

# THE LEADERSHIP OF SULTANAH NUKILA AND GENDER POLITICS IN THE SIXTEENTH-CENTURY SULTANATE OF TERNATE

**Fatma<sup>1</sup>,**

<sup>1</sup>Universitas Halu Oleo, Kendari ([fatma88@uho.ac.id](mailto:fatma88@uho.ac.id))

**Irfan Ahmad<sup>2</sup>,**

<sup>2</sup>Universitas Khairun, Ternate ([irfan.ahmad@unkhair.ac.id](mailto:irfan.ahmad@unkhair.ac.id))

**Aswati<sup>3</sup>,**

<sup>3</sup>Universitas Halu Oleo, Kendari ([aswati.mukadas@yahoo.com](mailto:aswati.mukadas@yahoo.com))

**Willem Christiaan Manuhutu<sup>4</sup>,**

<sup>4</sup>Vrije University, Amsterdam ([w.c.b.r.manuhutu@vu.nl](mailto:w.c.b.r.manuhutu@vu.nl))

**Muhammad Rusydan Hi Arby<sup>5</sup>**

<sup>5</sup>The University of Alabama, US. ([mrbiarby@crimson.ua.edu](mailto:mrbiarby@crimson.ua.edu))



©2026 by the authors. Submitted for open access publication under the terms and conditions of the Creative Commons Attribution-ShareAlike 4.0 International License (CC-BY-SA) license (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/4.0/>)

DOI : <https://dx.doi.org/10.30983/humanisme.v4i2.11009>

|                               |                         |                         |                          |
|-------------------------------|-------------------------|-------------------------|--------------------------|
| Submission: February 11, 2026 | Revised: April 15, 2026 | Accepted : May 29, 2026 | Published: June 28, 2026 |
|-------------------------------|-------------------------|-------------------------|--------------------------|

## Abstract

This article examines Sultanah Nukila's leadership within the political structure of the Sultanate of Ternate during the sixteenth century, positioning gender relations as an important element in the dynamics of power within the maritime sultanates of Maluku. The background of the study concerns the dynastic succession crisis following the death of Sultan Bayanullah, the increasing Portuguese intervention in the spice trade, and the political and religious pressures that threatened the sultanate's stability. The main research problem concerns how female leadership gained political legitimacy in this crisis. The novelty of this research lies in the integration of gender historical analysis with the local political structure of Ternate through the examination of dynastic genealogy, customary relations involving *bobato* and *soa*, and the political philosophy of *jou se ngofa ngare* as a framework of political legitimacy. The issue is examined through a critical reading of Portuguese colonial sources, modern historiography, and Ternate oral traditions to understand the relationship among power, political culture, and gender within the sultanate. The study employs the historical method, including heuristic inquiry, source criticism, interpretation, and historiography, with gender as the principal analytical approach. The findings demonstrate that Nukila's leadership functioned effectively in maintaining dynastic continuity, managing political elites, constructing local legitimacy, and responding to Portuguese colonial pressures, thereby playing an important role in maintaining the political stability of the Sultanate of Ternate during the early modern period.

**Keywords:** Nukila, Sultanate of Ternate; spice trade, gender politics; *jou se ngofa ngare*; Portuguese colonialism.

## Background

This study examines the major transformation in Southeast Asia's political-economic structure following the Portuguese conquest of Malacca in 1511, led by Afonso de Albuquerque. Before its fall, Malacca was a principal node of international trade linking East Asia, South Asia, the Middle East, and the Mediterranean, a meeting point for Muslim, Gujarati, Javanese, and Chinese merchants within a relatively open transregional network sustained by strong trading trust. Malacca's fall thus marked more than a shift in local political authority: it redirected the circulation of Asian maritime trade. It opened European penetration into spice networks previously organized through inter-port relations and local elites.<sup>1</sup>

After 1511, Portuguese expansion toward the eastern regions became an imperial project that combined economic, military, and religious interests into a single global system of power. In modern historiography, this process is understood as part of the formation of colonial trading networks that integrated spice-producing regions into the emerging capitalist economy of Western Europe.<sup>2</sup> Within this framework, spices such as cloves were no longer perceived merely as regional commodities but as strategic goods that supported capital accumulation and European

maritime expansion during the early modern period.<sup>3</sup> The Moluccan Islands therefore occupied a central position in Iberian geopolitical imagination as the only region producing cloves on a large scale.<sup>4</sup>

Early relations between the Portuguese and the Sultanate of Ternate were initially built through diplomacy and military alliance. *Francisco Serrao* gained the trust of Sultan Bayanullah and even served as an adviser at the royal court. This situation indicates that Ternate's political elites in the early phase were capable of utilizing the presence of foreign actors to strengthen their regional political position, particularly in confronting rivalry with Tidore and other powers in the Moluccas.<sup>5</sup> However, the relationship that initially appeared cooperative changed drastically after the Portuguese constructed a permanent fortress in Ternate in 1522. The fortress did not merely function as a defensive installation but also served as an administrative center that enabled the implementation of a spice monopoly, price regulation, and surveillance over the movement of commodities and people.<sup>6</sup> From the perspective of power analysis, the colonial fortress can be understood as a mechanism that produced economic and political control through surveillance and social discipline.<sup>7</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Anthony Reid, *Southeast Asia in the Age of Commerce 1450–1680, Volume 1: The Lands Below the Winds* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1988). p. 1–20

<sup>2</sup> Sanjay Subrahmanyam, *The Portuguese Empire in Asia 1500–1700: A Political and Economic History* (London: Longman, 1993); Immanuel Wallerstein, *The Modern World-System I: Capitalist Agriculture and the Origins of the European World-Economy in the Sixteenth Century* (New York: Academic Press, 1974); Wildhan Ichzha Maulana and others, 'Maritime Activities of the Demak Sultanate: Shipping and Trade Route in the Nusantara Network (1478–1546)', *Journal of Al-Tamaddun*, 19.1 (2024), 261–72.

<sup>3</sup> Fernand Braudel, *The Perspective of the World* (New York: Harper & Row, 1984).

<sup>4</sup> The Maluku Islands referred to as the principal producers of cloves included Ternate, Tidore, Moti in the region of Jailolo, and Makian in the region of Bacan, which today form part of the Province of North Maluku.

<sup>5</sup> Leonard Y Andaya, *The World of Maluku: Eastern Indonesia in the Early Modern Period* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 1993). p. 71–75.

<sup>6</sup> Charles R Boxer, *The Portuguese Seaborne Empire 1415–1825* (London: Hutchinson, 1969); Yulia Nurliani H Lukito and others, 'Revisiting Fort Heritage in Ternate, North Maluku: Nostalgia, Tourism, and Community Engagement', *Built Heritage*, 9.1 (2025) <<https://doi.org/10.1186/s43238-025-00181-4>>.

<sup>7</sup> Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison* (New York: Vintage Books, 1977). p. 3–31.

These changes carried significant consequences for Ternate's internal political stability. After Sultan Bayanullah died in the mid-1520s, his two crown princes, Deyalo and Boheyat, were too young to rule directly. In this context, Nukila emerged, later appointed regent for her two sons while holding governmental authority within the sultanate—known variously as *Ratu Nyai Cili*, Sultanah Nukila, or *Rainha Boki Raja*. Her regency made her the first female ruler in Ternate's history, with political legitimacy strengthened by her genealogical background as daughter of Sultan Tidore Almansur, linking her position to inter-dynastic kinship networks across Maluku.<sup>8</sup>

From the perspective of gender history, this situation demonstrates that political authority in Islamic maritime kingdoms was not inherently masculine. Joan W. Scott argues that gender serves as a historical category of analysis, enabling scholars to understand how relations of power are constructed through social and political formations.<sup>9</sup> The case of Ternate also has regional precedents. Experiences in Aceh and

Patani illustrate that female leadership could obtain legitimacy through a combination of genealogical authority, moral standing, and the ability to manage networks of political elites.<sup>10</sup> Female leadership in Islamic kingdoms of Southeast Asia should therefore not be viewed as an exception but as part of a broader political pattern, particularly during periods of dynastic crisis and external pressure.<sup>11</sup>

In the context of Ternate, the legitimacy of Nukila's leadership rested not only on genealogical connections but also on local political structures involving customary elite networks such as *bobato* and *soa*. These customary elite networks played an important role in political decision-making and in supporting the social legitimacy of rulers.<sup>12</sup> Political legitimacy in Ternate was also influenced by the philosophical principle of *jou se ngofa ngare*, which emphasized the moral relationship between ruler and subjects and the ethical responsibilities involved in exercising authority.<sup>13</sup> Relations between the Portuguese and Ternate were often unstable because agreements were frequently violated

<sup>8</sup> Leonard Y Andaya; Susanto Zuhdi, *Sultan Baabullah Datu' Syah Pahlawan Nasional Sang Pembebas Dari Timur 1528--1583* (Ternate: Dinas Perpustakaan dan Kearsipan Daerah, 2025). p. 135.

<sup>9</sup> Joan W Scott, 'Gender: A Useful Category of Historical Analysis', *The American Historical Review*, 91.5 (1986), 1053–75 <<https://doi.org/10.1086/ahr/91.5.1053>>; Bruno M Shirley, 'Beyond the Masculinity of Kingship: The Making of a Modern Queen in Early Second Millennium Sri Lanka', *Modern Asian Studies*, 58.2 (2024), 485–511.

<sup>10</sup> Barbara Watson Andaya, *The Flaming Womb: Repositioning Women in Southeast Asian History* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2006); Sher Banu A L Khan, *Sovereign Women in a Muslim Kingdom: The Sultanahs of Aceh 1641--1699* (Singapore: NUS Press, 2017); Stefan Amirell, 'The Blessings and Perils of Female Rule: New Perspectives on the Reign of the Patani Queens', *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies*, 42.2 (2011), 303–23 <<https://doi.org/10.1017/S0022463411000063>>; Nuraedah, 'Between Women, Throne, and Power: Religious Transformation in Kagaua Palu, 1600--1904',

*Paramita: Historical Studies Journal*, 33.1 (2023) <<https://doi.org/10.15294/paramita.v33i1.39109>>.

<sup>11</sup> Jeroen Duindam, *Dynasties: A Global History of Power 1300--1800* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016) <<https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9781316339841>>; Jeroen Duindam, 'Gender, Succession and Dynastic Rule', *History and Anthropology*, 32.2 (2021), 151–70 <<https://doi.org/10.1080/02757206.2021.1905238>>. p. 211–240

<sup>12</sup> Ch. F Van Fraassen, 'Ternate, de Molukken En de Indonesische Archipel: Een Studie Naar Traditionele En Vroegmoderne Politieke Structuren En Relaties' (Leiden University, 1987); Leonard Y Andaya. p. 74–79

<sup>13</sup> Mudaffar Sjah and others, *Moloku Kie Raha: Dalam Perspektif Budaya Dan Sejarah Masuknya Islam* (Ternate: Himpunan Pelajar Mahasiswa Ternate, 2005); Immamuddin Ayub, 'Eksistensi Falsafah Jou Se Ngofa Ngare Di Ternate' (Universitas Islam Negeri Sunan Kalijaga, 2015); Thalib Abas and others, 'Jou Se Ngofa Ngare Philosophy in Traditional Leadership in Ternate', 12.2 (2024) <<https://doi.org/10.24127/hj.v12i2.9034>>.

or manipulated to strengthen monopolies and political control. In several cases, such actions were accompanied by symbolic humiliation directed at the authority of the sultanate, a practice that, in studies of Iberian imperialism, is understood as a politics of humiliation aimed at undermining the legitimacy of local rulers.<sup>14</sup>

We argue that female political authority could function fully within an Islamic maritime sultanate without losing social or political legitimacy. The research thus asks how Sultanah Nukila gained political legitimacy in Ternate during Portuguese expansion, and how her leadership negotiated genealogical structures, local elite networks, Ternate's political philosophy, and colonial pressures. It hypothesizes that Nukila's leadership was not merely a temporary response to a succession crisis but the result of interactions among dynastic legitimacy, elite support, Ternate's normative political culture, and global imperial dynamics. Accordingly, the study analyzes Nukila's leadership, explains the genealogical foundations and elite networks supporting it, and examines the role of *jou se ngofa ngare* in legitimizing political authority—using the historical method (heuristics, source criticism, interpretation, historiography) with gender as the primary analytical framework.<sup>15</sup>

Theoretically, the study draws on world-system theory, the concept of early modern maritime capitalism, Foucault's analysis of power, Joan Scott's approach to gender, and Leonard Y. Andaya's studies of dynastic

politics and elite networks in Maluku. Compared to the existing literature, such as works by Heraty and Andaya on Maluku historiography,<sup>16</sup> the novelty of the research lies in integrating gender historical analysis with the local political structure of Ternate, thereby positioning Sultanah Nukila as an active political actor in the negotiation of power between the sultanate and colonial forces.

## Results and Discussion

### Sultanah Nukila and Female Leadership in Ternate during the Portuguese Period

Political changes that occurred in Ternate during the early sixteenth century cannot be separated from the transformation of the global economy triggered by European maritime expansion. After the Portuguese conquest of Malacca in 1511, the Maluku region quickly became a target of expansion due to its position as the only center of clove production within the Asian trade network. The integration of Maluku into this global commercial circulation can be understood through the framework of world-system theory, which explains how regions producing strategic commodities in Southeast Asia became increasingly connected to the emerging capitalist system in Western Europe.<sup>17</sup> Within this global economic structure, spices were no longer perceived merely as regional commodities but as sources of global wealth that stimulated the expansion of European maritime powers.<sup>18</sup>

Portuguese expansion in Maluku was materialized through the construction of a

<sup>14</sup> Ryan Dominic Crewe, 'Islas de Fábula y Guerra: Cómo Las Molucas Demarcaron El Nuevo Mundo', *Intus-Legere Historia*, 17.1 (2023), 11–42 <<https://doi.org/10.15691/0719-8949.561>>; Kimberlé Crenshaw, 'Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex', *University of Chicago Legal Forum*, 1989.1 (1989), 139–67 <<https://chicagounbound.uchicago.edu/uclf/vol1989/iss1/8>>.

<sup>15</sup> L. Gottschalk, *Mengerti Sejarah (Terjemahan Nugrobo Notosusanto)* (Jakarta: UI Press, 1985); Kuntowijoyo, *Metodologi Sejarah* (Yogyakarta: Tiara Wacana, 2003).

<sup>16</sup> Toeti Heraty, *Rainha Boki Raja: Ratu Ternate Abad Keenambelas* (Jakarta: Komunitas Bambu, 2010).

<sup>17</sup> Wallerstein, *The Modern World-System*, p. 347–357.

<sup>18</sup> Braudel, *The Perspective of the World*, p. 447–450.

fortress in Ternate in 1522. This fortress was not only a military installation but also an administrative center, enabling the Portuguese to oversee the distribution of spices and influence the sultanate's political affairs. From the perspective of power theory, the fortress can be interpreted as a mechanism that enabled the production of power through surveillance, economic regulation, and the formation of colonial administrative structures.<sup>19</sup> The fortress's presence thus altered Ternate's political configuration, as the royal city now contained two adjacent centers of authority for the first time: the sultanate's palace and the colonial fortress. Amid this increasingly complex geopolitical situation, Ternate faced a succession crisis after Sultan Bayanullah's death—his two crown princes being too young to govern independently. In this context, Boki Nukila emerged, who assumed authority as regent, controlling the sultanate's administration. Her rise as a female power-holder demonstrates that Ternate's political structure retained the flexibility to maintain dynastic continuity when male heirs were not yet ready to rule.

Discussion of the figure of Nukila in modern historiography has received particular attention through the work of Toeti Heraty titled *Rainha Boki Raja: Ratu Ternate Abad Keenambelas*. In her study, Nukila is positioned as an important figure in the political history of Ternate, whose role has long been overlooked in colonial historiography that tended to place women on the margins of political narratives. Heraty shows that colonial sources refer to Nukila as *Rainha Boki Raja*, a designation that directly indicates her position as a female ruler within the sultanate's political structure.<sup>20</sup> This designation demonstrates that even colonial records acknowledged

Nukila's role as part of the actual structure of political authority. Heraty further emphasizes that Nukila's leadership cannot be understood merely as symbolic authority. In the historical narrative reconstructed from various sources, Nukila appears as an active political figure who managed elite conflicts and maintained the sultanate's political stability during the transition of power.<sup>21</sup> Her leadership therefore demonstrates that noblewomen within Ternate society possessed a relatively broad political space to exercise governmental authority when dynastic stability faced serious challenges.

This interpretation aligns with the approach of gender history, which treats gender as a category of analysis for understanding relations of power in historical processes. Joan W. Scott explains that gender does not simply refer to biological differences between men and women but represents a social construction that shapes the distribution of authority within society.<sup>22</sup> In the context of sixteenth-century Ternate, this approach helps explain how aristocratic women such as Nukila could obtain political legitimacy through a combination of genealogical factors, elite support, and the capacity to manage periods of political crisis.

Genealogical legitimacy was crucial to Nukila's acceptance as leader. As a member of Sultan Bayanullah's immediate family, she drew on her position within the dynastic structure for a strong political foundation for her regency. In the political traditions of Southeast Asian kingdoms, dynastic lineage carried profound significance for its close ties to the continuity of authority and state stability. Barbara Watson Andaya shows that in many early modern Southeast Asian kingdoms, noblewomen could gain access to

<sup>19</sup> Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*, 1977, p. 3–31.

<sup>20</sup> Toeti Heraty, *Rainha Boki Raja*, p. 27–30;

<sup>21</sup> Heraty, *Rainha Boki Raja*, p. 64–68.

<sup>22</sup> Scott, 'Gender. A Useful Category of Historical Analysis', p. 1067–1091.

political authority through kinship networks and legitimate genealogical claims.<sup>23</sup>

Heraty further argues that within the political traditions of Ternate, aristocratic women often played a role in safeguarding dynastic continuity during periods of succession crises. Within this framework, Nukila's leadership can be understood as a political adaptation by the sultanate to preserve state stability when the heir to the throne was not yet capable of ruling.<sup>24</sup> This perspective shows that female leadership was not a deviation from the political norms of the sultanate but rather part of an internal mechanism that ensured continuity of governance.

The phenomenon of female leadership, as demonstrated by Nukila, also has parallels in other Southeast Asian polities. In the Sultanate of Aceh during the seventeenth century, several women ruled as sultanah with the support of political and religious elites. Research by Sher Banu Khan shows that the legitimacy of the Acehese queens was constructed through their ability to maintain political stability and manage relations between the palace and networks of religious scholars.<sup>25</sup> A similar pattern can also be observed in Patani, where several queens played important roles in diplomacy and regional trade. Stefan Amirell shows that the queens of Patani were actively involved in managing political and economic affairs within the kingdom.<sup>26</sup>

In the context of Ternate, the legitimacy of Nukila's leadership was also closely related to the relationship between the royal court

and local elite networks such as *bobato* and *soa*. The political structure of the sultanate did not operate in a strictly centralized manner. Still, it was built through relationships between the ruler and elite networks that performed administrative and social functions within society. Support from these elites formed an essential foundation for the stability of the sultanate's government. Leonard Andaya notes that the political system of Ternate possessed a strong consultative character, in which political decisions were often produced through negotiations between the sultan and the *bobato*.<sup>27</sup>

In addition to genealogical legitimacy and elite support, Nukila's leadership was also shaped by the local political value system known as *jou se ngofa ngare*. This philosophical principle emphasizes the moral relationship between ruler and subjects as well as the ethical responsibility inherent in the exercise of power. Within this value system, authority is understood as a trust that must be exercised while maintaining a balance among customary law, religion, and social life.<sup>28</sup> Consequently, the legitimacy of rulers was not determined solely by lineage but also by their ability to maintain social harmony and political stability within the realm.

According to Heraty's analysis, the political strength of Nukila lay in her ability to maintain equilibrium among these various elements of power. Her authority was not based solely on dynastic legitimacy but also on the capacity to manage relations between palace elites and the growing colonial power in Ternate.<sup>29</sup> In a geopolitical context marked

<sup>23</sup> Barbara Watson Andaya; Latifatul Izzah and others, 'Robinah: A Dignified Woman in the Dutch East Indies in the Dutch Colonial Era', *KARSA: Journal of Social and Islamic Culture*, 31.2 (2023), 297–327 <<https://doi.org/10.19105/karsa.v31i2.10576>>.

<sup>24</sup> Heraty, *Rainha Boki Raja*, p. 88–92.

<sup>25</sup> Khan, *Sovereign Women in a Muslim Kingdom*, p. 45–89.

<sup>26</sup> Amirell, 'The Blessings and Perils of Female Rule', p. 303–323.

<sup>27</sup> L. Y. Andaya, *The World of Maluku*, p. 74–79.

<sup>28</sup> Ridwan Dero, *Tradisi Dan Budaya Orang Ternate* (Ternate: Dinas Pariwisata Kota Ternate, 2001); Mudaffar Sjah and others.

<sup>29</sup> Heraty, *Rainha Boki Raja*, p. 105–109.

by mounting pressure from the Portuguese, this ability to preserve political balance was crucial to maintaining the sultanate's stability.

Thus, the leadership of Sultanah Nukila reveals a complex interaction between local political dynamics and the global pressures of the early modern world. On the one hand, Ternate had to confront Portuguese expansion that introduced new colonial structures of authority. On the other hand, the sultanate had to preserve internal stability through mechanisms of legitimacy rooted in local political traditions. Within this framework, female leadership did not emerge as a marginal phenomenon in Ternate's history but rather as part of the sultanate's political strategy to maintain dynastic continuity and political stability amid the geopolitical transformations of the early modern world.

### **The Genealogy of Nukila within the Structure of the Sultanate**

Genealogy played a crucial role in the political legitimacy of the Sultanate of Ternate. In the political traditions of Maluku, authority was determined not solely by military capability or the support of palace elites, but also by an individual's position within the royal line of descent. Genealogical lineage served as a symbolic foundation linking rulers to the dynasty's continuity and the broader social structure. Within such a system, dynastic blood became an important source of legitimacy closely associated with royal prestige and political stability. The position of Boki Nukila therefore became particularly significant as the wife of Sultan Bayanullah, the ruler of Ternate during the early period of Portuguese intervention in Maluku.

In modern historiography, the relationship between genealogy and political

legitimacy in Southeast Asian kingdoms is often understood as part of a dynastic political structure. Jeroen Duindam explains that in pre-modern monarchies, genealogical claims played an essential role in maintaining continuity of authority and in managing succession crises that could threaten the stability of the state.<sup>30</sup> In the context of Ternate, this genealogical structure became even more crucial after the death of Sultan Bayanullah, who left two heirs to the throne, both still very young. This situation created political vulnerability because, on the one hand, dynastic continuity had to be preserved, while on the other hand, the Portuguese were beginning to strengthen their influence within the royal court.

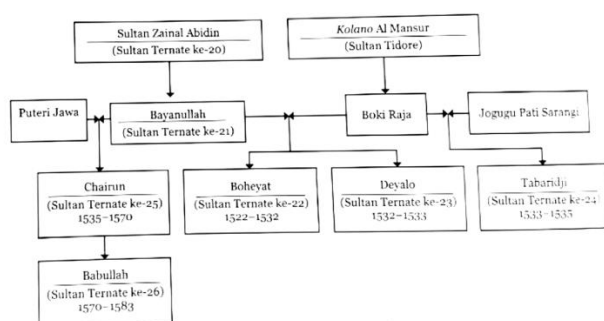
Under these conditions of crisis, the emergence of Nukila as regent obtained legitimacy through her position as a member of the immediate royal family and as the mother of the heirs to the throne. This genealogical position provided a strong political foundation for the acceptance of her role in managing the sultanate's government. Leonard Y. Andaya notes that within Ternate's political structure, the legitimacy of rulers often depended on a combination of dynastic lineage and support from local political elites involved in government decision-making.<sup>31</sup> Nukila's position therefore provided a basis for political recognition of her authority as the guardian of dynastic continuity.

---

<sup>30</sup> Duindam, *Dynasties: A Global History of Power 1300–1800*, p. 211–214

<sup>31</sup> L. Y. Andaya, *The World of Maluku*, p. 74–79.

## Silsilah Boki Raja



**Figure 1.** Genealogical Chart of Nukila or Rainha Boki Raja.

Source: Heraty, *Rainha Boki Raja*, p. 90.

Close reading of local historiographical texts also indicates that the royal family structure of Ternate was not entirely organized within a rigid patriarchal framework. In Naidah, edited by P. van der Crab, aristocratic women are portrayed as playing an important role in maintaining dynastic stability during periods of political crisis.<sup>32</sup> The narrative suggests that palace women, under certain circumstances, could function as guardians of lineage, intermediaries between generations, and mediators in elite conflicts. Within this framework, Nukila occupied a strategic position as a figure who connected Sultan Bayanullah's generation with the younger generation of heirs. This role provided both symbolic and political foundations for her leadership during the transitional period of power.

The gender historical approach helps explain this dynamic by positioning gender as a category of analysis within relations of power. Joan W. Scott emphasizes that gender refers not only to biological differences between men and women but also to social

constructs that shape the distribution of authority in society.<sup>33</sup> In the context of sixteenth-century Ternate, this framework shows that female leadership could emerge as part of the sultanate's political adaptation when succession structures faced crisis.

The analysis of Toeti Heraty in the work *Rainha Boki Raja: Ratu Ternate Abad Keenambelas* also emphasizes the importance of Nukila's genealogical position within the dynastic structure of Ternate. Heraty demonstrates that colonial sources refer to Nukila as Rainha Boki Raja, a term acknowledging her position as a female figure exercising political authority within the sultanate. In Heraty's interpretation, Nukila's legitimacy was grounded not only in her status as the mother of the heir to the throne but also in her ability to maintain the political stability of the palace amid increasing Portuguese pressure.<sup>34</sup>

Memory of the role of aristocratic women in safeguarding the continuity of the polity also survives in the oral traditions of Ternate society. In several dolabololo and folk narratives, noblewomen are often depicted as figures who preserve the balance of the realm when political authority is in turmoil. These oral traditions do not always mention Nukila explicitly. Yet, they reveal a cultural pattern that recognizes the possibility of women serving as stabilizing forces in political continuity when heirs to the throne are not yet prepared to rule. In this sense, oral tradition functions as a space of collective memory that reinforces genealogical and symbolic

<sup>32</sup> P van der Crab, 'Geschiedenis van Ternate, in Ternataanschen En Maleischen Tekst Beschreven Door Den Ternataan Naidah Met Vertaling En Aanteekeningen', *Bijdragen Tot de Taal-, Land- En Volkenkunde / Journal of the Humanities and Social Sciences*

*of Southeast Asia*, 26.1 (1878), 381–493 <<https://doi.org/10.1163/22134379-90000593>>.

<sup>33</sup> Scott, 'Gender. A Useful Category of Historical Analysis', p. 1067–1070.

<sup>34</sup> Heraty, *Rainha Boki Raja*, p. 27–30, 64–68.

legitimacy for female leadership within the structure of the sultanate.<sup>35</sup>

Thus, the genealogy of Nukila cannot be understood merely as a matter of blood relations within the royal family structure. In the political tradition of Ternate, genealogy also serves as a source of symbolic legitimacy, allowing an aristocratic woman to emerge as an authority figure during periods of succession crises. Her position within Sultan Bayanullah's family provided the foundation for the palace, elite networks, and broader society to accept her leadership. From the perspective of gender history, this experience demonstrates that female leadership in the Sultanate of Ternate was part of a political adaptation mechanism that maintained dynastic continuity amid colonial pressure and the geopolitical transformations of the early modern world.

### **Local Legitimacy of Nukila's Leadership through the Relations of *Bobato*, *Soa*, and the Philosophy of *Jou Se Ngofa Ngare***

The political structure of the Sultanate of Ternate was built upon a complex relationship between the sultan, the royal family, palace elites, and broader social networks organized within *bobato* and *soa*. Authority within this system did not operate in a purely centralized manner, flowing from the palace to society. Still, it was constructed through reciprocal relations between the center of power and networks of local elites. For that reason, the legitimacy of a ruler was determined not only by dynastic lineage but also by the capacity to build consensus with the *bobato* and leaders of the *soa*, who functioned as intermediaries between the court and society. Such a political

structure demonstrates that governance in Ternate was strongly consultative, with major decisions often resulting from negotiations between the ruler and the sultanate's political elites.<sup>36</sup>

The *bobato* constituted an elite group responsible for administrative, legal, religious, and customary functions within the government of the sultanate. They consisted of high-ranking officials who participated in political deliberations, decision-making, and governance oversight. In Ternate's political practice, the presence of the *bobato* indicates that the sultan's authority was not absolute but operated within a network of elites who collectively exercised authority in managing the realm. This system illustrates that the sultanate's politics contained internal mechanisms designed to maintain a balance between the ruler's authority and the role of local elites.<sup>37</sup>

On the other hand, *soa* represented social units based on kinship and territorial affiliation. Each *soa* possessed a leader who functioned as an intermediary between the community and the governmental structure of the sultanate. In social and political practice, the *soa* played an important role in mobilizing labor, managing land resources, and organizing customary rituals associated with royal legitimacy. Consequently, the support of *soa* leaders became a crucial factor in maintaining the stability of the sultanate's government because, through these networks,

<sup>35</sup> Abdul Hamid Hasan, *Aroma Sejarah Dan Budaya Ternate* (Jakarta: Antara Pustaka Utama, 2001).p. 45.

<sup>36</sup> Khairana Zata Nugroho and others, 'Women, Culture, and Power: A Comparative Study of the Roles of Women during Vereenigde Oostindische Compagnie and Geoctrooieerde Westindische

Compagnie Era', in *Proceedings of the 3rd International Conference on Culture and Sustainable Development (ICOCAS 2025)* (Atlantis Press, 2025), pp. 269–76 <[https://doi.org/10.2991/978-2-38476-503-4\\_33](https://doi.org/10.2991/978-2-38476-503-4_33)>.

<sup>37</sup> Irfan Ahmad, *Sejarah Ternate Dari Kota Tradisional Ke Kota Kolonial Abad XIII–XX* (Yogyakarta: Ombak, 2025); Mudaffar Sjah and others. p. 47

the authority of the palace obtained social recognition from society.<sup>38</sup>

During the succession crisis following the death of Sultan Bayanullah, Nukila's relationship with the networks of *bobato* and *soa* became decisive for the continuity of the sultanate's administration. At a time when the heirs to the throne were still very young, the support of local elites played an important role in preventing internal conflict that the Portuguese could exploit to expand their political influence in Ternate. Oral traditions of Ternate describe Nukila as capable of establishing mutual understanding with local elites, preventing the transition of power from escalating into open conflict.<sup>39</sup> Support for Nukila in these oral narratives is usually explained through two principal factors, namely, her legitimate position within the royal family structure and her ability to maintain political balance amid colonial pressure.

This analysis indicates that the legitimacy of Nukila's leadership cannot be understood solely as the result of her genealogical position within the royal family. Such legitimacy also emerged from her ability to cultivate political relationships with local elite networks that supported the governing structure of the sultanate. From the perspective of dynastic political theory, this situation demonstrates that the stability of monarchies often depended upon the ruler's ability to establish consensus with elite groups that formed the foundation of political authority.<sup>40</sup>

Beyond elite political networks, the legitimacy of leadership in the Sultanate of

Ternate was also grounded in a local political value system known as the philosophy of *jou se ngofa ngare*. This philosophy explains the moral relationship between ruler and subjects while emphasizing that power represents a trust that must be exercised with justice and responsibility. Within this concept, "jou" refers to the Supreme Being as the ultimate source of sovereignty, while "ngofa ngare" refers to human beings as the children of the land living within social and political bonds.<sup>41</sup> Authority is therefore understood as a moral responsibility that must maintain balance between custom, religion, and social life.

In the customary practice of Ternate, this principle is closely associated with the traditional expression *matoto agama, agama matoto kitabullah, kitabullah matoto Jou ta'ala*.<sup>42</sup> This formulation indicates that political legitimacy within the sultanate did not rest solely on coercive power but on harmony among customary norms, religious teachings, and divine moral authority. Within this framework, a legitimate ruler was defined as a leader capable of maintaining social equilibrium and ensuring harmony among the various elements of society. Acceptance of leadership, therefore, depended largely on the ability to safeguard the stability of the realm and the welfare of the people.

The philosophy of *jou se ngofa ngare* was also closely connected with the ideal of unity expressed in the phrase *marimoi ngone futuru*, meaning "let us unite." In the political traditions of Maluku, this expression emphasizes the importance of unity among

<sup>38</sup> Hasan, *Aroma Sejarah dan Budaya Ternate*, p. 43; Ahmad, *Sejarah Ternate dari Kota Tradisional ke Kota Kolonial*, p. 41, 174.

<sup>39</sup> L. Rajilun, *Daratan Tinggi Foramadiabi Adalah Ternate Awal Ke Daratan Rendah Sebagai Ternate Akhir*, 1982; Rainannur A Latif, *Tradisi Lisan Moloku Kie Raha* (Sofifi: Dinas Perpustakaan dan Kearsipan Daerah Provinsi Maluku Utara, 2015). p. 10, 80

<sup>40</sup> Duindam, *Dynasties*, p. 211–214.

<sup>41</sup> Mudaffar Sjah, 'Filosofi Maluku Utara', in *Ternate Sebagai Bandar Jalur Sutra: Kumpulan Makalah Diskusi*, ed. by G A Ohorella (Jakarta: Direktorat Jenderal Kebudayaan Departemen Pendidikan dan Kebudayaan, 1997).

<sup>42</sup> Dero, *Tradisi dan Budaya Orang Ternate*, p. 12–16. ;Mudaffar Sjah, 'Filosofi Maluku Utara', p. 207.

the palace, customary elites, and society as the foundation of the realm's strength. The stability of the sultanate depended greatly on the ruler's ability to maintain these bonds. Legitimacy, therefore, derived not only from dynastic descent but also from the capacity to sustain social solidarity within the political community.

Oral traditions of Ternate provide a cultural context that enriches the understanding of these principles. Through various *dolabololo*, the people of Ternate express moral teachings and ethical reflections on leadership that emphasize social harmony and wisdom in the exercise of authority. One frequently cited expression reads, “*ino fomakatinyinga doka gosora se balawa, om doro yo mamote fo magogoru se madudara*.” This phrase is commonly interpreted as an invitation to live in mutual tolerance and solidarity, like nutmeg and mace that grow together within the same fruit<sup>43</sup>. The symbolism highlights the importance of unity and solidarity as the foundation of the realm's strength.

The values contained in these *dolabololo* demonstrate that political legitimacy in the Ternate tradition rested on social harmony, moral responsibility, and the capacity to maintain balance among the different elements of society. In the context of the succession crisis following Sultan Bayanullah's death, this value framework helps explain why Nukila's leadership was accepted by both society and the sultanate's elites. Genealogical legitimacy indeed provided the initial basis of her authority. Yet, broader acceptance rested upon her ability to preserve political stability and prevent internal conflict that colonial forces could have exploited.

From the perspective of gender history, this situation indicates that female leadership

in the Sultanate of Ternate was not regarded as a deviation from local political norms. Joan W. Scott explains that gender as a category of historical analysis enables scholars to understand how relations of power are shaped through social and cultural constructions within society in the context of Ternate, a political structure emphasizing social harmony and moral legitimacy created space for aristocratic women to exercise political authority when dynastic stability was under threat.

Thus, the legitimacy of Nukila's leadership emerged from the intersection of several factors, namely genealogical legitimacy within the dynastic structure, support from local elite networks through *bobato* and *soa*, and the political value framework embedded in the philosophy of *jou se ngofa ngare* and the society's oral traditions. The interaction of these elements demonstrates that Nukila's leadership did not arise merely as an emergency response to a succession crisis but represented a form of political adaptation deeply rooted in the social and cultural structure of Ternate. Within this framework, female leadership appears as an integral component of the dynamics of power in Maluku during the early modern period.

### **Betrayed Treaties and the Politics of Humiliation toward Female Leadership in Ternate**

Relations between the European power and the sultanate moved toward a pattern of structural domination that slowly shifted the center of local political authority. However, agreements between the Portuguese and the sultanate can no longer be understood as equal arrangements but rather as legal and symbolic instruments used to assert colonial hierarchy in the political relations of Maluku. Studies of Iberian expansion indicate that in

---

<sup>43</sup> Latif, *Tradisi Lisan Moloku Kie Raba*, p. 40; Dero, *Tradisi dan Budaya Orang Ternate*, p. 4.

the sixteenth century the language of treaties was frequently employed as an instrument to transform local political relations into structures of colonial subordination. Subrahmanyam explains that Portuguese authority in Asia was constructed not solely through military force but also through networks of agreements that enabled control over trade and influence within the politics of local kingdoms.<sup>44</sup> In the case of Maluku, Portuguese claims over the spice trade were often rationalized through European legal doctrines and religious legitimacy derived from papal authority, a legal framework that had never formed part of the political system of the Malay Islamic world. The application of such external logic accelerated the erosion of the sultanate's sovereignty by transforming diplomatic relations into relations of domination<sup>45</sup>.

This transformation reflects the integration of spice-producing regions into the expanding capitalist economy of Western Europe. Immanuel Wallerstein explains that European maritime expansion during this period aimed to incorporate peripheral regions producing strategic commodities into a world economic network dominated by European powers.<sup>46</sup> In the context of Maluku, spices thus became not merely objects of commerce but also sources of geopolitical

power, prompting the Portuguese to strengthen their control over the production areas.

Colonial domination was implemented not only through economic and legal mechanisms but also through practices of symbolic violence intended to degrade the authority of local elites. François Valentijn's account of the humiliation of Kaicil Vaidua illustrates how a nobleman's body became a medium for conveying colonial political messages. The act of smearing pork fat on a noble figure in a public space carried meaning far beyond physical punishment. In the political culture of Maluku, a noble's honor was closely tied to genealogical legitimacy and customary dignity. The humiliation, therefore, served to undermine the honor of the Ternate aristocracy while simultaneously asserting that the local structure of authority was under colonial control.<sup>47</sup> Such practices may be understood as part of the production of political discipline through symbols and representation. Power operates not only through military force or formal law but also through symbolic mechanisms that generate fear and weaken the legitimacy of local authority.<sup>48</sup> Public humiliation of palace elites thus functioned as a strategy for disciplining society while demonstrating the superiority of colonial authority.

<sup>44</sup> Subrahmanyam; Fahmi Irfani and others, 'Islamic Law and Maritime Management: How the Sultanate of Banten Managed Its Territorial Waters in the 16th--17th Centuries', *Ulmuna*, 29.2 (2025), 990–1013 <<https://doi.org/10.20414/ujs.v29i2.1633>>.

<sup>45</sup> M Buduroh and D Susanto, 'Spices Trade and Social-Political Conflict at Molucca in the Literature', in *Proceedings of the 9th Asbam International Conference (Archeology, History & Culture in the Nature of Malay)*, ASBAM 2021 (Paris: Atlantis Press, 2022), pp. 753–59.

<sup>46</sup> Wallerstein, *The Modern World-System*, p. 347–357.

<sup>47</sup> François Valentijn, *Oud En Nieuw Oost-Indiën* (Dordrecht, 1724); H J De Graaf, *Historiografi Hindia Belanda* (Jakarta: Bhara, 1971). Dordrecht dan Amsterdam. It is important to note that in the context

of historiography, many historians question the authority and data of Valentijn. He is regarded as a plagiarist who compiled data from various documents, personal memoirs, travel accounts and also fragments 'stolen' from the work of others, which he gathered thanks to his tenacity. He, in fact, never actually visited most of the areas he wrote about in his eight-volume work.

<sup>48</sup> Francis R Bradley, *Forging Islamic Power and Place: The Legacy of Shaykh Daud Bin Abdullah Al-Fatani in Southeast Asia* (Athens, OH: Ohio University Press, 2021); Francis R Bradley, 'Women, Violence, and Gender Dynamics during and after the Five Patani-Siam Wars, 1785--1838', *Itinerario*, 45.3 (2021), 345–63 <<https://doi.org/10.1017/S0165115321000292>>; Foucault.

In Ternate's context, the humiliation of palace elites had broader implications because it occurred during Sultanah Nukila's rule: any act that weakened the aristocracy's dignity indirectly destabilized the legitimacy network supporting her leadership. Colonial politics of humiliation thus targeted not merely individuals but functioned to undermine the sultanate's legitimacy itself. This situation reveals an encounter between two political systems holding different views on female authority. Within Southeast Asian political traditions, aristocratic women could exercise political authority, especially during dynastic crises—Barbara Watson Andaya shows that in many of the region's maritime kingdoms, elite women gained access to power through kinship networks and dynastic legitimacy.<sup>49</sup> European colonialism, however, introduced a more rigid patriarchal framework in which political authority was almost entirely associated with male figures.

The meeting of these two systems created a complex arena of symbolic contestation. The leadership of Sultanah Nukila confronted not only Portuguese economic interests in the spice trade monopoly but also colonial representations that questioned the legitimacy of female rule. Joan W. Scott explains that gender in history often functions as a symbolic device for defining and maintaining relations of power within society.<sup>50</sup> Within colonial contexts, such gender constructions could be employed to diminish the legitimacy of female rulers while reinforcing hierarchies of male-dominated authority.

Nukila's response to this situation demonstrated adaptive political capacity. In the face of Portuguese pressure, Nukila did not rely solely on genealogical legitimacy

derived from her position as the wife of Sultan Bayanullah. She also consolidated political support from other kingdoms in the Maluku region, such as Tidore and Bacan. This regional solidarity became an important foundation for resistance against Portuguese domination. The siege of the Portuguese fortress in 1530 represented the culmination of this political strategy.<sup>51</sup> Colonial sources record that Nukila's speech in the context of this conflict emphasized the betrayal of treaties and the humiliation directed toward the dignity of the sultanate.<sup>52</sup>

The military strategy adopted in this conflict also demonstrates careful political calculation. Instead of conducting a high-risk frontal assault, the siege strategy applied sustained pressure on Portuguese forces. Nukila's decision not to destroy the Portuguese fortress after the successful siege also reveals a broader political vision regarding Ternate's position within global trade networks. The fortress still possessed a function within the spice trade system that connected Maluku with the wider world. By maintaining the fortress, Ternate could preserve its position within international commerce while simultaneously controlling political relations with the Portuguese.<sup>53</sup> This policy indicates that resistance to colonialism did not necessarily entail a total rejection of global trade but could involve attempts to renegotiate relations of power toward a more balanced outcome.

Studies of sixteenth-century global connectivity place Maluku as one of the crucial nodes within the early modern world economy. Leonard Andaya notes that Ternate's strategic position in the spice trade made the sultanate an important actor in both

<sup>49</sup> B. W. Andaya, *The Flaming Womb*, p. 150–170.

<sup>50</sup> Scott, 'Gender. A Useful Category of Historical Analysis', p. 1067–1070.

<sup>51</sup> L. Y. Andaya, *The World of Maluku*, p. 121; Zuhdi, *Sultan Baabullah Datu' Syah*, p. 148.

<sup>52</sup> Valentijn, *Oud en Nieuw Oost-Indiën*, p. 187.

<sup>53</sup> Zuhdi, *Sultan Baabullah Datu' Syah*, p. 148; L. Y. Andaya, *The World of Maluku*, p. 125; Valentijn, *Oud en Nieuw Oost-Indiën*, p. 187.

regional and global political dynamics.<sup>54</sup> Within this framework, Sultanah Nukila's leadership can be understood as a local response to global pressures stemming from Portuguese colonial expansion.

Thus, betrayed treaties, symbolic violence, and the politics of humiliation formed part of a colonial strategy aimed at disciplining and delegitimizing the Sultanate of Ternate. Yet this experience also demonstrates that such strategies did not always produce submission. In many cases, acts of humiliation instead stimulated political consolidation and strengthened solidarity among local elites. Through a gender-oriented interpretation, the experience of Sultanah Nukila shows that women did not occupy the margins of Maluku's political history but rather emerged as important actors who defended the dignity of the sultanate and negotiated Ternate's position within the early modern world.

### Imperialism, Religion, and Female Leadership

Iberian expansion in Asia unfolded within a framework that combined economic interests, military power, and Catholic religious missions. In early modern colonial practice, religion did not function as a separate spiritual sphere detached from politics. Still, it served as both a source of moral legitimacy and an ideological instrument for cultivating loyalty to colonial authority. In Maluku, the spread of religion occurred alongside the construction of fortresses, the consolidation of the clove monopoly, and intervention in the sultanate's succession politics. Religion thus became an integral component of an imperial strategy aimed at reorganizing local

political structures in ways compatible with Portuguese interests.<sup>55</sup> For this reason, the missionary effort of Christianization cannot be separated from the economic and geopolitical interests that drove colonial expansion.

Studies of Catholic missions in Southeast Asia show that Iberian Christianization strategies often targeted political elites as entry points for broader social transformation, on the assumption that converting rulers would ease control over wider society. In practice, engagement with royal families involved personal diplomacy, military protection, and promises of political support in internal conflicts. In Ternate, such strategies targeted the ruling family during the politically fragile period after Sultan Bayanullah's death. Aristocratic conversion, then, cannot be read as purely a spiritual transformation—it must also be understood as a long-term political investment that builds patronage networks linking local elites to Portuguese authority.<sup>56</sup>

The baptism of Sultanah Nukila, who later became known as Dona Isabel, illustrates a complex encounter between colonial pressure and religious symbolism.<sup>57</sup> As a regent governing on behalf of heirs to the throne who were still very young, Nukila occupied an extremely vulnerable political position. The conversion, therefore, cannot be understood simply as an expression of personal faith. In many studies of elite conversion during the early modern colonial period, baptism often served as a strategy of negotiation aimed at preserving political position under external pressure. Religious identity within this context became a field of bargaining between local interests and

<sup>54</sup> L. Y. Andaya, *The World of Maluku*, p. 71–75.

<sup>55</sup> Charles R. Boxer, (1969) *The Portuguese Seaborne Empire 1415–1825*. London, Hutchinson, p. 102–115; Subrahmanyam, *The Portuguese Empire in Asia*, p. 347–357.

<sup>56</sup> Subrahmanyam, *The Portuguese Empire in Asia*, p. 48–50.

<sup>57</sup> Heraty, *Rainha Boki Raja*, p. 38; Zuhdi, *Sultan Baabullah Datu' Syah*, p. 157.

colonial authority. Foucault explains that power operates through the production of symbols and representations that shape the ways societies understand authority and legitimacy.<sup>58</sup> In the case of Ternate, the conversion of palace elites may therefore be seen as an attempt by the Portuguese to integrate local political authority into a symbolic system of colonial power centered upon Catholic religious legitimacy.

This situation also reveals that the body and identity of a female ruler became a site of complex symbolic contestation. If male elites often encountered colonial pressure through physical violence or public humiliation, female rulers faced strategies that mobilized religious morality and paternalistic narratives within European Christian traditions. Joan W. Scott argues that gender functions as an analytical category in historical inquiry because it helps explain how relations of power are constructed through symbols, social norms, and cultural representations.<sup>59</sup> In colonial contexts, such representations could be employed to redefine the legitimacy of female political authority while placing women rulers in positions more easily controlled by colonial power.

Yet Portuguese Christianization strategies in Ternate did not unfold without resistance. Since the fifteenth century, Islam had already become firmly rooted as a foundation of political legitimacy within the sultanate. In the political structure of maritime Southeast Asia, religion functioned not only as a spiritual identity but also as a regional network of solidarity linking various centers of Islamic authority across coastal societies. Anthony Reid demonstrates that trade and diplomatic networks in early modern Southeast Asia were frequently strengthened

by religious ties that connected Muslim kingdoms across the region.<sup>60</sup> Within this context, Catholic ideological penetration encountered structural resistance because it confronted an established system of political legitimacy embedded in the traditions of the sultanate.

Resistance to Catholic missions did not always appear in the form of open rejection. In the context of female leadership, Sultanah Nukila's experience shows that women rulers were not passive actors in the face of colonial religious pressure. Barbara Watson Andaya notes that in many Southeast Asian kingdoms aristocratic women possessed considerable political space, especially when they were able to maintain dynastic stability and manage elite networks during periods of crisis.<sup>61</sup>

The relationship between imperialism and religion in Ternate therefore reveals the limitations of the Portuguese colonial project. Although religion functioned as a tool of legitimacy and political control, local power structures and the resilience of maritime Islam restricted the depth of ideological penetration. The leadership of Sultanah Nukila demonstrates that female rulers faced not only economic and military pressures but also symbolic strategies directed toward their religious identity and political dignity. This perspective enriches the understanding of colonialism as a multidimensional process involving material, symbolic, and religious forms of power, while also opening an analytical space more attentive to women's experiences in the political history of early modern Southeast Asia.

## Conclusion

This study demonstrates that Sultanah Nukila's leadership held significant weight in

<sup>58</sup> Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*, p. 3–31.

<sup>59</sup> Scott, 'Gender. A Useful Category of Historical Analysis', p. 1067–1070.

<sup>60</sup> Reid, *Southeast Asia in the Age of Commerce*, I, p. 1–20.

<sup>61</sup> B. W. Andaya, *The Flaming Womb*, p. 150–170.

Ternate's sixteenth-century political dynamics. Her authority rested on genealogical and customary legitimacy recognized within Maluku's maritime sultanate structure. Amid the succession crisis following Sultan Bayanullah's death and rising Portuguese intervention in the spice trade and palace politics, Nukila governed effectively, managing elite conflicts, consolidating alliances among regional kingdoms, and making strategic decisions that preserved dynastic continuity and stability. These findings indicate that female political authority could function fully within an Islamic maritime sultanate without losing social or political legitimacy.

Portuguese colonial pressure reveals the complex environment Ternate faced in the early modern period: trade monopolies, symbolic violence against palace elites, and Catholic missionary penetration created multidimensional pressures on the sultanate's sovereignty. Nukila's leadership showed an ability to interpret these geopolitical and economic transformations surrounding the global spice trade, the siege of the Portuguese fortress reflecting measured political-military rationality, while her decision to preserve existing trade infrastructure after the conflict reflected an economic vision for maintaining Ternate's position in regional commerce.

The gender approach used here opens a new analytical perspective in Maluku historiography. Female leadership within the sultanate should be understood not as an anomaly but as a political practice adaptable to dynastic crisis. Nukila's experience shows aristocratic women could hold substantial political space through genealogical legitimacy, elite support, and the capacity to balance palace and societal interests, challenging historiographical tendencies that treat political authority as a masculine domain and reduce women to genealogical symbols.

Reexamining Ternate's history through gender also exposes the limits of colonial narratives that cast European powers as the primary drivers of political change in Maluku. Local resistance, diplomatic negotiation, and the sultanate elites' capacity to manage internal conflict indicate strong local agency in confronting imperial expansion, with female leadership as a key factor enabling the sultanate's political autonomy under colonial pressure.

Maluku historiography thus needs a more inclusive approach that is critical of colonial and masculine biases. Centering Sultanah Nukila as a historical actor offers a fuller understanding of power, gender, and local political strategy in the early modern maritime world, confirming that Maluku's history encompasses not only the spice trade and colonial expansion but also female leadership that shaped the sultanate's trajectory and resilience.

Given this study's limited scope focused solely on Sultanah Nukila and Ternate, other women likely exercised agency in political and economic spheres as well. Further research is thus needed to challenge the still-dominant masculine lens in Indonesian and Southeast Asian political narratives.

**Acknowledgments.** This research was completed with the support and contributions of various individuals and institutions. The authors would like to express their appreciation to colleagues in the Department of History who provided input, criticism, and academic discussions throughout the writing process. The authors also extend their gratitude to the Sultanate of Ternate and the Sultanate of Tidore for their participation in scholarly discussions and for providing access to several collections of sources relevant to this research.

**Author Statements.** This article is the result of collaborative contributions from five authors whose roles complement one another throughout the research and writing process. Irfan Ahmad and Fatma developed the initial research framework, presented the main narrative of the research findings, and formulated the theoretical and methodological approaches based on joint discussions among the authors. Willem Christiaan Manuhutu and Aswati strengthened the study by using authentic colonial sources and by reviewing the manuscript, thereby reinforcing the theoretical framework in accordance with the requirements of academic journal publication. Muhammad Rusydan Hi Arby was responsible for language editing and translating the manuscript from Indonesian into English.

**Research Funding.** The authors have fully funded the publication process of this article through shared personal contributions.

**Data Availability.** The data used in this article are derived from publicly accessible academic references and historical sources.

**AI Use Statement.** During the preparation of this manuscript, the authors used several digital tools to support research and language editing. *Perplexity AI* was used to assist in identifying relevant academic references. In contrast, *QuillBot Plus* was used during the grammar and language editing stage to improve the linguistic quality of the manuscript. All analysis, interpretation, and the final content of the article remain the full responsibility of the authors.

#### Additional Information

**Fatma** was born in Ungkaya on 20 September 1988. She obtained a bachelor's degree in History Education from Universitas

Tadulako, Palu, in 2011, and a Master's degree in History from Universitas Gadjah Mada, Yogyakarta, in 2016. She is a lecturer in the Department of History, Faculty of Cultural Sciences, Universitas Halu Oleo, Kendari. Her research and publications focus on the regional and local history of Sulawesi, including the kingdoms of Bungku and Konawe, the socio-cultural history of Muna and Parigi Moutong, women's history, and cultural heritage preservation, and are disseminated through journal articles, book chapters, and research and community service reports. Beyond her research activities, she is active in academic governance and publishing, having served as a member of the accreditation team of the Department of History (2019), as editor of the *Idea of History Journal* since 2019, as Editor-in-Chief of *Jurnal Sorume* since 2023, and as Secretary of the Senate of the Faculty of Cultural Sciences, Universitas Halu Oleo, since 2024. She can be contacted via email at fatma88@uho.ac.id.

**Irfan Ahmad** was born in Ngofagita, North Halmahera, North Maluku, on 12 February 1983. He obtained a bachelor's degree in history from Universitas Khairun in 2008 and a Master's degree in history from Universitas Gadjah Mada in 2012. Since 2009, he has served as a lecturer at Universitas Khairun and has produced several works on the history, archaeology, culture, and local languages of Maluku. Alongside his academic activities, he continues to develop a digital literacy platform through a self-managed website, [www.jejak.malut.com](http://www.jejak.malut.com), which serves as a space for essays and reflections grounded in field experience and historical research on North Maluku. He can be contacted via email at [irfan.abmad@unkhair.ac.id](mailto:irfan.abmad@unkhair.ac.id) or through ORCID at <https://orcid.org/0009-0009-3193-1557>.

**Aswati** was born in Wawotobi on 22 Oktober 1962. She is a senior lecturer in the Department of History, Faculty of Cultural Sciences, Universitas Halu Oleo, Indonesia, where she also serves as Head of the Department of History. She earned her Bachelor's degree in History Education from Universitas Halu Oleo and her Master's degree in American Studies from Universitas Gadjah Mada. Her academic expertise encompasses Indonesian history, Southeast Asian history, local history, gender history, cultural heritage, oral tradition, and the history of Eastern Indonesia, particularly Buton, Muna, Tolaki, and the Maluku region. She has led and participated in numerous research projects on historical and cultural heritage, customary institutions, archaeology, and local historiography funded by national and regional institutions. She has also published extensively in both international and national scholarly journals and has authored several books on Indonesian history and cultural heritage. Her current research focuses on gender, political legitimacy, indigenous institutions, and the historical roles of women in the maritime kingdoms of Eastern Indonesia, contributing to comparative studies of female leadership in premodern Southeast Asian societies. She can be contacted via email at [aswati.mukadas@yahoo.com](mailto:aswati.mukadas@yahoo.com).

**Willem Christiaan Manuhutu** was born in 1959 in Lunetten near Vught, the Netherlands. He studied history at Utrecht University with a focus on Indonesian history, the Moluccas, and colonial studies. The Moluccan diaspora environment in the Netherlands shaped his research interests in the history of migration, the identity of Moluccan communities, and the historical relationship between the Netherlands and its former colonial territories in Southeast Asia.

In his professional career, Manuhutu is known as a historian and curator who has long been involved in managing the *Moluks Historisch Museum* in Utrecht and previously served as its director. His research and publications frequently address the Moluccan diaspora, the migration of former soldiers of the *Koninklijke Nederlandsch-Indisch Leger*, and the Dutch colonial legacy from the perspective of public history. He also conducted doctoral research at *Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam*, examining the historical relationship between the Netherlands and its former colonies and its implications for the concept of shared cultural heritage. Further information about his work and publications can be accessed through his Academia.edu page at <https://vu-nl.academia.edu/WManuhutu>.

**Muhammad Rusydan Hi Arby** was born in Ternate, North Maluku, Indonesia, on 2 February 1990. He obtained a bachelor's degree in architecture from Universitas Islam Indonesia, Yogyakarta, in 2013. He later continued his studies in urban and regional planning at Universitas Gadjah Mada, Yogyakarta, where he completed his master's degree in 2016. Since 2019, Rusydan has served as a lecturer at Sekolah Tinggi Ilmu Maritim Indonesia (STIMI Ternate). Beyond his academic and research activities, Rusydan founded the Determinan Foundation, an independent research institution focusing on urban studies, spatial planning, and coastal regional development. He is currently pursuing a doctoral degree at the University of Alabama, United States, where his research focuses on urban studies, spatial governance, and the development of island cities. He can be contacted via email at [mrhiarby@crimson.ua.edu](mailto:mrhiarby@crimson.ua.edu) or through ORCID at <https://orcid.org/0009-0001-8978-1741>.

**Bibliography**

- Abas, Thalib, Yusri Ali Boko, Suhartin Ode Bau, and Jamin Safi, 'Jou Se Ngofa Ngare Philosophy in Traditional Leadership in Ternate', 12 (2024) <<https://doi.org/10.24127/hj.v12i2.9034>>
- Ahmad, Irfan, *Sejarah Ternate Dari Kota Tradisional Ke Kota Kolonial Abad XIII--XX* (Yogyakarta: Ombak, 2025)
- Amirell, Stefan, 'The Blessings and Perils of Female Rule: New Perspectives on the Reign of the Patani Queens', *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies*, 42 (2011), 303–23 <<https://doi.org/10.1017/S002246341000063>>
- Andaya, Barbara Watson, *The Flaming Womb: Repositioning Women in Southeast Asian History* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2006)
- Andaya, Leonard Y, *The World of Maluku: Eastern Indonesia in the Early Modern Period* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 1993)
- Ayub, Immamuddin, 'Eksistensi Falsafah Jou Se Ngofa Ngare Di Ternate' (Universitas Islam Negeri Sunan Kalijaga, 2015)
- Boxer, Charles R, *The Portuguese Seaborne Empire 1415--1825* (London: Hutchinson, 1969)
- Bradley, Francis R, *Forging Islamic Power and Place: The Legacy of Shaykh Daud Bin Abdullah Al-Fatani in Southeast Asia* (Athens, OH: Ohio University Press, 2021)
- , 'Women, Violence, and Gender Dynamics during and after the Five Patani-Siam Wars, 1785--1838', *Itinerario*, 45 (2021), 345–63 <<https://doi.org/10.1017/S0165115321000292>>
- Braudel, Fernand, *The Perspective of the World* (New York: Harper & Row, 1984)
- Buduroh, M, and D Susanto, 'Spices Trade and Social-Political Conflict at Molucca in the Literature', in *Proceedings of the 9th Asbam International Conference (Archeology, History & Culture in the Nature of Malay)*, ASBAM 2021 (Paris: Atlantis Press, 2022), pp. 753–59
- van der Crab, P, 'Geschiedenis van Ternate, in Ternataanschen En Maleischen Tekst Beschreven Door Den Ternataan Naidah Met Vertaling En Aanteekeningen', *Bijdragen Tot de Taal-, Land- En Volkenkunde / Journal of the Humanities and Social Sciences of Southeast Asia*, 26 (1878), 381–493 <<https://doi.org/10.1163/22134379-90000593>>
- Crenshaw, Kimberlé, 'Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex', *University of Chicago Legal Forum*, 1989 (1989), 139–67 <<https://chicagounbound.uchicago.edu/uclf/vol1989/iss1/8>>
- Crewe, Ryan Dominic, 'Islas de Fábula y Guerra: Cómo Las Molucas Demarcaron El Nuevo Mundo', *Intus-Legere Historia*, 17 (2023), 11–42 <<https://doi.org/10.15691/0719-8949.561>>
- Dero, Ridwan, *Tradisi Dan Budaya Orang Ternate* (Ternate: Dinas Pariwisata Kota Ternate, 2001)
- Duindam, Jeroen, *Dynasties: A Global History of Power 1300--1800* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016) <<https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9781316339841>>
- , 'Gender, Succession and Dynastic Rule', *History and Anthropology*, 32 (2021), 151–70 <<https://doi.org/10.1080/02757206.2021.1905238>>
- Foucault, Michel, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison* (New York: Vintage Books, 1977)
- Van Fraassen, Ch. F, 'Ternate, de Molukken En de Indonesische Archipel: Een Studie Naar Traditionele En Vroegmoderne Politieke Structuren En Relaties' (Leiden University, 1987)
- Gottschalk, L, *Mengerti Sejarah (Terjemahan Nugroho Notosusanto)* (Jakarta: UI Press, 1985)
- De Graaf, H J, *Historiografi Hindia Belanda* (Djakarta: Bhratara, 1971)

- Hasan, Abdul Hamid, *Aroma Sejarah Dan Budaya Ternate* (Jakarta: Antara Pustaka Utama, 2001)
- Heraty, Toeti, *Rainha Boki Raja: Ratu Ternate Abad Keenambelas* (Jakarta: Komunitas Bambu, 2010)
- Irfani, Fahmi, and others, 'Islamic Law and Maritime Management: How the Sultanate of Banten Managed Its Territorial Waters in the 16th–17th Centuries', *Ulumuna*, 29 (2025), 990–1013  
<<https://doi.org/10.20414/ujs.v29i2.1633>>
- Izzah, Latifatul, and others, 'Robinah: A Dignified Woman in the Dutch East Indies in the Dutch Colonial Era', *KARSA: Journal of Social and Islamic Culture*, 31 (2023), 297–327  
<<https://doi.org/10.19105/karsa.v31i2.10576>>
- Khan, Sher Banu A L, *Sovereign Women in a Muslim Kingdom: The Sultanahs of Aceh 1641–1699* (Singapore: NUS Press, 2017)
- Kuntowijoyo, *Metodologi Sejarah* (Yogyakarta: Tiara Wacana, 2003)
- Latif, Rainannur A, *Tradisi Lisan Moloku Kie Raha* (Sofifi: Dinas Perpustakaan dan Kearsipan Daerah Provinsi Maluku Utara, 2015)
- Lukito, Yulia Nurliani H, and others, 'Revisiting Fort Heritage in Ternate, North Maluku: Nostalgia, Tourism, and Community Engagement', *Built Heritage*, 9 (2025)  
<<https://doi.org/10.1186/s43238-025-00181-4>>
- Maulana, Wildhan Ichzha, and others, 'Maritime Activities of the Demak Sultanate: Shipping and Trade Route in the Nusantara Network (1478–1546)', *Journal of Al-Tamaddun*, 19 (2024), 261–72
- Mudaffar Sjah, 'Filosofi Maluku Utara', in *Ternate Sebagai Bandar Jalur Sutra: Kumpulan Makalah Diskusi*, ed. by G A Ohorella (Jakarta: Direktorat Jenderal Kebudayaan Departemen Pendidikan dan Kebudayaan, 1997)
- Mudaffar Sjah, and others, *Moloku Kie Raha: Dalam Perspektif Budaya Dan Sejarah Masuknya Islam* (Ternate: Himpunan Pelajar Mahasiswa Ternate, 2005)
- Nugroho, Khairana Zata, Desi Susanti, Keke Pahlevi Daradjati, and Firda Mutia Widayanti, 'Women, Culture, and Power: A Comparative Study of the Roles of Women during Vereenigde Oostindische Compagnie and Geoctrooieerde Westindische Compagnie Era', in *Proceedings of the 3rd International Conference on Culture and Sustainable Development (ICOCAS 2025)* (Atlantis Press, 2025), pp. 269–76  
<[https://doi.org/10.2991/978-2-38476-503-4\\_33](https://doi.org/10.2991/978-2-38476-503-4_33)>
- Nuraedah, 'Between Women, Throne, and Power: Religious Transformation in Kagaua Palu, 1600–1904', *Paramita: Historical Studies Journal*, 33 (2023)  
<<https://doi.org/10.15294/paramita.v33i1.39109>>
- Rajilun, L, *Daratan Tinggi Foramadiabi Adalah Ternate Awal Ke Daratan Rendah Sebagai Ternate Akhir*, 1982
- Reid, Anthony, *Southeast Asia in the Age of Commerce 1450–1680, Volume 1: The Lands Below the Winds* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1988)
- Scott, Joan W, 'Gender: A Useful Category of Historical Analysis', *The American Historical Review*, 91 (1986), 1053–75  
<<https://doi.org/10.1086/ahr/91.5.1053>>
- Shirley, Bruno M, 'Beyond the Masculinity of Kingship: The Making of a Modern Queen in Early Second Millennium Sri Lanka', *Modern Asian Studies*, 58 (2024), 485–511
- Subrahmanyam, Sanjay, *The Portuguese Empire in Asia 1500–1700: A Political and Economic History* (London: Longman, 1993)
- Valentijn, François, *Oud En Nieuw Oost-Indiën* (Dordrecht, 1724)
- Wallerstein, Immanuel, *The Modern World-System I: Capitalist Agriculture and the Origins of the European World-Economy in the*

*Sixteenth Century* (New York: Academic Press, 1974)

Zuhdi, Susanto, *Sultan Baabullah Datu' Syah*

*Pahlawan Nasional Sang Pembebas Dari Timur 1528--1583* (Ternate: Dinas Perpustakaan dan Kearsipan Daerah, 2025)