

## Of Silk and Steel: A Case-Study on Islamic Conflict Resolution Strategies in Aceh Dar al-Salam in the 17th Century

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“God says that since antiquity there are no better things than these two things; namely, think always about God above all and always do good to other people. That the Governor-General on his part I trust shall do. Over such actions work, one is more and more blessed and is honoured and praised by all other men in this world. The Acehnese and the Dutch have for many years continued in peace and friendship, but now as it has pleased God, we have come to war, but these differences are small, and with the help from God Almighty and the good resolve of a good outcome from the Governor-General, once again the Acehnese and the Dutch are one. Therefore, the Governor-General, herein, would do no other but to settle [the differences]. The wise people in earlier times say to warn [us] that always remember two things, namely always think foremost of God and of death and forget two things, all the virtues that we do to other men and all the bad things that are done to us, so that our conscience will remain pure and calm”.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Jacobus Anne van der Chijs et al., ed., *Dagh-Register Gehouden int Casteel Batavia vant Passerende daer ter plaetse als over Geheel Nederlands-India Anno 1624–1682 [The Daily Journals of Batavia Castle]*, 31 vols, Leiden: Martinus Nijhoff Publishers, Batavia: G. Kolff, 1887– 1931, *Dagh-Register*, 1659, pp. 103–4

- Letter from Sultanah Safiatuddin Syah of Aceh dar al-Salam to the Dutch Governor General Joan Maetsuyker in Batavia in 1659<sup>1</sup>

Sultanah Safiatuddin Syah (r. 1641–75) ruled Aceh for 34 years, even longer than her father, the renowned Sultan Iskandar Muda (r. 1607–36) who ushered in what was deemed as the “golden age” in Acehnese history. In the seventeenth century, Aceh’s influence expanded and reached as far south as Padang in Sumatra and Johor on the Malay Peninsula. Widowed at the age of 29 when her husband, Sultan Iskandar Thani (r. 1636–41) died unexpectedly, she succeeded her late husband when she was inaugurated as Sultanah Tajul Alam Safiatuddin Syah three days later. In an unprecedented and never repeated episode in Acehnese history she was succeeded by three women rulers in succession: Sultanah Nur Alam Naqiatuddin Syah (r. 1675–78); Sultanah Inayat Zakiatuddin Syah (r. 1678–88) and; Sultanah Kamalat Zainatuddin Syah (r. 1688–99).<sup>2</sup>

The Verenigde Oostindische Compagnie (VOC - Dutch United East India Company), henceforth the VOC, arrived in this region in 1602 and after establishing themselves in Batavia, their centre of power, they gradually strengthened their political and commercial control by conquering Melaka in 1641. In the mid-seventeenth century, their main political and commercial rival in the Straits of Melaka was Aceh. Aceh controlled most of the lucrative tin in Perak and pepper in Sumatra West Coast (SWC) to almost the southern half of Sumatra up to Padang. In an effort to capture these lucrative resources, the Dutch adopted a few strategies ranging from diplomacy, negotiating treatise and when these failed, pressured Aceh by blockading the ports of Aceh, Perak and SWC. These tensions nearly led to war and such was the case when the queen decided to send this letter to the Dutch Governor General Joan Maetsuyker in Batavia in 1659.

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<sup>1</sup> Sher Banu Khan, *Sovereign Women in a Muslim Kingdom: The Sultanahs of Aceh 1641-1699*, Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 2017, pp. 179

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 2-3

Besides the external threat she faced from the Dutch, Sultanah Safiatuddin faced serious internal challenges and conflicts from her own court where different factions of the male elites or the *orang kaya* constantly jostled for power resulting in a series of coup and counter-coup in the 1650s. This report from Joan Maetsuyker describes one such event:

“... from a free burgher vessel came the following rumour that the whole court there [Aceh] was in an uproar. The *grooten laxamana* [great Laksamana], with two or three of his accomplices together with some members of the council who did not favour the Company had rebelled against the *oppersten rijxraet* Maradja Siri Maradja [first Councillor, Maharaja Sri Maharaja], a loyal and exceptional friend of the Dutch nation, and publicly accused him of wanting to seize the throne with the help of the Dutch. This caused such a great revolt at court under the *orang kaya* and their followers that for a long time no audience or access to the court was given and it was uncertain whether the Queen was sick, dead or alive...”<sup>1</sup>

- Governor General Joan Maetsuyker, in his report to the Heren Zeventien found in the *Generale Missiven* of 1651

As mentioned in the report, there were two factions – the Laksamana’s and the Maharaja Sri Maharaja’s and they were in turn divided between those who were pro-Dutch (Maharaja) and anti-Dutch (Laksamana). The *orang kaya* were split in terms of the strategies to be adopted in dealing with the Dutch. The pro-Dutch favoured accommodation whilst the anti-Dutch wanted to show them the door even at the expense of risking a war with the Company.

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<sup>1</sup> Willem Phillipus Coolhaas, ed., *Generale Missieven van Gouverneurs-Generaale en Raden aan Heren XVII der Verenigde Oostindische Compagnie*, [General Correspondence of the Governor Generals and Council to the Seventeen Gentlemen of the Dutch East Indies Company], vol. 2, Leiden: Martinus Nijhoff Publishers, 1964. This news was received on 13 and 25 August 1651: *Generale Missiven*, vol. 2, 1639 to 1655, pp. 519–20

The above two quotes – the letter and report set the context for an in-depth case-study to analyse the conflict-resolution strategies adopted by the Sultanah of Aceh in dealing with an external non-Muslim power such as the Dutch East India Company on the one hand and the internal factional struggles in the Acehnese court amongst the male political elites. This examination of the strategies of Sultanah Safiatuddin is significant in identifying, understanding and constructing Islamic conflict-resolution frameworks, ethics and processes. The Qurʾān and Hadīth are the major sources Muslims reference to formulate answers to almost all aspects of society, however I propose that we also examine Islamic societies where they contain beliefs, values (worldviews), history and tradition that can serve as rich bases to formulate conflict-resolution models besides Islamic theology and jurisprudence.

An examination of Islamic societies such as in the Acehnese case, highlights the importance of local cultural context – where *adat* (customary practices) cannot be separated from religion where both *adat* and Islam intersect. Another important reason is to understand how local, indigenous practices shape leadership models and strategies of conflict-resolution in this region. The Malay, Nusantara, Southeast Asian Islamic contexts may illuminate unique models that may be different from other Islamic contexts such as in the Middle East. At present, there has been very little research on conflict-resolution in the Nusantara region compared to those in the Muslim heartlands of the Middle East.

Another reason to examine the Acehnese model as a case-study is that this research could lead to an interesting comparative research between the two sultanates of Aceh and Brunei dar al-Salam in terms of how they approached and strategised on external policy, diplomacy and internal security based on Islamic conflict resolution models. A cursory look at both sultanates reveal many similarities which could be bases of a comparative study. For example, in Brunei, the importance of three pillars – Malayness, Islam and *Beraja* (MIB). These three elements played important roles in the Acehnese sultanate in the seventeenth century too. Furthermore, the rulers

knew each other – Sultan Hassan took some ideas from Iskandar Muda of Aceh. Brunei too nearly could have been ruled by a Muslim woman – Tengku Norehsani, the daughter of Sultan Ahmad Tajuddin II, Brunei's 27th ruler and Tengku Rohani (daughter of the Sultan of Selangor).<sup>1</sup>

An analysis of Sultanah Safiatuddin Syah's strategies on conflict-resolution with the Dutch East India Company (VOC) in an Islamic context I return to the letter which begins this article. In this letter, Sultanah Safiatuddin was almost giving a sermon to the Dutch governor general, using Islam to exhort the Dutch to undertake good deeds. Unlike in the past, when her male predecessors—especially Sultan Al-Kahar— used Islam to wage jihad (holy war) against the Portuguese, religion was used not as a means to show the difference between the kafir (infidels) and Muslims but as a common denominator, a universal call to do good and bring peace to all mankind. This letter was carefully composed to persuade the Dutch not to wage war against Aceh, an appeal to peace by diplomacy, as tensions between the VOC and Aceh reached a climax in the mid-1650s. These were due to the VOC's strategy of gun-boat diplomacy where the Dutch blockaded the Aceh and Perak Rivers to pressure Aceh to sign away some commercial concessions to the Dutch for Perak's tin. As Perak was then a vassal of Aceh, negotiations on Perak's tin trade was handled at the Acehnese court between the Acehnese and the Dutch with representatives from the Perak court present. These negotiations dragged on for years since the Sultanah refused to grant toll-free trade in Perak to the Dutch because these would threaten Perak's tin revenue and would thus "take the bread from her subjects' mouths".<sup>2</sup> In retaliation to the numerous blockades of the Perak River, the anti-Dutch faction of the Perak elite took it upon themselves to undertake a coup and murdered some Company officials who had been sent on a mission to Perak to build the Company's factory in 1651. These murders increased the already significant tensions between

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<sup>1</sup> Bob Reece, "The Little Sultan": Ahmad Tajuddin II of Brunei, Gerard MacBryan and Malcolm MacDonald", *Borneo Research Bulletin*, vol. 40, pp.81-128, pp. 95

<sup>2</sup> NA, VOC 1171, Rapport substantieel aen d' Ed Heer Cornelis van der Lijn, 1649, *Report to the Honourable Cornelis van der Lijn*, f. 185R

Aceh and the VOC since besides the high-handed tactics of blockades, the Dutch demanded reparation for the murders. War was almost inevitable between Aceh and the VOC in the decade of 1650.

The fact that this war did not happen was due largely to the Sultanah's conflict-resolution strategies in dealing with the Dutch despite the existence of a very hostile anti-Dutch faction of the Acehnese elite. Due to her style of diplomacy, war was averted and unlike most of the other Muslim sultanates, such as Makassar and Bantam which fell into Dutch hands in 1669 and 1682 respectively, Aceh remained independent and was the last Muslim bastion against Dutch imperialism submitting to Dutch rule only after a thirty year war in 1903. In analysing her foreign policy, I argue that the Sultanah's strategies were very much shaped by her leadership style that was based on Islam and *adat* as sources of legitimacy and action compared to her predecessors who were based on pre-Islamic conceptions of charismatic prowess, *sakti* (magic) and semi-divine kingship. In analysing her 1659 letter, one cannot help but be struck by the normative value behind the letter i.e. Allah as a source of authority and action.

### **Islam as a Source of Legitimacy and Authority**

The very name of the kingdom—Aceh dar al-Salam, Aceh the Abode of Peace—shows that Islam played an important if not integral role in the kingdom from its inception. According to Ito, by the end of the sixteenth century, Islamic law had become an integral part of the sultanate's law.<sup>1</sup> The ruler was assisted by a group of religious judges headed by the Kadhi Malik al-Adil and administered law and order in the realm. According to these sources and information from the *Adat* Aceh, the kingdom had four courts of law: one pertaining to ritual, family and inheritance; a second dealing with criminal cases; a third concerning commercial law; and the last pertaining to the purely religious requirements and observances, such as praying, fasting and so on. As Muslim jurists did not recognise any

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<sup>1</sup> Takeshi Ito, *The World of the Adat Aceh: A Historical Study of the Sultanate of Aceh*, PhD thesis, Australian National University, 1984, pp. 155

distinction between civil, criminal and other branches of law, the first three courts were also based on Islamic law. However, cases were generally judged according to both *adat* (customary laws) and the law of the land (Islamic law).<sup>1</sup> This practice was very much in line with the famous Acehnese motto “*Adat bersendikan syarak*” (customs supported by Islamic law). It is, however, important to note that though Islamic law was already integral to the kingdom’s governance and an Islamic bureaucracy was in place, the administration and execution of Islam largely depended on the rulers.

Now, let us examine Aceh under the reign of Sultanah Safiatuddin Syah (1641-1675). Firstly, it is important to note that despite the dominant interpretation from the heartland of Islam in the Middle East, that Islam forbids a woman to rule, in the context of Aceh at that time both the elite and ulama (religious scholar) accepted her rule as legitimate. According to local *adat* and Acehnese ulama’s Islamic conception of leadership at that time, royal lineage, good attributes and being a Muslim were the criteria of becoming a ruler not one’s sex. Female rule was not seen as anathema to Islam; indeed, according to the *Taj us-Salatin*, (a political treatise written in Aceh in 1603) in the absence of a male heir, female rule was legal to prevent chaos.<sup>2</sup> A ruler was considered exemplary if she (or he) possessed good moral values and ruled according to Allah’s laws. My research shows that the Sultanah used both Islam and *adat* as her main basis of legitimacy and style of governance.

Firstly, the Sultanah took the full Muslim epithets of kingship, *zill Allah fi al-’alam* (Shadow of Allah on Earth) and *khalifat* Allah, that is, she was the *khalifat* or caliph and the sole sovereign ruler of Aceh. Here we see no separation between temporal and spiritual authority, contrary to some scholars’ suggestion that a separation between religious and temporal

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<sup>1</sup> Ibid., pp. 174

<sup>2</sup> Khalid M. Hussain, ed., *Taj us-Salatin*, Kuala Lumpur: Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka, 1992, pp. 60

authority was necessary to enable the Sultanah to rule Aceh only in the temporal sense.<sup>1</sup>

In this only surviving original Malay letter from Sultanah Taj al Alam to King Charles II of England, 1661,<sup>2</sup> she states-

*“Sitemi yang maha mulia daripada Paduka sri sultan al-muazzam wa’al khaqan al mukarram Taj al-Alam Safiyyat al-Din Syah berdaulat Zill Allah fil-alam yang diatas singgahsana takhta kerajaan negeri Aceh Dar al-Salam, ialah khalifat Tuhan [my emphasis] seru alam sekelian”*

“A most honoured missive from Her Majesty, the great sultan and the illustrious king, Taj al- Alam Safiyyat al Din Syah, the sovereign one, Shadow of Allah on earth, who is on the throne of the kingdom of Aceh, Abode of Peace, she is the vicegerent of Allah of the whole world”

Unlike her male counterparts however, Safiatuddin adopted the title of *khalifat* not in the egoistic and narcissistic conception of Allah’s shadow on earth following the pre-Islamic conception of the king as semi-divine, but the humble conception of *khalifat* as Allah’s humble servant, vicegerent/deputy on earth to execute Allah’s laws. This is how Sultanah Safiatuddin describes her role in the only surviving Malay letter of 1661-

“[W]ho manifests Allah’s wisdom and blessings, who upholds Allah’s laws, who clarifies those that are in doubt, whose shine brings forth Allah’s light and goodness, who exhorts people to Allah’s path, who treats Allah’s creations with mercy, who dispenses Allah’s justice with utmost care, who

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<sup>1</sup> Rusdi Sufi, “Sultanah Safiatuddin Syah”, *Wanita Utama Nusantara dalam Lintasan Sejarah [Prominent Women of the Archipelago in the Course of History]*, ed. Ismail Sofyan, M. Hasan Basry and Ibrahim Alfian, Jakarta: Jayakarta Agung Offset, 1994, pp. 43

<sup>2</sup> Annabel-Teh Gallop, “Gold, silver and lapis lazuli: Royal letters from Aceh in the 17th C” in Reid, Feener & Daly (eds.) *Mapping the Acehnese Past*, Leiden: KITLV Press, 2011



hides that which is ugly and forgives those who have sinned,  
and whose words are gracious”

These roles which she assigned to herself in her letters are unique and they are not found in her male predecessors’ letters. So, based on these Islamic principles of governance it is not surprising that Islam forms her basis of diplomacy and conflict-resolution strategies.

### **Peacebuilding as a Central Islamic Precept**

Safiatuddin’s diplomacy is in line with the concept of peace-building which is a central Islamic precept, a moral value, which is closely linked to justice and human flourishing. The Qurʾān commends *sulh* (conciliation or settlement) as the superior moral course of action to be taken by disputing parties. Reconciliation is the best course, even though people are often swayed by greed [from reaching an amicable solution].<sup>1</sup> The Qurʾān clearly exhorts Muslims to make peace and reconcile between contending parties, but are there exceptions to this general rule? Are there situations where compromises and peaceful settlements of disputes are not desirable – in the case of conflicts in this case, between Muslims and non-Muslims?

In her 1659 letter, unlike her male predecessors, Sultanah Safiatuddin used Islam not to wage jihad against the non-Muslims but as a call for peace. Her policy is also contrary to the current dominant political Islamists extremist narratives urging all Muslims to wage jihad as mandatory for all Muslims supporting the clash of civilisation thesis.

The Qurʾānic discourse in this matter is complex and does not support a simple command or conclusion. Contexts and scholars’ interpretations of Qurʾānic verses complicate this matter further. Those who support the non-reconciliation thesis between Muslims and non-Muslims cite the so-called sword verses *al-Baqarah*: 216 and *at-Tawbah*: 5.

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<sup>1</sup> Sūrah *an-Nisā*: 128

“Fighting has been prescribed for you even though you find it displeasing. Perhaps you dislike something in which there is good for you and perhaps you find pleasing that which causes you harm. But Allah knows and you do not.”<sup>1</sup>

“...slay the idolaters wheresoever you find them, capture them, besiege them, and lie in wait for them at every place for ambush. But if they repent, and perform the prayer and give alms, then let them go their way. Truly Allah is Forgiving, Merciful.”<sup>2</sup>

It is important to note here that these verses directly referred to the context of war during the Prophet's ﷺ time and they referred to fighting against the Makkan polytheists who were at war with the Prophet ﷺ in Madīnah. These verses are not meant to be universal injunctions applicable at all times.

The current misinterpretation of the concept of jihad amongst Muslim Islamists and extremists has complicated the matter touching on Muslim and non-Muslim relations especially in matters of political and diplomatic relations. In the Qurʾān j.h.d. is defined as exerting oneself, taking extraordinary pains; to employ oneself vigorously and diligently. Exerting oneself in relation to something (one's evil inclinations, human enemy or Satan). The central value here is to struggle – to do good and overcome bad in the path of Allah (*amal ma'ruf nahin munkar*). 'Struggle' could be further categorised by internal and physical struggle where internal struggle against self refers to the discipline to resist temptations that oppress the soul. Physical struggle refers to the opposition against oppressions, chaos and injustices. The Qurʾān uses the word “*qital*” to refer to fighting and “*harb*” to refer to war but some Muslim scholars in early Muslim history of political and territorial expansion conflated jihad with *qital*, thus jihad has been taken by some Muslim scholars to mean legitimate warfare against non-Muslims. This early invocation of jihad as war and as

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<sup>1</sup> Sūrah al-Baqarah: 216

<sup>2</sup> Sūrah at-Tawbah: 5

a means to legitimate the early expansion of the Muslim Empire in the first century and the use of jihad in defensive wars as the source of legitimacy to fight against injustices and victimisation that prevailed during colonialism has made the use of the term problematic. Since then, jihad as a violent means of struggle is invoked by small groups of Muslims who are committed to achieving their objectives through violence. This invocation constitutes a selective and manipulative appropriation from Islamic text, tradition and history.

Contrary to the above tradition of political thought amongst some Muslim scholars, jihad is ordained to be waged defensively, in retaliation against those who fight against Muslims or have driven Muslims out of their homes and families. It is important to note that even waging war in self-defense is defined by clear rules such as not to kill civilians, women and children; aggression far from being legitimised is actually forbidden.

“Permission [to fight] is given to those against whom fighting has been initiated because they have been wronged, and Allah is able to help them...”<sup>1</sup> shows that fighting is allowed defensively and “Fight in the way of Allah those who fight you and do not commit aggression for Allah does not love aggressors. War must be just. Jihad must be a just war not a “holy war” as has been misappropriated by some dominant Muslim narratives.”<sup>2</sup>

Indeed, *sūrah al-Baqarah: 256* which upholds the principle of non-coercion in religion unambiguously and permanently militate against the conception of an offensive military jihad that may be waged against non-Muslims based on their faith. Seeking peace is the central tenet of the Qurʾān since it has 124 verses which exhort peaceful solutions to conflicts. Particular Islamic values that support a philosophy of conflict resolution are the universality and dignity of humanity, the equality of races and ethnic groups and the sacredness of human life. For example, *sūrah al-Mā'idah: 32* states that – “if anyone saved a life, it would be as if he saved humanity.”

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<sup>1</sup> *Sūrah al-Hajj: 39-40*

<sup>2</sup> *Sūrah al-Baqarah: 190*

Besides the Qurʾān, the constitution of Madīnah (*Sulh al Hdaybiyah*) is an example where the Prophet ﷺ laid out a consensual social and political structure where Muslims and non-Muslims enjoyed reciprocal rights and obligations. This is in line with the concept of *sulh* in terms of signing treaties to suspend fighting and establish peace. Muslim jurists have often said that an agreement of *sulh* is a binding contract and that it is among the most socially desirable of contracts.<sup>1</sup> Ali, the Prophet's ﷺ cousin is reported to have cited the Prophet's ﷺ conduct with non-Muslims in justification of his decision to accept arbitration with Mu'awiyah, that is the Prophet ﷺ had sought *sulh* with non-Muslims.<sup>2</sup>

Here I return to the first paragraph quoting the Sultanah Safiatuddin's letter to Governor-General Maetsuyker. Her main strategy here was to seek peace and conciliation – refer to my emphases on the underlined sentences where the main value embedded in this letter which informed her policy decisions were to create peace by first forgiving and forgetting.

One important condition for peace to take place is to forget what happened and to forgive by initiating new and friendly relations. Forgiveness plays a key role in the Qurʾān and in the Islamic value system, “who shun grave sins and indecencies and who when they are angry, they forgive”.<sup>3</sup> Ibn Is'haq wrote that the Prophet ﷺ always prayed when he was persecuted during the Makkan period saying, “Forgive them Lord, for they know not what they do”.<sup>4</sup>

Many other verses in the Qurʾān illustrate the importance of peace and friendship between Muslims and non-Muslims – “It may be that Allah will forge affection between you and those of them with whom you are in enmity. Allah is Powerful, and Allah is Forgiving, Merciful. Allah does not forbid you, with regard to those who did not fight you on account of religion and did

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<sup>1</sup> Khalid Abou Fadl, “Conflict Resolution as a Normative Value in Islam”, in Douglas Johnston, *Faith-Based Diplomacy Trumping Realpolitik*, Oxford: Oxford Scholarship Online, 2008, pp. 1-39, pp. 10

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 10

<sup>3</sup> *Sūrah as-Sūrā: 37*

<sup>4</sup> Mohammed Abu-Nimer, *Nonviolence and Peace Building in Islam: Theory and Practice*, Gainesville, Florida: University Press of Florida, 2003, pp. 67

not expel you from your homes, from treating them righteously and being just toward them. Truly Allah loves the just”.<sup>1</sup> and “O mankind! Truly we created you from a male and female, and We made you peoples and tribes that you may come to know one another”.<sup>2</sup>

Besides promoting peace with the VOC, the Sultanah also treated non-Muslim traders, travellers even missionaries in her kingdom well. Another characteristic of her reign which was related to achieving peace and harmony was religious tolerance. Sultanah Safiatuddin allowed Franciscan priests to minister to the Catholic community in Aceh. This practice was continued under her women successors Sultanah Naqiatuddin and Sultanah Zaqiatuddin. This practice was however discontinued when the last queen abdicated, and Aceh returned once more to male rule.

Sultanah Safiatuddin’s treatment of people of other faiths is in line with the Prophet’s ﷺ practice of tolerance and peaceful co-existence with the Jews and Christians and to recognise their right to freely practice their religion. Religious and cultural tolerance is a central precept in the Qur’ān. Abdulaziz Sachedina argued in his book *The Islamic Roots of Democratic Pluralism* that if Muslims were made aware of the centrality of Qur’ānic teachings about religious and cultural pluralism as a divinely ordained principle of peaceful coexistence among human societies, then they would spurn violence.<sup>3</sup>

The critical question here is – how much to compromise for the sake of peace? Were her accommodative strategies towards the Dutch a reflection of her position of weakness as alleged by scholars such as Kathirithamby-Wells and Barbara Andaya who claim that local polities had started to decline by the mid seventeenth century and were slowly subjugated by increasingly powerful western powers in the region? Her accommodative strategies towards the Dutch were also opposed by the hardliners in her own court. My research shows otherwise, whilst accommodating the Dutch

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<sup>1</sup> *Sūrah al-Mumtahanah*: 7-8

<sup>2</sup> *Sūrah al-Hujurāt*: 13

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 20

she fought hard to preserve her kingdom's and subjects' interests. For example, regarding the consistent Dutch pressures for her to sign treaties giving concessions such as toll-free trade for Perak's tin and Sumatra West Coast's pepper, which took decades of negotiations between both powers, Sultanah Safiatuddin always limited the concessions. For example, in terms of the prices fixed for tin, she ensured that it was not too low for her Perak subjects. In both Perak and SWC, she absolutely did not allow toll-free trade because that would take the revenue or "bread of her subjects' mouths". These compromises managed to avert war between Aceh and the Dutch in the decade of the 1650s. More importantly, this ultimately led to the protection of her kingdom and Aceh was able to maintain her independence when other Muslim polities that went to war with the VOC were defeated. Furthermore, these negotiations, acts of peace and diplomacy facilitated commerce to thrive in the "Age of Commerce" and Aceh remained as an important maritime trading centre in the region up to the end of the century.

Thus, in this case, her accommodative strategies which necessitated a degree of compromise were justified and far from weak since they affirmed the achievement of peace and not mere pacification. Peace-building becomes a high order value since it worked for the interest of the Sultanah's subjects and her kingdom.

#### **‘*Adl*, *Afu* and *Rahīm* as part of Islamic Conflict-Resolution Strategies**

Related to the principles and practices of peace in Islam are *tawhīd* (unity of Allah and humankind), *fitrah* (upholding peace as a duty and innate nature of every Muslim), ‘*adl* (justice which is the backbone of peace), *afu* (forgiveness) and *rahmā* and *rahīm* (compassion and mercy). The preoccupation of most good rulers and scholars in Islam was not with war but with the pursuit of justice, an essential element of the nonviolent pursuit of the resolution of conflict. Social justice is a major goal in Islam, for example the abolition of slavery, racial prejudice and equality.

These Islamic values/principles of *‘adl*, *afu* and *rahim* were embedded in Safiatuddin’s style of leadership. Many instances of her actions during her reign reported by both European officials, Muslim travellers and Aceh’s own elite testified to the above characteristics of her style of governance.

Pieter Sourij, the Dutch Commissioner to Aceh, describes it as such “a very good-natured but awe-inspiring government”, tempered and gentle in her rule but firm (as silk and steel, reflected in the title of this article). Her administration of law and justice was very much based on the spirit of mercy and humanity. For example, whilst her predecessors used torture with impunity, such caprice and cruelty were not reported during the reigns of the female rulers. Iskandar Muda and Iskandar Thani often modified the sultanate’s shari’ah law. In many cases the penalties inflicted were harsher than the provisions of the shari’ah. Penalties were meted out based on traditional judicial practices, which Ito described as trial by ordeal, and at the discretion (more often whim) of the sovereign.<sup>1</sup> Examples of trials by ordeal include plunging one’s hand into boiling oil and licking heated iron. European observers reported on the harsh punishments, especially during the reign of Iskandar Muda, where it appears punishments were meted out based on caprice, jealousy or just plain bad temper.

Verhoeff, Broecke, Best and Beaulieu mentioned that delays in attending to his needs, defeating him in cockfights or wearing too costly ornaments could lead to a loss of limbs and life. An *orang kaya*’s wealth and popularity could cost him his life or his property. An *orang kaya* who asked Iskandar Muda for a deferment in preparing for war was killed, together with his whole family. For those suspected of attempting to assassinate him, Iskandar Thani meted the same tortures and death by execution as Iskandar Muda.<sup>2</sup> In 1636, Iskandar Thani punished four of his concubines, whom he suspected of trying to poison him, by amputating their hands, feet and noses. Their bellies were then opened, and the flesh excised from the

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<sup>1</sup> For a description of Aceh’s law and court administration, see Ito, “The World of the Adat Aceh”, pp. 178

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 181

bones, after which their bodies were burnt.<sup>1</sup> Iskandar Thani imprisoned Francisco de Souza de Castro, the Portuguese envoy, for failing to mount the elephant sent to convey him to the palace.

On the contrary, the Sultanah's methods deemed weak by some scholars, were actually unique and more importantly, effective. For example, when Maharaja Sri Maharaja was accused of taking Safiatuddin's royal lands, which would cost him his life under Iskandar Muda, the Sultanah admonished him at court, where he had to sit with his hands folded on top of his head and beg for forgiveness for hours.<sup>2</sup> This humiliation or perhaps the mercy shown was as effective a deterrent since there were no more reports of him troubling the Sultanah any further. After attending an audience day on 12 July 1642, Pieter Sourij described her as "merciful". He related that on that day, many criminal and civil cases were discussed; one delinquent was brought before the Sultanah but someone pleaded for him to be spared and he was pardoned by the Sultanah. In another case, a member of the congregation at a mosque opposed the *penghulu kawal*, an official at court in charge of policing. He was supposed to receive a death sentence, but thanks to appeals from many Indian Muslim traders requesting his pardon, the perpetrator's life was spared by the Sultanah. However, as he had committed the grave crime of beating a court official in a mosque, his left hand was amputated.<sup>3</sup> Another example was the case of a Muslim captain from Bengal by the name of Mirs Mamoet who was accused of having sexual intercourse with the daughter of a certain Sayyid Sierip. While the case was still being investigated, Sayyid Sierip killed Mirs Mamoet because he had refused to marry his daughter. A fellow Bengali merchant requested that the Sultanah execute Sierip and his daughter. The Sultanah referred this to the relevant courts and adjudicators. The Laksamana and the Lebai Kita Kali settled the case as it involved a murder (to be tried at the criminal court, under the Laksamana) and a sexual liaison (under the jurisdiction of the religious court, under the *Kali* or *Kadhi*). The

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<sup>1</sup> Ibid., pp. 172

<sup>2</sup> Sher Banu Khan, *Sovereign Women in a Muslim Kingdom*, pp. 186

<sup>3</sup> NA, VOC 1143, Dag-Register gehouden bij Pieter Sourij (Daily Register of Pieter Sourij), 1642, ff. 567V–568R



verdict was death for both father and daughter; however, the Sultanah had the right to hear the final appeal. She saved the father from the death sentence, but the daughter was sentenced to strangling for fornication.<sup>1</sup>

The Acehese chronicle, the *Bustan us-Salatin* describes Sultanah Safiatuddin:

“Her royal highness, our lord Seri Sultan Tajul Alam Safiyyat al-Din Shah Berdaulat, the shadow of Allah on earth, possessed many praiseworthy and virtuous traits, as well as being fearful of Allah and always praying five times a day and reading the Qurʾān aloud, repeating the name of Allah and always reading the book of Allah, and commanding people to perform good deeds and forbidding them to commit bad deeds, as was sent down by Allah to our Prophet Muhammad, and was extremely just in the matter of examining and sentencing all the servants of Allah [my emphasis]. On account of the blessing of the royal power and good fortune of Yang Maha Mulia, there were many of the servants of Allah who were faithful believers and prayed five times a day and pursued knowledge.”<sup>2</sup>

It is important to note that apart from the indigenous court chronicles, which may be biased towards royalty, other reports written by Muslim and non-Muslim foreigners who went to Aceh corroborate the evidence found in local records. A Muslim traveller named Al-Mutawakkil, who arrived in Aceh during Safiatuddin’s reign, gave this interesting description of the Sultanah:

“A very gracious, perfect Muslim woman, generous with money, rules them. She can read and knows science, beneficence and agreement on the Qurʾān. She is called Safiyati ‘l-Din Shah Bardawla [*Berdaulat*, meaning

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<sup>1</sup> NA, VOC 1143, Dagh-Register gehouden bij den Oppercoopman Pieter Willemsz (daily Register of Upper Trader Pieter Willemsz), 1642, ff. 503R–503V

<sup>2</sup> Siti Hawa Haji Salleh, ed., *Bustan al-Salatin*, Kuala Lumpur: Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka, 1992, pp. 62

sovereign]. Her name is written on the coins, on one side Safiyati 'l-Din and on the other side Shah Berdawla”<sup>1</sup>

Her piety was also attested to by VOC officials in Aceh, who mentioned that the Sultanah observed fasting in Ramadan, the third pillar of Islam. Johan Truijtmán described one audience day:

“It was fasting month; thus, one could not eat or drink. The Sultanah asked to be excused for this and hope that we would not blame her for not treating us with food.... Later in the evening, we were entertained with more singing performances at court where the whole court was alighted with lighted candles. We were treated with food served in gold plates and honoured with betel-box.”<sup>2</sup>

Another Dutch official, Arnold Vlamingh noted that during Ramadan, foreigners and guests at court were not served any food or drinks. However, in the evenings after sunset, when Muslims broke their fast, the palace halls were filled with banquets once again. Also, if audience days fell during the time when the Acehnese celebrated the two Muslim canonical festivals, these days were cancelled.

### **Analysis of Conflict-Resolution Strategies of Sultanah Safiatuddin in the Political-Cultural Context of Aceh dar al-Salam**

How did a woman sovereign negotiate power between the different conflicting male factions in her court and still manage to remain in power for thirty-four years? Her main strategy in conflict-resolution within her kingdom was to take on the role of an arbitrator (*tahkim*) and mediator as a balancer between the factions. As part of *tahkim*, instead of getting embroiled amongst the factions or taking sides, she stayed above the politicking and acted as an arbitrator.

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<sup>1</sup> Robert Bertram Serjeant, *The Hollanders in the Sirrah of Al-Mutawakkil* from the papers of R.B. Serjeant found in Edinburgh University Library, pp. 124

<sup>2</sup> NA, VOC 1171, *Dagh-Register gehouden bij Johan Truijtmán*, Daily Register of Johan Truijtmán, 1649, ff. 205R–205V

The practice of arbitration has been widespread in the Middle East and also in Muslim societies in this region. In most societies, arbitration as a mode of conflict-resolution was also part of pre-Islamic customary law which became part of Islamic law since there were no contradictions between both laws. The arbitrator, whose most important qualifying merits were justice and wisdom, was selected by the community. The Prophet ﷺ gained this legitimacy as an arbitrator even before his ﷺ prophethood. After the Prophet's ﷺ death, this role was transferred to the ummah which was then conferred to the new leader – Caliph or *Kalifah*. The precedent of arbitration was set by the example of Syedina Ali and Mu'awiyah where after a bloody and indecisive confrontation both sides decided to resolve their differences through arbitration. Muslim jurists cite this precedent of arbitration to show the desirability of negotiated settlements.

One important example of this practice during the reign of Sultanah Safiatuddin was when Aceh was embroiled in the intense debate between two rival ulama factions – Al-Raniri and Syaiful Rijal in the early 1640s. During his reign, Iskandar Muda favoured and supported the Wujudiyah teachings of Hamzah Fansuri and Shams al-Din, while his successor, Iskandar Thani acted as a patron of the more legal-orthodox teachings of al-Raniri and supported this faction by appointing al-Raniri as the Sheikh al-Islam in Aceh in 1637.<sup>1</sup> The direct involvement of the rulers in supporting the Sheikhs of the different *tariqat* (schools of Sufism) caused a major rift in the ulama that resulted in a bloody struggle for power. When Sheikh Shams al-Din died in 1630, al-Raniri carried out a bloody purge of his followers, with Iskandar Thani's blessing. Many were executed, and their books burnt, and some fled the kingdom. This bitter struggle between these two groups resumed in 1643, following the return from Makkah of Syaiful Rijal, a native of Minangkabau, who had been a student of Jamal al-Din and follower of Sheikh Shams al-Din. Pieter Sourij described the chaotic conditions at court when the Sultanah was called upon to settle this

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<sup>1</sup> Peter G. Riddell, *Islam and the Malay-Indonesian World: Transmission and Responses*, London: C. Hurst, 2001, pp. 110–21

dispute.<sup>1</sup> Instead of taking sides, the Sultanah declared that she knew little about these religious debates and asked her elites to solve this conflict themselves.<sup>2</sup> Only after Syaiful Rijal had emerged as a clear winner in the debates did the Sultanah decide to call him to court to appoint him as the Sheikh al-Islam.<sup>3</sup>

The major difference between Safiatuddin's rule and her male predecessors is that she did not involve politics in the religious debates. Besides leaving these religious debates to the experts, she neither favoured nor supported any particular theosophical leanings nor any particular ulama faction. She kept herself as far as possible above the factional struggles that gripped the kingdom at the time. It is also especially important to note that despite the parallels to the earlier factional religious struggle, this time there were no mass executions or bloodshed. Al-Raniri, though defeated, was allowed to return to Gujarat in 1644 where he died in 1658. It is also important to note that even if Safiatuddin had preferred one *tariqat* over the other (no evidence is found about her preference though), since she did not publicise or politicise her theosophical leanings, she adopted a more balanced approach and allowed the majority view to stand but did not allow the minority group to be persecuted.

Another important conflict-resolution strategy adopted by Sultanah Safiatuddin which was related to *tahkim* was to arrive at important political decisions based on consensus. Following the famous Acehnese motto *Adat bersendikan syarak* (customs supported by Islamic law), she practiced *muafakat* and *musyawarah* where she allowed her male elite to deliberate issues before she made the final decision. *Muafakat* and *musyawarah* are sanctioned by both Islam and *adat*. Qanun al-Asyi Darussalam (Canon Law of Aceh Dar al-Salam) laid out several institutions, the duties of which were to assist the ruler in governing the kingdom. The

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<sup>1</sup> For a more complete analysis, please refer to Sher Banu A.L. Khan, "What Happened to Sayf al-Rijal?", *Bijdragen tot de Taal-, Land- en Volkenkunde* (BKI) vol. 168, no. 1, 2012, pp. 100–111

<sup>2</sup> NA, VOC 1143, *Dagh-Register gehouden bij Pieter Sourij*, 1642, ff. 671V–672R; see also Takeshi Ito, "Why did Nuruddin al-Raniri leave Aceh in 1054 A.H.?", in *Bijdragen tot de Taal-, Land- en Volkenkunde* 134, 4 (1978): 489–91

<sup>3</sup> NA, VOC 1143, *Dagh-Register gehouden bij Pieter Sourij*, 1642, ff. 671V–673R

ruler's closest advisors were the *wazir* (vizier), *perdana menteri* (prime minister) and the *kadhi malikul adil* (religious judge). The executive branch consisted of the *balai laksamana*, a kind of military arm and the *menteri dirham* and *balai furdah*, the commercial arm in charge of taxes and issuing money.<sup>1</sup> The legislative branch, called the *balai musyawarah*, the task of which was to swear on the consensus undertaken (*angkat muafakat*), consisted of three divisions: the *balai rungsari*, *balai gadeng*, and *balai majelis mahkamah rakyat*. The *balai rungsari* consisted of the four senior *orang kaya*, the *balai gadeng* was made up of 22 prominent religious scholars, and the *balai majelis mahkamah rakyat* had 73 members, each representing a *mukim*.<sup>2</sup> The *Adat Meukuta Alam* (an ancient Acehnese code of laws) states that an *uleebalang*, representing a particular *mukim*, must be elected by the village head (*keuchik*), the religious head (imam) and the elders (*orang tuha-tuha*), through consensus.<sup>3</sup>

It is not clear how and to what extent these institutions functioned under Iskandar Muda and Iskandar Thani, but the limitation of royal power is one significant feature of female rule in Aceh. Female rule in Aceh, to a large extent, demonstrated the political ideals laid out in indigenous political treatises, such as the *Taj us-Salatin* and the *Bustan us-Salatin*. The idea that rulers needed to share responsibilities with their ministers and discuss matters of state with them was not merely a customary ideal, but also a religious one. This responsibility stated in the *Taj us-Salatin* was reinforced in the *Bustan us-Salatin*. However, the author of the *Taj* emphasised that women rulers, in particular, were encouraged to do this. The decision-making process at court under the Sultanah on audience days, signalled a distinct departure from the period of her male predecessors. One feature was the *orang kaya*'s involvement in decision making through discussion

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<sup>1</sup> (Haji Abdul Malik Karim Amrullah) Hamka, "Dewan Perwakilan Rakjat Atjeh Diabad Ketujuhbelas" [Aceh's House of Representatives in the 17th C], *Gema Islam* No. 36/37 (15 July 1963), pp. 11–2. According to Hamka, this Qanun al-Asji Darussalam was written during Iskandar Muda's reign and was copied from generation to generation by the family of Tengku di Abai, Ibnu Ahmad from Habib Abubakar bin Usman bin Hasan bin Wundi Molek Sjarif Abdullah bin Sultan Djamalu'll Alam Badrul Munir Djamalullail Ba'alawi, the Sultan of Aceh of Arab descent. The last copy was rewritten in 1310 AH/1893 AD

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 11

<sup>3</sup> Tuanku Abdul Jalil, ed., *Adat Meukuta Alam*, Banda Aceh: Pusat Dokumentasi dan Informasi Aceh, 1991, pp. 1–2

(*muafakat*). The custom of *muafakat* had long been practised in Aceh, and the tradition was ingrained in its people from the simple villager to the nobility at court.<sup>1</sup> It formed the basis of Acehnese decision making from the level of the *gampong*, to the *mukim* and the *sagi*. Snouck Hurgronje wrote that Habib Abdurrahman (one of the leading ulama in the Aceh-Dutch War, 1873–1903) told him the *muafakat* formed the strongest factor in an administrator's statecraft. The administration of the *gampong* was composed of three elements: the *keuchik* (village head), *teungku* (religious village head) and *ureueng tuha* (old man of wisdom). All three components had a role in the discussion and decision-making process. In reviving this age-old decision-making process, the Sultanah's similarly obtained advice from both the orang kaya and the ulama.

Pieter Sourij remarked in 1642 that the Acehnese were subject to a *zeer debonnaire echter ontsagheijk* (mild but awe-inspiring) government. Each of the kingdom's councillors was respected as a king: without their counsel and advice the queen could not perform.<sup>2</sup> His observations captured the essence of Sultanah Safiatuddin's reign; benevolent but not weak. It also revealed the interdependent and reciprocal relationship between the Sultanah and her elites. Thus, although she had absolute authority over the final decision, she adopted a more collaborative style of decision making.

## Conclusion

Scripture and diverse historical contextualisation have much to contribute to the understanding of Islamic conflict-resolution. The sultanate of Aceh dar al-Salam under the reign of Sultanah Safiatuddin demonstrates that peace-building was a key strategy in dealing with a hostile and powerful European power and it was successful in maintaining Aceh's independence. Peace-building was also a central tenet in Islamic conflict-resolution strategies.

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<sup>1</sup> Christiaan Snouck Hurgronje, *The Acehnese*, trans. A.W.S. O'Sullivan, with index by R.J. Wilkinson, Leiden: Brill, 1906, vol. 1, pp. 64–77

<sup>2</sup> NA, VOC 1143, Dagh-Register off Journael gehouden bij den Pieter Sourij, 1642, f. 565V

Related to peace-building, Sultanah Safiatuddin's strategy to keep her kingdom in order, to keep it from being fragmented by a very fractious male elite was to act as the final arbiter, to balance the different factions and to involve the male elite as much as possible in the decision-making processes through the process of *muafakat* and consensus-building. Female rulers promoted *muafakat*, which created an environment where power and wealth sharing was possible, turning the relationship between nobility and royalty from one of conflict to cooperation. The queens, by virtue of their sex, remained separate and neutral from the masculine jealousies, egos and rivalries that characterised relations between the male king and his elites. The women sovereigns of Aceh's style of leadership was also in line with the moderate and soft-power approach of local Islam (Islam Nusantara).

Although the case-study examined took place in the seventeenth century, I believe that it has current relevance. Islamic perspectives on the importance of peace-building through conciliation (*sulh*), to forge friendship and tolerance between Muslims and non-Muslims and to undertake arbitration (*tahkim*) are universal values shared amongst most religions and are aligned with modern, international norms.

Indeed, the historical lessons learnt from the reign of Sultanah Safiatuddin of Aceh would have relevance to current monarchical systems as well since she reflected many of the Islamic ideals of a good ruler. Furthermore, this case-study challenges current views from extremist literature on war and jihad; Islam itself teaches us to be united by humanity and peace regardless of race or faith. The essence of Islam – peace – is a panacea in a world that is increasingly divided by religious conflicts and extremism.