

9 Kuntowijoyo, *Metodologi Sejarah..*, 99.

so-called androgynous history: a more just history wherein both women and men participate and have their places equally.¹⁰ The themes in this model of history might include women's role in the socio-economic fields (this includes politics), biography or prosopography of female prominent figures, women's movements, women's portrait in the art, the history of family, women's culture, women's relation to men, and women's groups or workers, as well as ethnicity.

Feminist historians, one of the foremost ones is Gerda Lerner, have also struggled with the absent of women in the history. In the first phase of feminists' effort their mission had been to revive and reevaluate the missing of women both individually and collectively from the history, to eventually write the story of women's merits. In the next phase the feminist historians tried to explore what so-call complementary history, which means the history that perceives women's role as only the contributors to the movements designed mostly by men. The following phase had been a struggle on the epistemological level as identified by postmodern thinkers on the history. In this phase, Sandra Harding in her book *The Science Question in Feminism*,¹¹ and *Whose Science Whose Knowledge: Thinking from Women's Life*,¹² are the best examples of feminist's questioning of the "androcentric of science" which includes both social and natural sciences. In the context of Indonesia Kuntowijoyo's proposal in terms of Indonesian history is in line with this phase of feminist struggle.

2. Androcentricism in the Interpretation of Religion

In the context of religion, Androcentrism means that the religious traditions are constructed and developed by men and from men's perspective, and therefore the main focus has been the experience of men.¹³ Meanwhile, patriarchy indicates the dominance and superiority of men in the study of religion, discourse and religious practices. Religion or understanding of the religion, then, becomes sexist: it privileges male and the men's experience and place them as superior, while at the same time degrades women and considers them inferior or peripherals.

10 Kuntowijoyo, *Metodologi Sejarah..*, 110.

11 Sandra Harding, *Whose Science? Whose Knowledge? Thinking from Women's Lives* (New York: Cornell University Press, 1991).

12 Sandra Harding, *The Science Question in Feminism*, and *Whose Science Whose Knowledge: Thinking from Women's Life...*

13 Lucinda Joy Peach "Women and World Religions" (Upper Saddle River New Jersey: Pearson Education, 2002), 1-2.

Within the hegemony of androcentric, sexist and patriarchal interpretation of religion and culture, women's experience and contribution to religion do not have part in the history and discourse of religion.¹⁴ Women remain voiceless and marginalized from the process of the formulation of religious doctrines and beliefs and hence disappear from the history of religion. Androcentricism, sexism and patriarchal construction lead to the emergency of *gender differentiation, gender segregation, and gender injustice*.

C. Locating Women's Role and Power in the History of Aceh Kingdom

The kingdom of Aceh was established in early 16th century and developed immediately into an incredibly major power in North Sulawesi as well as one of the most important regions in Indonesia and Malaysia. The Aceh court was a military and imperial center whose economic survival depended on its being able to function as a central port for the region.¹⁵ Following the victory of Aceh in a war against Johor and Malaka, Aceh was well known for the most powerful military trop through all the straits.¹⁶ In the early 17 century, Sultan Iskandar Muda developed Aceh into a most significant powerful empire in the western archipelago and the dominant power in the straits.

Sultan Iskandar Thani Alauddin Mughayat Syah (1636-1641) eventually was appointed to be the King soon after the dead of Sultan Iskandar Muda. During Sultan Iskandar Thani's reign there were no more aggressive campaigns and the court was most noted as a center of Islamic learning.¹⁷ Sultan Iskandar Thani's period was quite short and soon after he passed away, his wife, Ratu Taj ul Alam, replaced the position of King and became the Queen of Aceh for 34 years (from 1641 to 1675). Following Iskandar Thani's death, the elite of Aceh asserted their influence and self interest and prevented the emergence of another power ruler in Aceh until the nineteenth century. The next three periods of Aceh empires following the leadership of Ratu Taj ul Alam were historically led by women, the Queens (1641-1699). From 1699 after the periods of Queens to 1838 eleven (11) inconsequential sultans, but no more Queens, led Aceh kingdom and the primary

14 Inayah Rohmaniyah, "Andosentrisme dan Seksisme dalam Tafsir Agama," *Welfare Jurnal Ilmu Kesejahteraan Sosial*, Vol.2 No, 1, Fakultas Dakwah dan Komunikasi UIN Sunan Kalijaga Yogyakarta, Desember 2013.

15 M. C. Ricklefs, *A History of Modern Indonesia since c. 1200* (Houndmills: PALGRAVE, 2001) 37.

16 Saskia E. Wieringa, "Kata Pengantar" (Introduction), dalam Endriana Noerdin, *Politik Identitas Perempuan*, xii

17 M. C. Ricklefs, *A History of Modern Indonesia ...*, 40

struggle within these periods of kingdom was war against the England and Dutch. The kingdom of Aceh was emerging as a major power just as the Portuguese arrived in the region.

In the context of political level, elite groups were standing under the sultans whose support was urgent and essential to the sultan's power. The elites, or known as *uleebalang*, however often required rigorous persuasion or suppression to give that support.¹⁸ In the time of Iskandar Muda's reign the members of elite were successfully persuaded to support the sultan, but the following *sultans* and *sultanahs* had less success.

As a culturally and religiously patriarchal society, Aceh incredibly had a number of female leaders sitting as the Queens, legislators, admirals as well as the leaders of guerrilla wars against the Dutch¹⁹ during Dutch long colonialization era in Indonesia. The written history, nevertheless, often negated those women's figures. It has been quite difficult to find a particular historical book depicting those female leaders. Preliminary research shows the fact that most of books on Aceh do not cover the four powerful queens of Aceh. A small number of books reveal them merely in a very brief or at glance, as a small part of the whole books.

1. *Sri Sultanah Tajul alam Safiah Ad-din: Her Excellence and Strategic Position*

Sri Sultanah Tajul alam Safiah Ad-din, or well known for Sultanah Safiatudin Syah, was the oldest daughter of Sultan Iskandar Muda Meukuta Alam from the Princess Sani whose title was the Princess of Sendi Ratna Idra (1607-1636).²⁰ Together with other princess, she had an experience to study on history, philosophy, art, and mysticism and other modern sciences since she was only seven year old little girl. Hamzah Fansuri, Nuruddin ar-Raniri, and Seri Faqih Zaenul Abidin ibn Daim Masyur were among the great *ulama* who became her teachers. She liked reading and memorized almost all art literatures written by her teacher, Hamzah Fansuri.

Her great attention to knowledge directed her to assist Hamzah Fansuri financially to be able to develop his work that eventually

18 M. C. Ricklefs, *A History of Modern Indonesia since c. 1200*

19 Saiful Mahdi, *Teladan dari Perempuan Aceh* (database on-line) (accessed 26 December 2007); available from http://www.acehinstitute.org/opini_saifulmahdi_teladandariperempuanaceh.htm

20 Soedjono Dirdjosisworo, *Megawati dalam babar Sejarah Pemimpin Perempuan Indonesia* (Bandung: Mandar Maju, 1999), 6.

led him to be a famous man of letters. Likewise, she helped Abdur Rauf as-Sinkili and supported him to write books on law. She sent them to Malay, India, Baghdad, Makkah and Madinah to improve their knowledge and get trained on their field.

The princess grew to be a knowledgeable young woman with an integrated personality. When she transformed into an adult woman she got married with the son of Pahang Sultan from the Malay Peninsula. Few years after her wedding, her father, Sultan Iskandar Muda, passed away in 1636 and the court authorities of Aceh Kingdom appointed her husband the Sultan of Aceh and gave him a title "Sultan Iskandar Thani".²¹ The Sultan, nevertheless, passed away immediately after 5 years of his reign (1641) and leaved no child from his marriage with the Princess Safiatuddin.

Only three days after her husband's death, the court of Aceh Kingdom which consisted of elites and *ulama* held a meeting led by Qadlil Maliki Adil Syekh Nuruddin ar-Raniri and appointed Safiatuddin the Sultanah of Aceh. A debate over the legitimacy of woman as a leader of the Kingdom among the court members initially emerged. But, based on Syekh ar-Raniri's advice to separate between religion and politics, the Princess Safiatuddin eventually was appointed the Sultanah of Aceh Kingdom and the Court gave her the title Sri Sultan Tajul Alam Safiatuddin.²²

Ar-Raniri is well-known for his reputation as an Islamic mystic and scholar from Gujarat, India, who worked for several years in the court of the Sultan of Aceh. In this stage, religion and Ar-Raniri's interpretation on religious norms did not hinder woman to lead the kingdom of Aceh. His argumentation to separate between religion and politics did not automatically illustrate his androgynous paradigm, but at least indicates how local wisdom played an important role in solving contextual problem. It accordingly confirms the important role of religious leader in either creating a space for or marginalizing woman.

The Queen Safiatuddin ruled Aceh Darussalam Kingdom for about 35 years from 1641-1675 M, a quite long period of leadership. The Kingdom during her time was in a critical situation due to the decrease of warfare ability following the death of Sultan Iskandar Muda and Sultan Iskandar Thani. The situation became worse as the people who were against the Queen's leadership (female leadership) remained attempting to challenge and take over her

21 Rusdi Sufi, "Sultanah Safiatuddin Syah" in Ismail Sofyan etc, ed *Wanita Utama Nusantara Dalam Lintasan Sejarah* [Prominent Women in Indonesia in the Glimpse of History], (tp, tt) 43.

22 Rusdi Sufi, "Sultanah Safiatuddin Syah ...", 43.

power. At the same time, the Dutch colonialists living within the Kingdom provoked the rebels and took advantage of this critical situation. The elites of Aceh and the society, however, supported their queen consistently.

Nuruddin ar-Raniri and Abdur Rauf as-Sinkili, the two great Ulama who were also her teachers, supported the Queen Safiatuddin significantly in running the Kingdom.²³ Islam, modern sciences, culture, economics and literature developed harmoniously under her leadership. Aceh developed to be a central of knowledge and a city of university. The Queen Safiatuddin was not only the Queen but also a religious leader, along with the two well-known *Ulama* as her consultants. She paid her great attention and enthusiasm in developing Islam and in doing so she sent *Ulama* from Aceh to Thailand in 1668 to teach and spread religion of Islam in the region.

The Queen struggled with the establishment of democracy in the Kingdom and opened up equal access for both woman and man. This was the issue that the previous Kings did not pay enough attention to. She created policies that required to involve women in every sphere of life, both in the domestic and public arenas, and gave an instruction to every center for education to open widely the access and participation for women. She provided broader access for women to work in every governmental institution and division, including in military. She further maintained and strengthened *Kemala Cahaya*, a division of Kingdom guardian established by her father, which consisted of women only, as well as *Armada Inong Bale* (Widows Armada) whose famous first commander was Laksamana Malahayati.

The Queen also reformed the People's Consultative *Council* by increasing the number of female members of the council to become 22 out of 74 members. The significant representation of women in the council led her to enact laws on women's life improvement and empowerment in the society. Hence, under the Queen Safiatuddin leadership, the Kingdom of Aceh developed to become a leading and prosperous empire and society. The Queen passed away on October, 23rd 1675 M and another woman, Sri Sultanah Nurul Alam Naquiddin Syah, replaced the position of Queen of the Kingdom of Aceh.

23 Soedjono Dirdjosisworo, *Megawati dalam babar*, 8.

2. *Sri Sultan Nurul Alam Naqiatuddin Syah (1675-1677): Her Political Strategy and Governmental Reformation*

The successor of The Queen Safiatuddin Syah was Sultanah Naqiatuddin, a princess who was appointed the Queen and was endowed the title Sri Sultan Nur Alam Naqiatuddin Syah. Her period of reign was quite short; it lasted only for two years. It has been also difficult to find enough data on her step foots in the governmental arena. The Queen had her genealogical root from the son of Sayid al-Mukammil, from the University of Kebangsaan Malaysia.

During her short reign, the Queen Naqiatuddin Syah had successfully made such important development and reformation in the governmental level. One of the reformations was the reformulation of governmental structure. She formed a centralized government and divided the governmental region into three regional districts, the west, east, and south of Aceh Kingdom. She distributed the internal governmental affairs into three *Panglima Sagi*. The *Panglima* functioned to control and monitor the affectivity and extensiveness of the implementation of the central governmental policies that was under the head of district, the *Uleebalang*.²⁴ The book *Tajus Salatin* depicted that when the Queen Naqiatuddin ruled the Kingdom of Aceh, the fire destroyed the great mosques of Baiturrahman and the Queen's palace as well. The Queen, eventually, passed away on January 1678.

3. *Ratu Inayat Zakiatuddin Syah (1677-1688): Her Diplomatic and Networking Capacity*

Following the death of Sri Sultan Naqiatuddin, another woman was appointed the Queen to replace the position of the death Sultanah. She was a daughter of Sultan Muhammad Syah. The Court endowed her the title Paduka Sri Sultanah Inayat Syah Zakiatuddin Berdaulat Zil Allah fil Alam.²⁵

Sri Sultanah Inayat Syah was 40 year old when ruled the Kingdom and appointed Syaikh Abdul Rauf as her consultant. She requested her consultant to write a commentary book on *Arba'in* codification (book on *hadith*). She was a physically strong and politically smart woman with heavy and strong voice. When the England colonials arrived in the land of Aceh from Madras in

24 Rusdi Sufi & Muhammad Gade Ismail, "Ratu Nurul Alam, Inayat Syah dan Kamalat Syah, in ...4.

25 Rusdi Sufi & Muhammad Gade Ismail, "Ratu Nurul Alam", 66.

1684 and asked her consent to build a trade center strengthened by the fortress, she refused their proposal. She understood the meaning of fortress for the foreigners. Yet, she allowed them to build a merely office for trading at the harbor of Aceh. This story illustrated the great and strong political capability of the Queen and her diplomatic strategy.

The queen accordingly showed her capacity on building a networking. There was a story about a messenger from Makkah, el Hajj Yusuf E. Qadri, who arrived in Aceh in 1683. The queen welcomed him and accepted the gift from the King Syarif Barakat with full of enthusiasm. She hold a big ceremony to greet the guest. The messenger felt incredibly pleased with the Queen's hospitality. Upon his returning home to Mecca he reported to the King Syarif Barakat the excellence and perfection of the Queen's kingdom in Aceh. He informed the King that the Acehnese were good Muslims who life peacefully in togetherness.

The Queen ruled the kingdom for eleven (11) years. She passed away on October 1688 and her successor was Ratu Kamalat Zainatuddin Syah.

4. *Ratu Kamalat Zainatuddin Syah (1688-1699): Struggle against the Dispute on Female Leadership*

Soon after the Queen Inayat passed away, Ratu kumalat Zainatuddin Syah was appointed the next Sultan by the Court. She was one of the relatives of the Queen. One source mentioned that she was the Queen Safiatuddin's daughter in law, but another argued that she was the young sister of the Queen Zakiatuddin Syah.²⁶

Prior to the queen Zainatuddin Syah's coronation a strong debate over female leadership reemerged. The Kingdom elites broke into two frictions with different point of view on the authority of female leader. One group, which consisted of rich people of Aceh were against her coronation. This group wanted to return the highest position of political power of Aceh kingdom back to the hand of man. Another group, were in favor of her being a Queen of Aceh Kingdom and support her.

The debate on the female leadership reappeared in line with the position of the opponent group that became stronger in this period, while the group was previously powerless and went

26 Rusdi Sufi & Muhammad Gade Ismail, "Ratu Nurul Alam....", 70

underground. This group was the latent supporter of *Ulama* who kept resisting against female leadership even since the first Queen was appointed. It was only the *Panglima Sagi* that continued to support and defend the idea of having woman as a Queen.

The dispute on the female leader in this period led the groups to physically fight against each other. In the beginning, the group of *Panglima Sagi* was successful in defending their stand and *Kamat Syah* remained to be the Queen of Aceh. Yet, the supporter group later could not preserve their idea, as the opponent employed a tricky and tactic strategy. They proposed to leave the controversy about the legitimacy of female leader with the King and *Ulama* in Mecca and asked their *fatwa* or religious advice for the solution. Hence, the religious leaders of opposition group in Aceh legitimated and justified their position based on the letter from Mecca notifying all the head and people in Aceh that the appointment of woman as a Sultanah is against Islamic *syariah*.²⁷ The opponents eventually got succeeded since the elites including *Panglima Sagi* could no longer resist against the decision from Mecca.

Following the victory of *ulama* in the dispute, *The Queen Kamalat Zainatuddin Syah* was immediately abdicated in October 1699 and an Arabian descendant man, Sultan *Badrull Alam Syarif Hasyim Jamal ad-Din*, took over the throne.²⁸ This was the end of woman's access to the highest level of political power in the history of Aceh, and since then the power of Aceh government never again falls into the hands of a woman.

D. Androcentric Interpretation as the means of Marginalizing Women

Androcentric model of understanding of religion in the one side, and gender in the other side have played central role in the process of construction and reconstruction of Aceh since 17 century.²⁹ In the early history of Islam and of Queen's era in Aceh in 1641, prior to *Safiatuddin* coronation, the first Queen of Aceh Kingdom, there was a debate among the court members over the legitimacy of woman as a leader of the Kingdom. The debate took place since the Sultan did not have a male descendant. The dispute was whether or not the appointment

27 Kamaruzzaman Bustamam Ahmad, *Kesultanan wanita Aceh*

28 Rusdi Sufi & Muhammad Gade Ismail, "Ratu Nurul Alam",73.

29 Endriana Noerdin, *Politik Identitas Perempuan Aceh* (Jakarta: Women Research Institute, 2005), 12.

of female Sultanah was against Islamic law. The reason was basically rooted in the stereotypical argument that woman was lack of reason, which was socially constructed (gender) but found justification from the androcentric and patriarchal understanding of religion.

Islam, according to this opponent group, did not allow woman to be any kind of leader, including a leader in family, in prayer, as well as in politics or government (Kingdom). The book of *Tajus Salatin* (The Sultans' Crown) written by Buchari al-Jauhari indicates the position of those who are against female leaders. It highlights justice as a country foundation, and to create what so-call justice a leader has to be: a) mature; b) knowledgeable; c) good looking; d) generous; e) remembering other's merit ;f) brave; g) remembering the kingdom h) looking for knowledgeable and reasonable, and the King should be; i) *a man*, since woman is lack of reason.³⁰

The Queen in the context of Aceh was appointed unintentionally while there was no man to be the King. The book of *Tajus Salatin* is against female leadership in the highest position of political power. It however is acceptable in the situation when a male heredity is not available. The problems of being a Queen in Aceh, therefore, were: 1) the *ulama* was firmly against and never acknowledged the Queen's authority and rejected to admit it as an ideal model for future generation; 2) her power was perceived to be so decreasing [not as legitimated and powerful as King's] that the Queen was disable to resolve a fight between political and economical elites in the region; 3) the Queen had become powerless to fight against VOC domination and defended the region from the colonial power.

Yet, the supporter group argued that from their Islamic point of few, Safiatuddin met all religious requirements to be a Sultanah along with her morality and knowledge necessitated by a Sultan. She therefore was believed to be eligible to be a Sultanah. Abdurrahman as Sinkili, a prominent and honorable religious leader in the Kingdom of Aceh at that time who was also Safiatuddin's teacher, was included in this group. He suggested that political affairs should be separated from religious matters.

Religion continued to be used to hamper woman from being the leader of Aceh Kingdom, while at the same time religion had also been a forceful reason to allow woman to lead. The dispute between those *ulama* who were against female leader and those who support, in fact, had played significant role in defining woman's access to the highest level of political power. The debate over the eligibility of woman to be

30 As quoted by Asvi Warman Adam, "Perempuan Dalam Sejarah Lelaki", *Journal Perempuan Untuk Pencerahan dan Kesetaraan*, no. 52 (March 2007), 15.

the leader of Aceh Kingdom remained continuing until the last Queen of Aceh, *Ratu Kamalat Zainatuddin Syah*, took control over the Empire. The period of Kamalat Syah reign was seen as the "transition phase" wherein a strong theological debate over the women leadership emerged and unfortunately arrived at conclusion that women eventually have been regarded as unqualified to be a queen.

In the earlier periods, the opponent Ulama who refused of having female leader were less powerful than those who supported the Queen. They, nevertheless, kept looking for the strategy to abdicate woman from the throne and eventually found an idea to involve *ulama* from Mecca. In the name of Islamic law and orthodoxy the mecca *Ulama* issued a letter banning woman to be the King. This shows how the absence of woman from the highest political power has relation with and been resulted from people's understanding of religion. It does not do anything with woman's capability of being a political leader.

Islam has been existing in Aceh since 13 Century, yet the *ulama* or religious leaders did not directly took control over the political power in the region. The *ulama* eventually gained their influential dominant power in the politics after the collapse of Aceh Darussalam Kingdom in 1873.³¹ The establishment of *Persatuan Ulama Seluruh Aceh* (the unity of all Acehnese *Ulama* or PUSA) identified the beginning of *ulama* power in the region. The Ulama tried to reconstruct Aceh nationalism based on an androcentric and patriarchal Islamic *syariah* and since then the political atmosphere in Aceh has marginalized women.

According to Edriana's research on Aceh, women in Aceh had to deal with three different powers: 1) Indonesian Military power; 2) the GAM (Aceh Independence movement); and 3) patriarchal *ulama*.³² In the one hand the *Ulama* and GAM use women to be what so-call "The symbolic bearers of the Acehnese Muslim collective identity and honor." They make an effort to reconstruct Aceh nationalism and pinpoint women as the symbol of the power of Islam in the region. They regulated how women have to dress and wear what so-call "Islamic Clothing" in accordance with *ulama's* interpretation in that matter or otherwise the *ulama* and GAM would utilize their power to force the women. In the other hand, Indonesian military used the women as the means to destroy Acehnese opposition. They terrorized and fought against Acehnese by getting the women raped.

Acehnese women faced somewhat difficult dilemma. The *Ulama* historically have taken away women's access to the highest political power in the name of religion and use them to construct and maintain

31 Endriana Noerdin, *Politik Identitas Perempuan....*, 2.

32 Endriana Noerdin, *Politik Identitas Perempuan....*, 3.

their collective identity. However, women's struggle to fight against Indonesian military in fact strengthened the power of *ulama* to be more oppressive on women.

Aceh is well known for an Islamic region where religious values are dominant and become the heart of the socio-cultural life of society. As religious values decorate the public arena of the region, the patriarchal culture has been its heart of politics.³³ The prevailing patriarchal culture within the Aceheness political live unavoidably leads to the marginalization of women in public life.

E. Conclusion

The history of Indonesia and of religion in Indonesia has been a male dominated-history or what so-called *androcentric* history and, therefore, has marginalized women's history. A new model of androgynous history is urgent to develop a model of history that accommodates both women's and men's voices and stories and allows them to equally have their space.

The four Queens of Aceh historically and remarkably ruled the government for 60 years and were capable and recognizable to be qualified Queens with a lot of effort to defend and develop the Kingdom as well produced brilliant policies for the betterment of the kingdom. The debate over the legitimacy of female leadership had unfortunately hindered the contribution of women in the history of Aceh Kingdom. The victory of "conservative" *ulama* who utilized religion to take women's power away from political arena ended the history of Queens of Aceh. The issue similarly emerged while Megawati came forward to be the candidate of the President of Indonesia and, likewise, some *ulama* and Islamic parties or organizations politically refused her in the name of religion.

The portrait of queens of Aceh is an interesting story as the Aceh kingdom was the only Islamic empire in the world that previously allowed women to become the highest leader of political power in the government.³⁴ Four queens (Sri Sultanah Tajul alam Safiah Ad-din, Sri Sultanah Nurul Alam Natiyyah Ad-din, Sri Sultanah Zakiah Ad-din Johar Shah, dan Sri Sultanah Kemala Ad-din) ruled the empire for 60 years, until ultimately the dispute on female leadership in Islam in the

33 Amirudin, "Menyubversi Maskulinitas Aceh", *Harian Kompas*, Saturday, July 16, 2005.

34 Kamaruzzaman Bustamam Ahmad, *Kesultanan wanita Aceh abad ke-17*, (database on-line) (accessed 7 October 2007); available from <http://www.rsi.sg/malay/imej/view/20050516140253/1/.html>

region ended the women's access to the highest position of political domain.

This illustrate how religion and gender play an important role in order to justify collective identity and at the same time discrimination against women. In the context of Aceh, women's marginalization in the political arena and public life has been a long lasting serious problem as it has been intertwined with religious belief and political interest.

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