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OTHER TITLES OF INTEREST

Unveiling India

The Early Lensmen 1850-1910

Contributors: Rahaab Allana and Davy Depelchin

The Alkazi Collection of Photography in association with Mapin Publishing Pvt., in collaboration with ICCR, New Delhi and supported by Europalia-India & The Royal Museum of Fine Arts of Belgium, 2014

Allegory & Illusion

Early Portrait Photography from South Asia

Contributors: Christopher Pinney, Beth Citron and Rahaab Allana

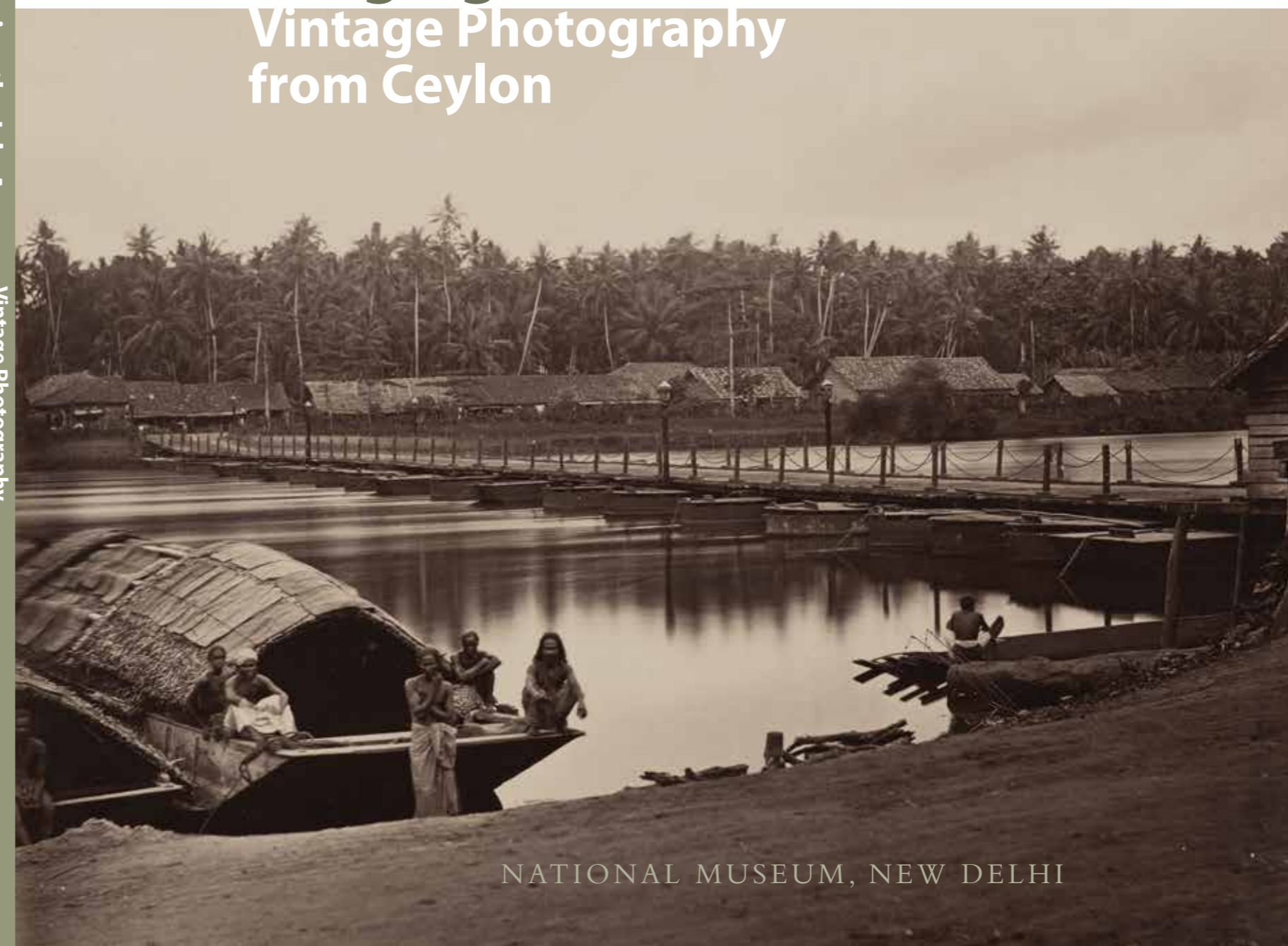
The Alkazi Collection of Photography and Rubin Museum of Art in association with Mapin Publishing Pvt. Ltd., 2013



Tamil woman - Srinivas
By G. Srinivas
1870-1880

THE ALKAZI COLLECTION OF PHOTOGRAPHY

Imaging the Isle Across
Vintage Photography
from Ceylon



NATIONAL MUSEUM, NEW DELHI

THE ALKAZI FOUNDATION FOR THE ARTS

Imaging the Isle Across

Vintage Photography
from Ceylon

NATIONAL MUSEUM, NEW DELHI

Imaging the Isle Across
Vintage Photography
from Ceylon

The history of photography in South Asia is a story of itinerant practitioners, seeking to expand the eye of the lens by exposure to the farthest corners of the world. Though Ceylon came under British rule only in 1815, it followed the maritime expansion of the Portuguese, the Dutch, Danes and the French – the first of which identified it in their sea-charts as Zeilon, from which the modern name Ceylon was derived and maintained till 1972.

An upsurge of industrialisation and a plantation boom in the nineteenth century framed the country as a repository of natural resources, and its people as 'natives' in an antique land. The documentation of the cities of Kandy and Colombo, the architecture of Anuradhapura, and the portraiture of a predominantly Buddhist community therefore mark a preliminary survey of the hinterland. However, upon keener review of the images, the passageway of traders, troops and priests fuses Ceylon with a composite identity, which enabled commercial photo firms such as Plâté & Co., Skeen & Co. and Scowen & Co., to resounding success.

Featuring vintage photographs drawn primarily from the Alkazi Collection of Photography, this publication takes its viewers through a visual mapping of sites as well as tropes and themes emerging from early photography via diverse mediums of production such as albums, illustrated books and postcards. These traces remain foundational in generating an imagistic canon that etched the life of a swiftly transforming country, as did the coming of a modern pictorial language instituted by Lionel Wendt, the art photographer and patron. Wendt, some of whose eclectic and experimental works are included here from the Sansoni Collection, shifts a linear reading of colonial imagery by volunteering a unique cultural expression in the early twentieth century. Hence this initiative is a tribute to the assorted histories of visualisation predominant in the isle across, further reframing India's own relationship to the frontiers through surviving archives.



with support from





Imaging the Isle Across Vintage Photography from Ceylon

MAPA GEOGRÁFICO
DE LA PENÍNSULA DE
LA INDIA:
CONTIENE LAS COSTAS DE MALABAR
Y COROMANDEL, CARNATE, MAISSUR,
LA ISLA DE CEILAN, &c.

Este con los documentos y noticias mas auténticas
del geógrafo D. Tomás Mauricio Lopez
de la orden de S. Jerónimo de la



© National Museum, New Delhi

First published in India in 2015 by National Museum and The Alkazi Foundation for the Arts in conjunction with an exhibition of the same name at National Museum between September 26 and November 10, 2015.

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Copyediting: Rahaab Allana
Design: DsgnUnplugged
dsgn-unplugged.blogspot.in
Production: K.K.S Deori
Production Assistance: Sanjib Kumar Singh and Yogesh M.

Acknowledgements

National Museum, New Delhi
Shri Sanjiv Mittal, Director General
Shri P.K. Nagta, Director (Collections and Administration)

Shri K.K.S. Deori, Curator, Display
Shri K K Sharma, Deputy Curator, Exhibition Cell
Shri Sarovar Shinde, Assistant Curator, Exhibition Cell

Ms. Renu Nawani, Hindi Officer
Shri Kuldeep Prasad, Layout Artist
Ms. Priya, Artist
Ms. Rige Shiba, Assistant Curator, Learning and Education
Ms. Joyoti Roy, Outreach Consultant
Ms. Rajalakshmi Karakulam, Exhibition Coordinator

Archaeological Survey of India
Dr. Rakesh Tewari, Director General
Dr. Urmila Sant, Director (Museums)
Cambridge University: Centre of South Asian Studies

India-Sri Lanka Foundation
Alkazi Foundation for the Arts
Ms. Jennifer Chaudhary Biswas
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The exhibition is a partner event of the Delhi Photo Festival 2015

Captions:

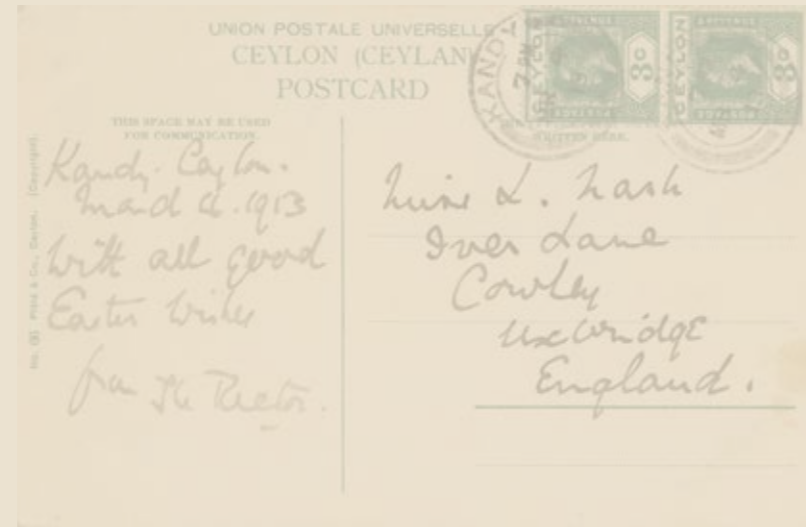
Half title page: Scowen & Co., A Young Tamil Hindu Girl, Albumen Print, 1890, 261 x 250 mm, ACP: 94.16.0016

Title page: D. Thomas Mauricio Lopez, [Geographic Map Peninsula India. Contains the coast of Malabar and Coromandel, Carnate, Maissur, Ceylon], Ink and Natural Pigments on Paper, 1801, Madrid, 440 x 595 mm, AC: 2015.01.M3

Contents (right side): Skeen & Co. and Unknown Photographer, Pages from the Album *Views of Ceylon and Kodaikanal*, Albumen Prints, 1890s, 278 x 383 x 34 mm, ACP: 95.0018 (48 & 49)

Printed at Creative Offset Press

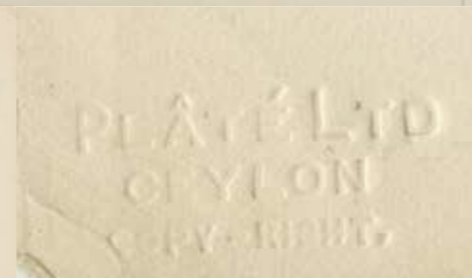
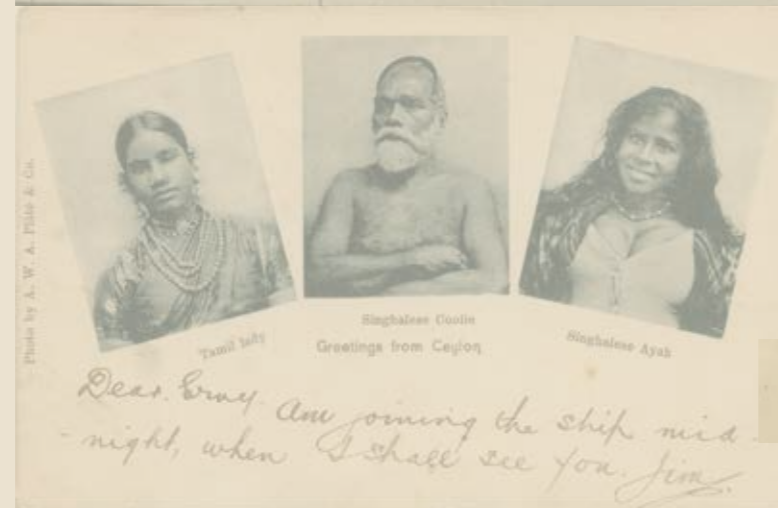
Price: Rs 250



Pit-Sawyer: Colombo.

Jetawanarama Ruins

Handsome flight of steps to a vihare. The *doratupala* (guard stone) is one of the most beautiful specimens of sculpture yet unearthed in Anuradhapura



Group of estate coolies

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19. *Mackelija River, "Laxapanagalla", a young coffee estate (jungle recently felled), in the background.*

Foreword

Sanjiv Mittal

Director General, National Museum, New Delhi

National Museum has collaborated with the Archaeological Survey of India and The Alkazi Foundation for the Arts to present the exhibition, *Imaging the Isle Across - Vintage Photography From Ceylon*. The exhibition coincides with and is featured as part of the Delhi Photo Festival, India's biggest international photography festival.

The early imagery of Sri Lanka – the South Asian Island has been brought to the public in the form of an eclectic exhibition for the very first time in India. The exhibition showcases original photographic prints from the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Photography in Sri Lanka began with the influx of European travellers and traders, after it came under British rule in 1815, and the plantation economy started thriving. The photographs of plantations hence offer insights into the visual and contextual histories such as the strategic employment of local labour to service this industry. The early documentation of ancient and ruined capitals, cityscapes, landscapes, coffee and tea industries, views of the railway, trading practices, botanical specimens and portraits of the natives was carried out by a number of photographers who had established themselves in Ceylon.

The section of the exhibition which focuses on landscapes and architecture gives a view of the country's geography, archaeology, and culture. Views of churches and other structures from the Dutch era, railway and harbour sites, causeways, rural and urban scenes, bridges and waterfalls, buildings, cleared habitats and natural landscapes accompany this section. The exhibition also has a section on ethnographic portraits which reflect the cultural diversity of the island colony.

I would like to thank the Alkazi Foundation for the Arts for their initiative in conceiving this exhibition from their collection. I would like to acknowledge the support lent by Archaeological Survey of India at every step of production of the exhibition. I also wish to thank Mr. Ebrahim Alkazi, the esteemed collector, and the curator, Mr. Rahaab Allana and his team, for putting together the wonderful narrative of the exhibition which brings these photographs to life.

This catalogue features a majority of the photographs displayed in the exhibition with comprehensive descriptions of each. It is designed to augment the experience of the reader and take them a step closer to the rich culture of Sri Lanka.

A Survey of Histories

Dr. Rakesh Tewari

Director General, Archaeological Survey of India

Over the last decade, research and archival work on vintage photographs have contributed to the creation of social memories and national histories. An institutional investment in images also underscores the recreation of pasts through repositories that have been secured, not only in private hands, but also in government organisations such as the Archaeological Survey of India. As the landscape and the urbanscape changes around us rapidly, some of these collections remain the only traces of how spaces were originally conceived, and how the spread of nature dominated the current urban sprawl.

With a focus on Ceylon in this exhibition, we are once again brought to dwell on a previously unseen collection of images from the Alkazi Collection of Photography. Described as a 'repository of oriental wealth', Ceylon's strategic location at the tip of the spice and trade routes was the primary reason for the immense attention it drew from commercial studio photographers. As one has observed in these images, civic and administrative development of roads and railways was a direct consequence of a boom in the island's plantation economy bringing along with it, an influx of Europeans tourists. These new settlers formed the main clientele for commercial photographers, and today comprise a significant portion of its varied demography.

As a tribute to the region, this publication, which has contributions from scholars in the region as well as from Cambridge University, provides a rare insight into the history of photo practices and as a consequence, the connection between South Asian countries through the work of itinerant practitioners – including those of early motion film as well. It features prominent early artists such as W.L.H. Skeen & Co., Plâté & Co., and Charles Thomas Scowen who also documented the ancient and ruined capitals, coffee and tea industries, trading practices, botanical specimens and portraits of the 'natives'. In doing so, this exercise is a survey of the region through documents that are rarely explored, but allow us to constantly revise what we know of the region and its imaging practices.

The Archaeological Survey of India is honoured to be a part of this collaboration.

Islanded and Connected

Rahaab Allana

Curator, Alkazi Foundation for the Arts



Skeen & Co. [Attributed]
'Ceylon, Tamil Lady'
Albumen Print, 1880s,
266 x 216 mm
ACP: 94.19.0002

Photography in South Asia is attempted dialectically in this exhibition with a reference to one region: Ceylon. As the visual culture of the colonial period remains a challenging, exploratory domain in today's media dominated world, the inter-relations between the archives of the subcontinent may not readily strike the reader or viewer as collegial or drawn from a networked past. The nineteenth century presents an early encounter with the colonial environment, dominated by cultural change and travel as the state transformed into a modern entity through infrastructure and political expansion. The paradox of how the city developed and opened up to a global economy is bolstered by an imperial vision, an uncompromised worldview with regard to people from the subjugated nations, often leading to harsh and clinical pre-conceptions about a country's resident population.

Within this exhibition, some attention has been paid to certain segregations that seem logical within the context of a photography archive – colonial buildings and cityscapes established in the nineteenth century, portraiture in the studio, landscape views and the urbanscape which captures the imagination of those drawn to it. However, through these frames, we also prominently foreground its people – the labour, economy, the religion and a growing urban class, which transforms the city into a cosmopolitan entity that negotiates hierarchies. The exhibition therefore begins with landscape images, as an entry into the region being explored for the first time through the camera. As the lens roams and settles upon its subjects – from the coast further inwards – the world seems to enlarge capturing not a tribal population, but one close to the rhythms and sways of the sea and sand with refined sartorial conventions and religious ceremonies. The architecture and archaeology further manifest a deep cultural association with the subcontinent, traced in the antiquated remains of Hindu temples and Buddhist pagodas, if not the iconography.

Much like its neighbours, Sri Lanka has had a complex modern history. The civil war, which ended only recently, (2009) seems to be a point of engagement and departure in most perceptions of its current state. What these images cite is an important prehistory represented as an example, by the portrait of a Ceylonese lady on the opposite page – a mesh of encounters that predates the post-colonial and announces a return to the origins of public engagement by the lens. Though wars create a disjuncture, the cities of Colombo and Kandy today stand as thriving coastal towns, replete with modern architecture, art centres, as well as an art biennale, which heralds all forms of interdisciplinary dialogue around the role of the practitioner and the institution. And in this, photography maintains a significant presence seeking to address how documents of the past propel new media exchanges in the present. The Lionel Wendt Art Centre in Colombo for instance, is one such outgrowth of a heady modernism, connected even to Santiniketan through Harold Peiris, painter and secretary of the 43 Group, who settled there for two years – a time when both regions, Sri Lanka and India, stood on the precipice of Independence as one nation.

Imaging the Isle Across Early Photographers from Ceylon 1840-1920

Ismeth Raheem

Historically, Ceylon has witnessed some of the most pioneering photography in South Asia, enabling practitioners such as Jules Alphonse Eugene Itier (1802 - 1877), Eliphalet Brown Jr. (1816 - 1886), Frederick Fiebig (unknown - 1869), Robert Schangleweit (1833 - 1885), John Thomson (1837 - 1921), Samuel Bourne (1834 - 1912), Julia Margaret Cameron (1815 - 1879), William Henry Jackson (1843 - 1942), Felice Beato (1832 - 1909) and even Henri Cartier Bresson (1908 - 2004), to resounding success. While most were interim visitors, some like Felice Beato, the renowned war photographer, set up a handicrafts and sales outlet; and other long term residents like Julia Margaret Cameron expanded the scope and dissemination of images from the region.

An interest in Lanka however dates to the time of Greek geographers who authored the first century manuscript, *Peirplus of the Erythrean Sea*; as well as Ptolemy's cartographic charts from the fourth century, referring to it as *Taprobane* (Fig. 1); and even the Arabs who by way of close trade links had named it the *Island of Serendib*. By the fifteenth century, the Portuguese, the first of the European colonists here recognised it in their sea-charts as *Zeilon* from which the modern name Ceylon was derived and maintained till 1972. Given this long engagement, innumerable drawings, engravings, and paintings of Ceylon's landscape and people by visiting artists were available to certain upper echelons of society in Amsterdam, Lisbon, London, Paris and other European cities from the sixteenth century onwards.¹ Consequently, such lavish visual material kindled the appetite of itinerant photographers, who were drawn to the orient not only for its pictorial appeal but also the entre-port trade which facilitated commercial enterprises.

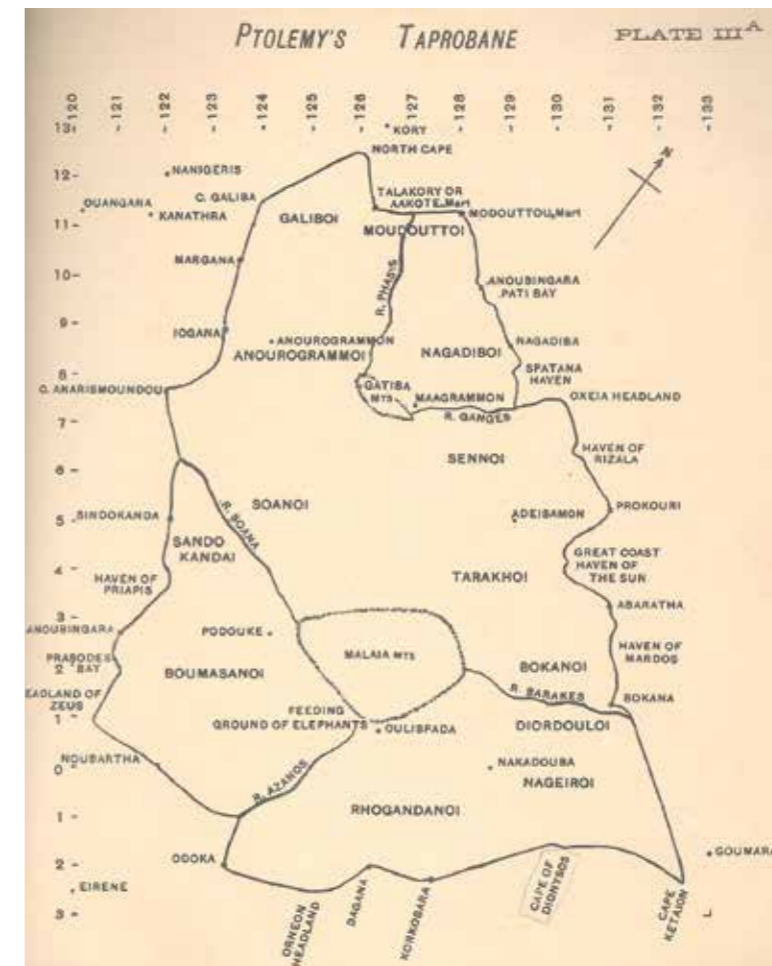


FIG. 1 Ptolemy's cartographic chart referring to the Island as 'Taprobane' Ink on Paper, 4th century A.D. Courtesy: Ismeth Raheem

The pre-occupation with a picturesque landscape in Ceylon, a tempering of the image into an aesthetic established in Victorian times, negotiated the 'sublime' and the 'beautiful' as visual tropes with varying appeal and articulation.² This overriding fixation with ruins and even ethnographic 'types' was possibly a reaction to the impact of rapid urbanisation and industrialisation in the West. Encroachment into the rural scenery had taken its toll on much of the countryside in Europe, and the orient was viewed as a *more* natural, lyrical vista that was waiting to be surveyed and idealised by the mastery of travelling artists armed with the camera obscura.

Photography and Society

Over many centuries, the Portuguese, Dutch, British, French and the Danes have occupied Ceylon's maritime territories. Society therefore inherited an exciting and heterogeneous mix of people with a rich cultural heritage. Although by religion its population was predominantly Theravada Buddhist, the minorities ranged from Hindus, Christians (Catholic and Protestant), Muslims, a small coterie of Malays and

A Landscape of Desire

Jennifer Chowdhry Biswas

Sri Lanka is a little Island, a pendant, that nestles gently on the swelling bosom of the Indian Ocean. Caressed by warm waters, 770 miles of golden sand ring the Island. Within these sands is green, lush green, fertile land sculptured, towards the centre, into soaring mountains. An emerald, fringed by filigreed gold and set in aquamarine – truly a jewelled pendant.¹

Photography in Ceylon, like larger South Asia, grew alongside the colonial era. Its early articulations are hence interwoven with the picturesque, a search for the ‘idyllic’ and by context are bound to the larger region by way of overarching imperial motivations – political, social as well as cultural. The rise of international trade with the opening of the Suez Canal in 1869 and the concomitant arrival of troops and travellers led many European photographers to seek out new professional avenues, following in the steps of early painters. Indelible factors of geography – location, space and terrain – played an important role in shaping the visualisation of colonised regions. As indicated above, the imperial gaze upon Ceylon as a political and cultural space was similarly mired in clichéd classicist descriptions, ‘a romanticised and sexualised island, a lost Eden’, considered one of its prized possessions.² Having connections with the subcontinent as a whole through civil migration, religious and cultural exchanges as well as intercontinental trade, the country gained a networked, yet distinctive status as a ‘forward’ state under the British rule.³

With a focus on one such ‘frontier’ region of the subcontinent, the title of this essay is also a citation to literary historian, Ananya Jahanara Kabir’s publication *Territory of Desire* wherein the author’s emphasis on



FIG. 1 Joseph Lawton
‘Railway on the Kadaganawa
Pafs - (The Allagalla Gallery)’
from the *Layland Album, Ceylon*
Albumen Print,
Late 1860s, 208 x 162 mm
ACP: 97.37.0001(26)

the turbulent past (and present) of the valley of Kashmir is underscored with the irony of its visualisation as a ‘desired space’, and an ‘original framework of fantasy’.⁴ Kabir’s concentration on this landlocked terrain, coveted by both the British and Russians for control over the North West frontier (Afghanistan and Central Asia) during the nineteenth century, assesses how artist travellers sought to epitomise it as a serene location, while its socio-political history was quite other. It is my general contention that the island colony of Ceylon also encountered a comparable regime of visualisation, as it was strategically located in the Indian Ocean being the nodal point of trade, and hence ‘desire’ in the nineteenth century – stretching up to West Asia, East Africa and further downwards to the coastline of the far east.⁵

Lens Upon Islanders

Ayesha Matthan

The encounter with portrait photography in colonial Ceylon presents a rare amalgam of identity, culture and occupation in the history of the subcontinent. A synthesis of ‘community and status’ or ‘community and habitat’ finds a striking pictorial foothold in the island and the photographic repertoire in this essay will attempt to showcase such encounters through the studio photographs of both the elite and local populace. It will also present the concurrent preoccupation with plantation photography and correlated images of a choreographed display of mass labour. The subdued but arresting shots of natives at work and within the domestic realm, in addition, finds a place in this collection. They present a glimpse into life on the island in the late nineteenth century, capturing themes related to bourgeoisie assertion/consciousness, religious revivalism and civilian life. In so doing, this analysis shall offer some insights into the intercourse between – as the historian Sujit Sivasundaram calls it – ‘cosmopolitanism and indigeneity’, marking the island’s separate identity from the Indian mainland. Though ethnographic portraiture on the island skirted an anthropometric vision unlike colonial India, it did eventually categorise islanders and their occupations.

Consequently, this essay shall also attempt to examine three critical areas in Ceylonese ethnographic portraits. Starting with the location of Ceylon as an important trading post, the essay addresses the representational significance of portrait photography, class and gender. Through an analysis of the body, costume and notions of propriety in colonial Ceylon, this section delves into images portraying both the native and immigrant population, investigating the larger context of plantation photography and the developing relationship between the habitat and the workers.



FIG. 1 Skeen & Co.
'Malay Man' from the album
Views of Ceylon
Albumen Print, 1880s,
270 x 214 mm
ACP: 96.24.0001(50)

People, places and their routes

The physical site of Ceylon in the Indian Ocean has seen over the centuries, waves of traders, religious scholars, immigrants/settlers and colonisers, appear on its shores. It was situated as an axis of cross-cultural exchange between the west – West Asia, East Africa and the African coast – and the east – primarily Southeast Asia and countries such as Cambodia, Siam and Burma. This channel of peoples and cultures is articulated thus:

The Ascent of (Wo)Man

Visual Priming in Early Photographs and Films of Ceylon, 1880s - 1930s

Annamaria Motrescu-Mayes

Ongoing inter-disciplinary explorations of research sources can significantly contribute to new understandings of current South Asian traumas around race, identity, and religion. This essay is primarily concerned with the ways in which late nineteenth and early twentieth century visual records of Ceylon testify to the practice of visual priming in the creation of Ceylonese/Sri Lankan national and cultural stereotypes. Focusing on a selection of European illustrations, photographs and non-fiction films made between the 1880s and 1930s, it argues that certain repetitive visual narratives have charted as well as perpetuated particular geographical and cultural tropes of Ceylon. The process of visual priming is understood here as a predominately Western ideological stereotypification of Ceylonese culture – a strategic artistic process achieved through an efficient, recurrent and prolonged production and dissemination of particular sets of visual records and discourses. Within the cultural economy of late colonial times, and for some time afterwards, most visual records of Ceylon functioned as standard populist visual commodities traded internationally through formalised aesthetic narratives meant to illustrate and (mis)represent Ceylonese traditions, landscape and typologies. For instance, images of tea plantations, Buddhist monks and fishing villages remained for many decades the visual prerogative of Western illustrators, photographers and filmmakers (whether amateur or professional) concerned with a populist narrative of Ceylon's idyllic exoticism. While the same could be claimed about nineteenth century visual records of India, visual representations of Ceylon become more acutely relevant in a cultural context in which the rhetoric of early picturesque views



FIG. 1 From the *Wilson-Pemberton Collection*. Film 18. Courtesy: Centre of South Asian Studies, University of Cambridge



FIGS. 2-3 From the *Augier Collection*. Film 5. Courtesy: Centre of South Asian Studies, University of Cambridge



FIG. 4 Screen Capture from *Scenes in Ceylon*, dir. James Scott-Brown, U.K., 1909. Courtesy: British Film Institute, ID: 19126