

Aesthetics and Socio-Cultural Representation of Sri Lanka on Stamps

Introduction and Cultural Significance of Stamps

Postage stamps act as national symbols, commemorating events and reflecting a nation's socio-cultural framework. In this study, aesthetics in Sri Lankan stamps refers to visual elements like color, form, and symbolism, which enhance beauty and express cultural values. Stamps also represent social and cultural life, depicting historical events, practices, landscapes, and symbols of Sri Lankan identity. Ultimately, they serve as a medium for communicating Sri Lanka's heritage and societal evolution.

Since the introduction of pictorial stamps in Sri Lanka in 1935, stamps have functioned both as communication tools and cultural artifacts. However, the rise of digital communication has reduced the use of physical stamps, threatening their cultural significance. As traditional mail declines, the rich narratives embedded in stamps risk disappearing. This study aims to preserve these socio-cultural stories by examining the historical and cultural importance of stamps in shaping Sri Lanka's national identity.

Research Aim and Objectives

This research aims to answer: "How can stamps serve as a visual medium to understand aesthetic and socio-cultural evolution in Sri Lanka?" The objective of the study is to develop a framework for analyzing Sri Lankan stamps as visual resources

that capture the nation's aesthetic and socio-cultural evolution. The research leverages the diverse expertise of its team to incorporate both national and global perspectives.

Methodology: Semiotic Content Analysis

While digital communication has reduced the prominence of physical stamps, this shift presents an opportunity for digitization to preserve these cultural narratives. This study uses **Semiotic Content Analysis** as the analytical method, blending semiotics and content analysis to interpret the meanings embedded within stamp imagery. Semiotic Content Analysis enables a deeper examination of cultural codes, iconography, and symbolism in stamps, capturing the nuanced ways in which stamps communicate socio-cultural values and historical narratives. Developed by the research team as a novel approach for analyzing philatelic materials, Semiotic Content Analysis provides unique insights into the complex cultural significance of Sri Lankan stamps.

In the context of this study, [1] describes codes as gateways for understanding ideologies embedded in society, while [2] explains that, at the connotative level, codes connect to social structures, economic power, and political ideologies. These foundations support the framework's use in analyzing the visual and textual elements of stamps to reveal underlying cultural significance.

Framework for Analysis: Thematic Clouds

The study introduces the “**Thematic Cloud of Stamps**” to categorize stamps by visual and textual elements, representing signs and modes of communication. To capture the diverse socio-cultural narratives, this framework organizes the stamps into several thematic clouds, each examining a specific aspect of Sri Lankan culture and identity. A total of 91 stamps, spanning from 1935 to 2005, were analyzed.

Drawing from the principal investigator’s stamp archives and interviews with Sri Lankan stamp designers, **Thematic Cloud 1** (Figure 1) categorizes stamps from **1935 to 1947** into eleven groups, providing insights into socio-cultural and historical themes, including depictions of the reigning monarch and related artwork from the period.

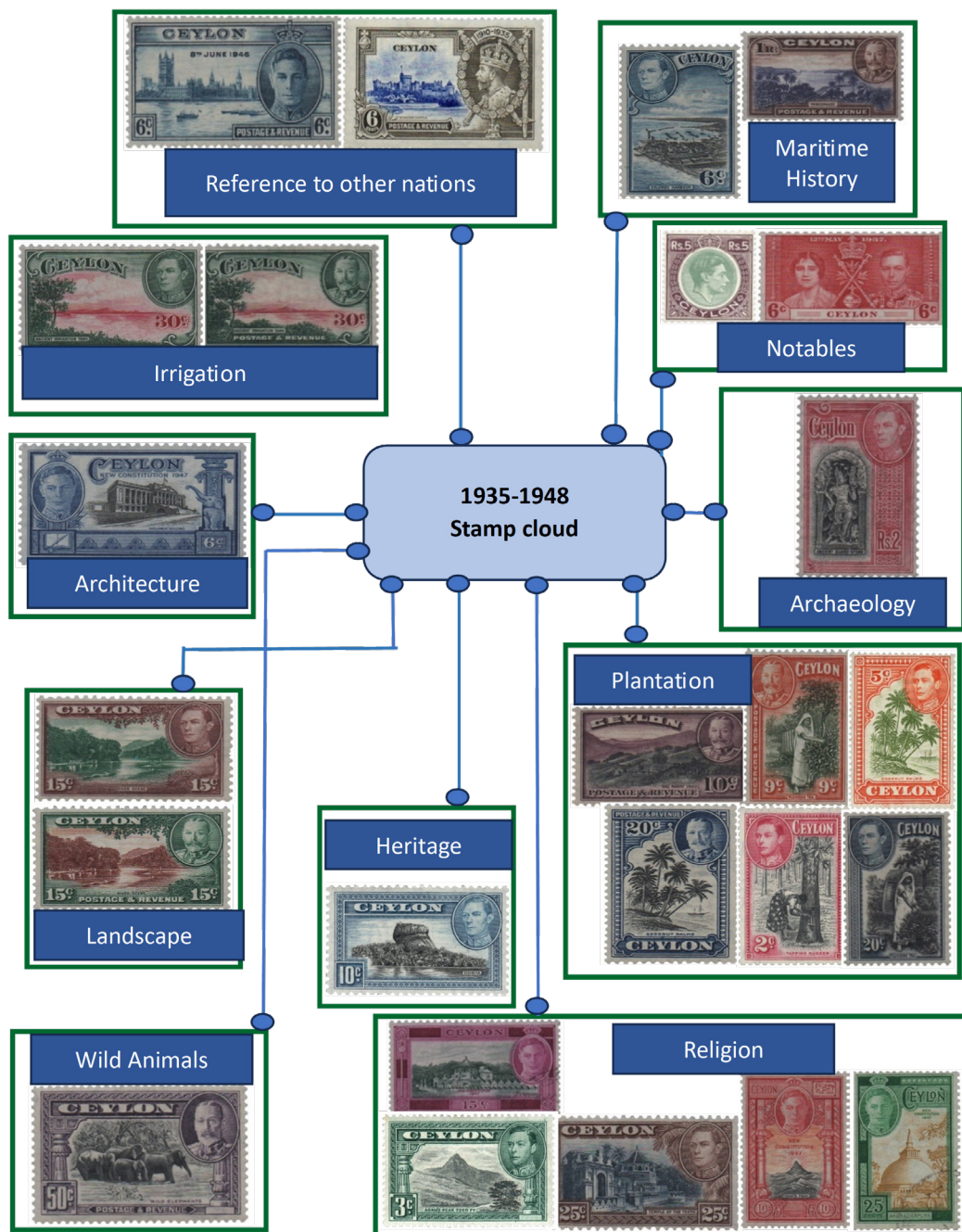


Figure 1: Thematic Cloud of Ceylon Stamp Issues from 1935 to 1947 (Developed by the Researcher)

Postage stamps serve as effective visual aids for raising awareness about technological evolution. The "Thematic Cloud of the Evolution of Science (TCES)" analyzed 28 Sri Lankan stamps issued between 1965 and 2005, categorizing them into five groups to illustrate various technological advancements, as shown in Figure 2.

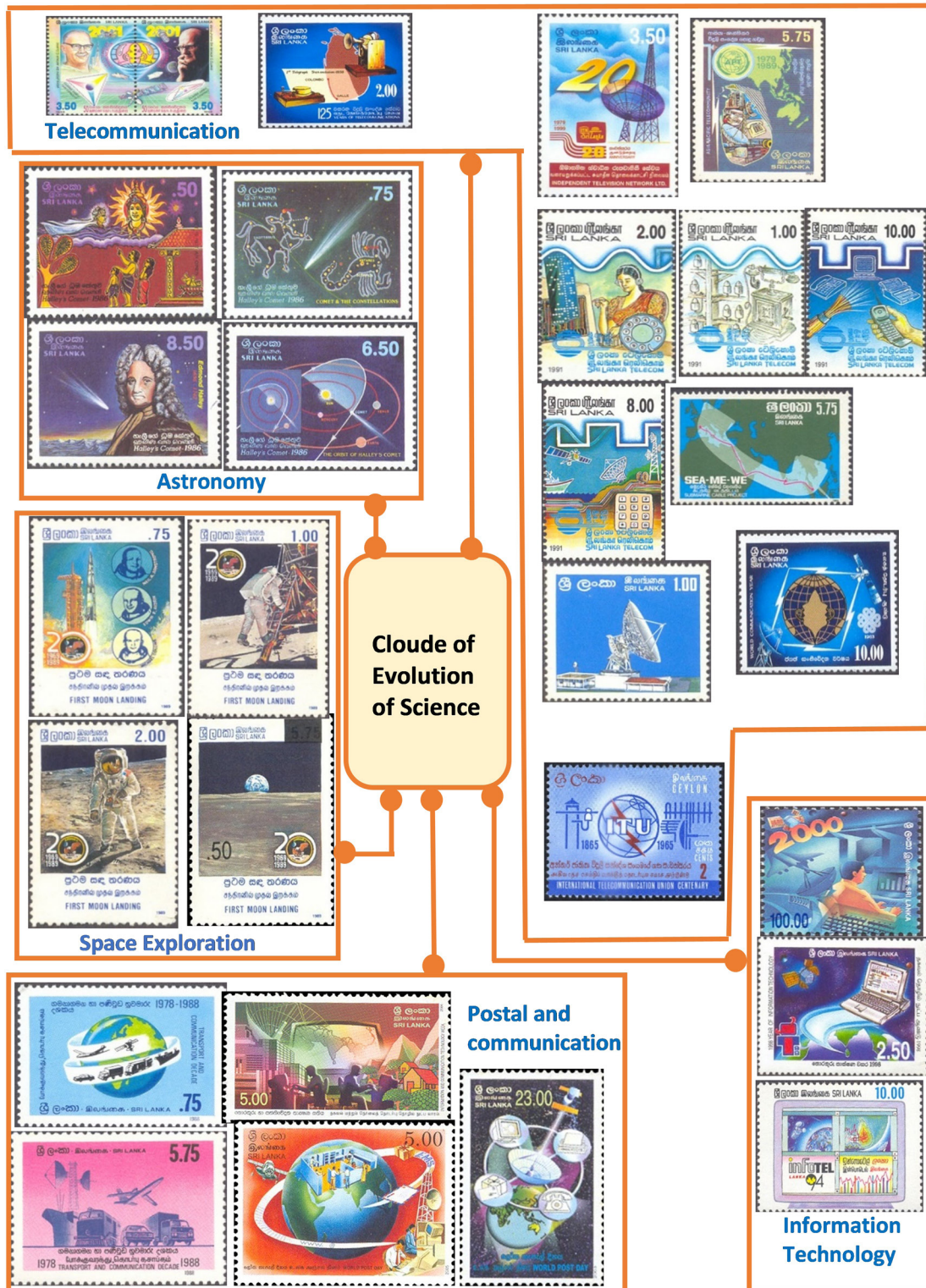


Figure 2: Thematic Cloud of the Evolution of Science (TCES), (Developed by the Researcher)

The study analyzed 39 Sri Lankan postage stamps issued between 1936 and 2001, highlighting their role in promoting environmental awareness and wildlife conservation. Thematic Cloud 3 categorizes these stamps into three groups, featuring 30 stamps with mammals (18 elephants), four with amphibians, and five with reptiles, as shown in Figure 3.

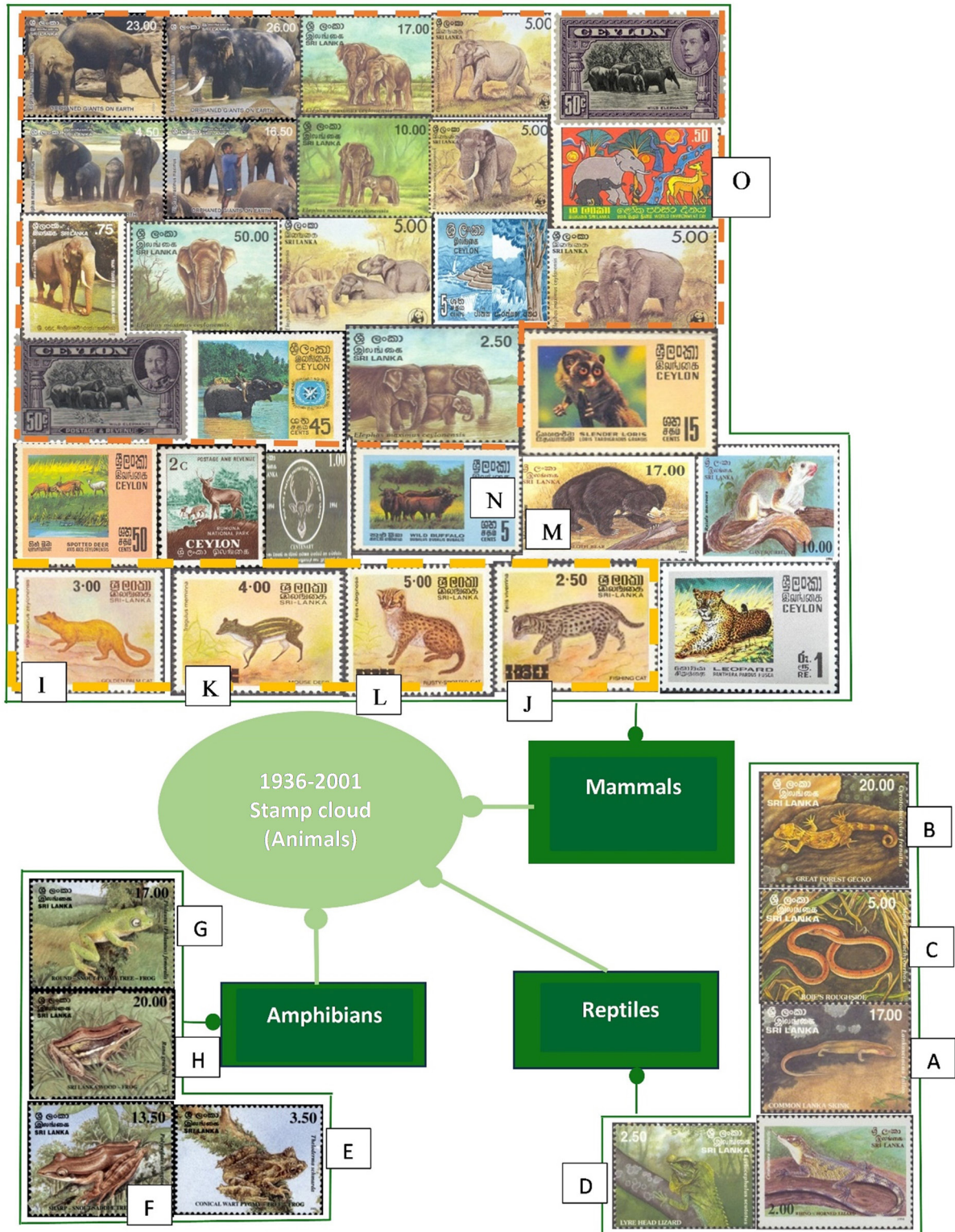


Figure 3. Thematic Cloud of Sri Lankan Wildlife on Stamps (Developed by the Researcher)

Future Directions of Study: The methodology employed in this study can be extended to various themes, applying the analysis to other forms of visual media such as postcards, coins, and newspaper images, which contribute to the construction of national identities.

References:

- [1] S. Hall, "Encoding/decoding," in *Culture, Media, Language: Working Papers in Cultural Studies*, Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies, Ed. London, U.K.: Hutchinson, 1980, pp. 128-138.
- [2] G. Rose, *Visual Methodologies: An Introduction to Researching with Visual Materials*. [Online]. Available: <https://ci.nii.ac.jp/ncid/BB21051656>. Accessed: Oct. 7, 2024.

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