‘Women showed their worth by draping rare cloth around their abdomen, to symbolise fertility and continuity of the clan.’

F. J. P. Sachse, 1907
It was not until 1687 that some of the first drawings of people from the eastern islands of Indonesia were made.

Sylvester Brounower was a servant of the eminent English philosopher John Locke (1632-1704), who lived in political exile in the Netherlands from 1684 to 1688. Brounower copied some 26 images and one was of an Ambonese woman. Neither Locke nor his servant had ever been to the eastern islands of the Indonesia and as with many drawings and etchings of that time, the accuracy of the clothing in the watercolours was heavily infused with the artist’s own flair and imagination, a fact acknowledged by Locke himself. It is highly problematic to evaluate genuine sartorial styles of those times according to these images. Not until the advent of photography during the nineteenth century did a more authentic depiction of Indonesians became available. One of the oldest photographs of Ambonese women in the collection of the KITLV in The Netherlands was made in the famed studio of Woodbury and Page in Batavia (Jakarta). Although clearly staged, the photograph, which was taken around 1870, shows in great detail the clothing and accessories worn. The long black blouse featured in this portrait appears frequently in photographs taken in Ambon around the turn of the twentieth century – visual confirmation that these items were indeed part of the dress lexicon of Ambonese women.

During the late nineteenth and early twentieth century Ambonese people appeared in photographs for a variety of reasons. The majority of these pictures were made in the context of ceremonies documenting ethnic displays at Queen’s birthday celebrations or activities organized around the arrival of the Governor General. Others represented romanticized ethnographic examples of (usually Alifuru) men, women and children, depicting their primitiveness.

“A" Alifuru are the local indigenous people whose society formed the basis of Ambonese culture.

*It has been impossible during the course of this project to find, either in private or public collections, visual images of members of Ambonese Muslim communities of that time. As is discussed, this absence could be viewed as indicative of the place they occupied within Dutch colonial society.