In any society, the past is forever being swept aside. Memories fade, records are lost, and those in power manipulate images of the past. In Aceh, survivors of the tsunami have to confront the sudden, massive loss of people and of their history. Material culture, which is the physical record of minds and hands, also vanished beneath the tsunami waves. Loss of material culture destroys evidence of the connections forged between maker and user that knit social classes together. Here, I introduce the Images Archive of the Royal Netherlands Institute of Southeast Asian and Caribbean Studies (hereafter: KITLV Images Archive) at Leiden as a repository that offers the possibility of recovering traces of Aceh’s past. The archive is also an important source for historians rethinking the history of Aceh within the larger histories of Indonesia.

All visual sources – paintings, portraits, photographs – need a context for their explanation and interpretation. My research method combines the study of document-based histories of Aceh with the study of images. I focus on the content of the photographs. Who or what was considered by photographers to be important to record through the expensive processes of early camera technology? How does a visual record contribute to understanding the past? I also consider the Aceh photographs in comparison with other photographs stored in the KITLV Images Archive that were taken in the same time period at other locations around the archipelago.

Major themes of histories of Aceh are the early seventeenth-century sultanate with its global connections, and the Aceh War, or rather, Aceh wars, over

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1 My thanks go to the Agency for the Rehabilitation and Reconstruction of Aceh and Nias (BRR) for support to participate in the First International Conference of Aceh and Indian Ocean Studies. I would also like to thank the Rethinking Indonesian Histories-project of the Koninklijk Instituut voor Taal-, Land- en Volkenkunde (KITLV, Royal Netherlands Institute of Southeast Asian and Caribbean Studies), for the opportunity to join the team of researchers in Leiden and Yogyakarta in 2005. Project colleagues Henk Schulte Nordholt, Ratna Saptari, Bambang Purwanto, Degung Santikarma and Hilmar Farid were generous in sharing their knowledge and companionship. I also thank Peter Boomgaard, Robert Cribb, Noorhaidi Hasan and Gerrit Knaap for valuable insights. An earlier version of this chapter was published in Jean Gelman Taylor 2008.
the years 1873 to the 1930s. In official histories of the Republic of Indonesia and in popular conception, Aceh is presented as a tenacious opponent of colonial rule and fierce supporter of independence. These themes of power, alienation and resistance in the historiography of Aceh have influenced its visual representation in published collections of photographs and art histories of Indonesia. In them, photographs of soldiers, bivouacs and military infrastructure represent Aceh. An examination of the KITLV Images Archive, however, reveals a great many more facets of Aceh. I will describe the materials in the archive from Aceh, after brief remarks on using photographs as research tools for understanding the region’s complex history.

Photographs as tools of history

At its birth, photography seemed to be a tool of science; the images it produced imparted ideals of reality and truth. The Netherlands Indies government quickly grasped the potential of photography and commissioned photographs in 1841 of Borobudur and of other ancient monuments that were being pried loose from their cover of vegetation by amateur archaeologists. Once photographs became reproducible, and supplies of chemicals and paper could be ordered by telegraph from Holland and dispatched promptly by steamer, a new industry established itself in Java. The professional photographer subsequently followed explorers, the colonial army, civil servants and commercial agents across the archipelago, and the camera began to replace pencil and paint in creating official records of Indonesian peoples and places. Amateurs joined the ranks of photographers after the release of the Kodak camera to the public in 1888. They contributed domestic themes and picturesque landscapes to the stock of photographs of Indonesia. Less cumbersome and cheaper photographic equipment with faster operating times meant that in theory, anything at all could be photographed.

Consideration of what actually was photographed obliges us to recognize that photography is not an objective record of peoples, times and places. Photographs are subjected to manipulation through selection, like any other set of documents. They are staged records and products of fleeting relationships between the photographed and the photographer. Anthropologists and historians of photography remind us to examine with care photographs taken by Europeans of colonized places and peoples (Wachlin 1994; Wachlin and Van der Linden 1989). Specialists in colonial photography draw attention to the social distance between the viewer and the viewed, and to the proc-