

Examining the Colonial Era in Sri Lanka using Historical Evidence: The *Times of Ceylon Christmas Number* Periodicals

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Abstract

The *Times of Ceylon Christmas Number* (TCCN) publications, released each year from 1909 to 1979, serve as essential historical artifacts for piecing together Sri Lanka's colonial history. By employing methods from archaeology, media studies, and historical analysis, this interdisciplinary research investigates these publications as complex representations of British colonialism. The study sheds light on the TCCN's role in mediating colonial ideologies, hybridizing cultural identities, and documenting socio economic transformations by analyzing textual content, visual imagery, advertisements, and material features (such as typography and paper quality). The insights into print culture, consumerism, gender roles, and cross-cultural exchanges revealed by the periodicals position them as essential resources for historians, archaeologists, and anthropologists. This research promotes the incorporation of ephemeral print media into postcolonial studies, highlighting their importance in safeguarding intangible heritage and contesting Eurocentric historical narratives.

Keywords: material culture, postcolonial studies, visual history, colonial, print culture



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Introduction

The Times newspaper tradition began in Britain with *The Times of London*, founded in 1785. It became one of the most respected newspapers in the British Empire and strongly influenced how news was written and presented. As Britain expanded its empire, newspapers using the name “*Times*” appeared in many countries. These included the *Times of India*, *Daily Times* in several colonies, the *Times Colonist* in Canada, and the *Times of Ceylon* in Sri Lanka.

Around the world, *Times* newspapers did more than report news. They promoted British narratives about government, culture, and progress. They were written in English and mainly served educated readers, colonial officials, and local elites. Through their writing style and choice of topics, these newspapers often supported colonial rule and presented British culture as modern and superior. Local cultures were usually minimised or romanticised. As such, historians see *Times* newspapers as tools of cultural imperialism.

In Sri Lanka, *The Times of Ceylon* was an important English-language newspaper during the colonial period. It followed the same style and values as other *Times* newspapers across the empire. The *Times of Ceylon Christmas Number* (TCCN), first published by Times of Ceylon Private Limited, was released annually every December. It included articles, short stories, photographs, and advertisements featuring a wide range of content.

In retrospect, the TCCN is a valuable resource that depicts everyday life and social attitudes in early 20th century colonial Sri Lanka. While it featured local people, traditions, and landscapes, these were often presented from a colonial point of view. Sri Lanka was shown as traditional or exotic, while British rule was linked to order and modernity. The TCCN helps us understand how colonial power worked through culture rather than force. By combining entertainment, culture, and advertising, it shaped how readers thought about Sri Lankan identity, history, and progress. It covertly supported the colonial agenda, while appearing neutral or celebratory.

A collection of this periodical, covering the years 1909 to 1979, is currently housed in the Colombo National Museum Library. These issues span a significant portion of the 20th century and represent both the early and mid-colonial periods. The periodical serves as a rich resource for understanding the development of print culture during British colonial rule. The *Times of Ceylon Christmas Number* is not only a literary publication but also a cultural artifact. It provides important evidence for analyzing the social, educational, economic, religious, and political conditions of the time. The inclusion of illustrations and photographs enhances its value for researchers by offering visual documentation alongside textual content.

The study of colonial era periodicals in Sri Lanka is an emerging interdisciplinary field that connects archaeology, media studies, and postcolonial historiography. However, there is limited scholarly work specifically focused upon the *Times of Ceylon Christmas Number*.

Literature Survey

Many researchers have studied newspapers and print culture in different colonial settings. Ballantyne (2011), in his study “Reading the Newspaper in Colonial Otago of New Zealand” explains how newspapers were made, how people read them, and how they understood the news. His study shows that newspapers played an important role in daily life and in shaping ideas during the colonial period. Chandra and Kaiser (2015) whose study of newspapers and magazines explored the modern newspaper industry, addressing the role of newspapers today, including advertising and the industry structure, while a study by Ritika and Corinna (2024) discussed what created print culture during the colonial period. The latter focused on both the social and material aspects of printing; for instance, how newspapers were produced, who produced and used them, and the printing techniques involved. In a study on print culture during the First World War in the colonial Ghana wartime newspaper, influence on public opinion under colonial rule are assessed (Newell, 2009). Also from the African continent, print culture, and audiences in colonial Kenya, were studied focusing on political and community groups in anti-colonial movement (Frederiksen, 2011). Hill (2020) studied print culture and censorship from colonial Latin America up to the nineteenth-century Latin press in the United States, where he explains how governments controlled printed materials which in turn affected political expression. While the aforementioned scholars have researched newspapers in regions such as New Zealand, Africa, and Latin America, they have paid little attention to how special periodicals like Christmas Numbers represented colonial life. While these studies have examined newspapers and print culture in different colonial regions, very little research has been conducted on Sri Lanka’s colonial print culture. A notable exception is the work of the current author, who examined selected aspects of the collection of TCCN periodicals at National Museum Library in Sri Lanka and especially how this newspaper helped shape and reflect the print culture of that period (Sudusinghe, 2021). *The Times of Ceylon* Christmas Number periodicals have rarely been studied as historical sources. Since these publications offer valuable insights into culture, religion, society, and colonial perspectives, this study aims to address this gap by using TCCN periodicals to examine the colonial period in Sri Lanka

This study uses a qualitative and interdisciplinary approach, combining archaeology, media studies, and history. It examines the *Times of Ceylon Christmas Number* not only as a historical text but also as a visual and material object that reflects colonial Sri Lankan culture, politics, and society. Primary sources include selected issues of the periodical, published from the late 1800s to the mid-1900s, accessed through public archives, libraries, and digital collections.

The research involves two main types of analysis: textual and content analysis, focused on editorials, stories, poems, and cultural practices to understand how colonial and local identities were represented. Visual and material analysis examine illustrations, advertisements, photographs, and the physical design of the magazine to explore themes like class, race, gender, artistic influence, and print technology.

The *Times of Ceylon Christmas Number* magazines provide thousands of items that help us understand the time in which they were created. These magazines are especially useful for researchers who want to learn about the materials used, the printing systems, layout designs, and how print styles developed over time.

Originally, in 1909, the magazine size was 36 cm x 28 cm. By 1965, the size had changed to 29 cm x 23 cm. They used thick, high-quality paper that resembled art paper, showing the importance of presentation even then. All covers were printed in four colours, but the inside pages were first printed in black and white. Some photos or paintings were added manually by pasting them into the magazine. Often, full-page pictures were placed on black background paper and covered with tissue paper to protect them. Many of these photos still look original today, likely due to the high-quality glue they used.

The text was printed clearly, although early editions didn't have page numbers. Page numbers started appearing around 1935–1937. By looking at these magazines, we can learn about the printing technology of the time. Different strategies were used from year to year. The magazines also give us insights into the economic and technological background of the time. They seemed to be aimed at wealthier readers. The name *Christmas Numbers* and the greeting on the first page, "A Merry Christmas to You All," reflect English traditions.



Figure 1. Cover page (L) and front page (R), TCCN December, 1909

The first issue in 1909 (Figure 1) was sold for 1 rupee, and later the price increased to 1.25 rupees. The names of authors were sometimes included, either written fully or signed with initials (e.g., TCCN, 1909, pp. 21, 63; or Z.Z., 1911). Some used their parents' names (e.g., "Planter's daughter," 1926) or even their husband's name, like "By Bella Sydney Woolf (Mrs. R. H. Lock)." This highlights an important point. In England, women were often identified in a general way, such as "Mrs.," or through their relationship to a man. A similar practice can be seen in the *Times of Ceylon Christmas Number*. Although some authors' names were printed in full or as initials, many contributors, especially women, were identified through family connections rather than as independent individuals. For example, some writers used their parents' identity, such as "Planter's daughter" (1926), while others were named through their husbands, as in "By Bella Sydney Woolf (Mrs. R. H. Lock)."

This way of naming reflects the colonial social structure, where a person's social status was closely tied to family, class, and gender. Women's identities were often defined by their relationship to men, reinforcing male authority and patriarchal values within colonial society. Even when women participated in literary and cultural production, their recognition remained limited and mediated through male identities. Therefore, the naming practices in the magazine reveal more than editorial choices. They show how colonial values shaped social hierarchy and gender roles, and how women's voices were present but framed within existing power structures. One article was titled "With Apologies to P.I.X." (1920). A few years after it started, the magazine began including content pages to help readers navigate the issue.

Colonial Stories and Visual History in the *Times of Ceylon Christmas Number*

The *Times of Ceylon Christmas Number* magazines include many stories and articles about the period when the British ruled Sri Lanka (then called Ceylon). These magazines give us useful information about the British way of life, their social clubs like the Horn Club, and events they celebrated, such as festivals. For example, one article is called "The August Festivities" (TCCN, 1909, p. 9), which describes special celebrations during that month. This photo feature article shows a crowded area during a horse race. It covers a special outdoor event where many people gathered to watch and enjoy the race.

One article features old stamps used in Ceylon, showing the history of the postal system. Another article was written by the Colonial Secretary in Perth, Western Australia, describing the immigration conditions there at the time (TCCN, 1909). This shows how closely connected British colonies were to each other. It also illustrates shared social trends across Commonwealth countries and highlights how newspapers were used as important tools to spread information and policies between different colonies.

The magazine also talks about big events like the coronation of the British king or queen. For instance, there is an article titled "Ceylon and the Coronation" (TCCN, 1911). They also recorded when important people left the country, as seen in another

article (TCCN, 1911). These details help us understand the social and political life of that era in Sri Lanka (Ceylon).

A British writer named J.P. Lewis published an article in 1909 (TCCN, p. 67) explaining how local Sri Lankans (Ceylonese people) used English in their official and daily work. This shows the influence of the English language during colonial rule. The magazine also includes information about the education system at the time. For example, in 1911 (TCCN, p. 11), an article titled “*The Passing of a European Institution*” discusses schools in Nuwara Eliya. Nuwara Eliya was known as “Little England” because it was a plantation area with government offices, churches, and European-style bungalows. The article was written by a school headmaster and explains how European style education was provided in this hill country town, mainly for the children of British officials and plantation families. This helps us understand how education supported colonial social life and reinforced European culture in such areas

In 1913 (TCCN, p. 66) (Figure 2) the magazine published an article about old maps. These maps show how Colombo looked during different colonial periods, such as before the Dutch took over, when the Portuguese built the first fort, plans for railway lines to Kandy, and how the Dutch later divided the city.



Figure 2. Map of Colombo City December, 1913

Another interesting article from 1936 (Figure 3) (TCCN, pp. 52–54) includes pictures of old paintings. The article is titled “Early Dutch Views of Sri Lanka.” These are photos of watercolour paintings kept in the Rijksmuseum in Amsterdam. They were painted around the year 1710 in Ceylon. The paintings show Kalutara Fort, Haffenhiel Fort, the square or castle in Jaffna, the Colombo Fort, and the Governor’s house.

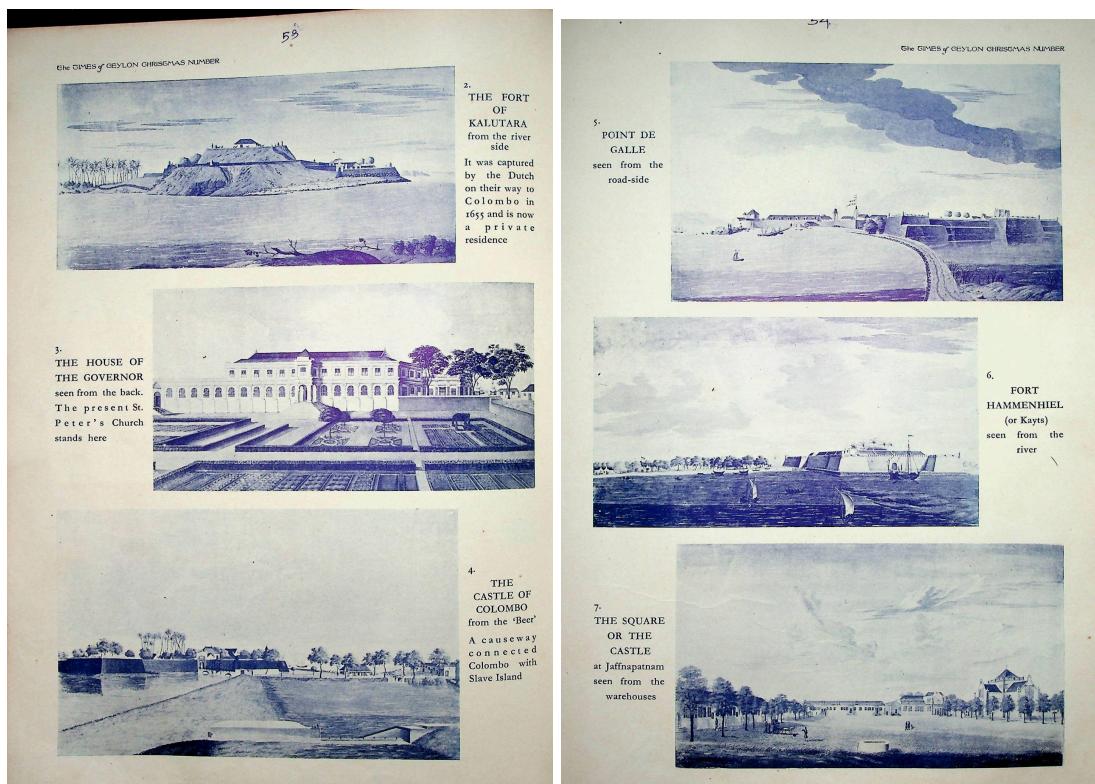


Figure 3. Old Paintings, December, 1936

These artworks and articles are very valuable. They give researchers a better understanding of how Ceylon looked and functioned during the Dutch and British colonial periods. They also help us learn how people lived, travelled, studied, and communicated in those times.

Photographs and Illustrations as Historical Evidence

The *Times of Ceylon Christmas Number* published many photographs and drawings that help us understand life during the British colonial period in Ceylon. These images are very useful for learning about history, culture, and everyday life during that time. One example is a photo series titled “Snapshots in Colombo” (Figure 4) (TCCN, 1909). Each photo has a title and a number, showing scenes such as a village school, Victoria Park, the Colombo horse show, women bathing at Lock-Gates, San Sebastian area in Colombo, the ferry, and workers called “Tambies” doing their jobs. When they

published these photos, they gave credit to the photographers, which shows the value and respect given to their work.

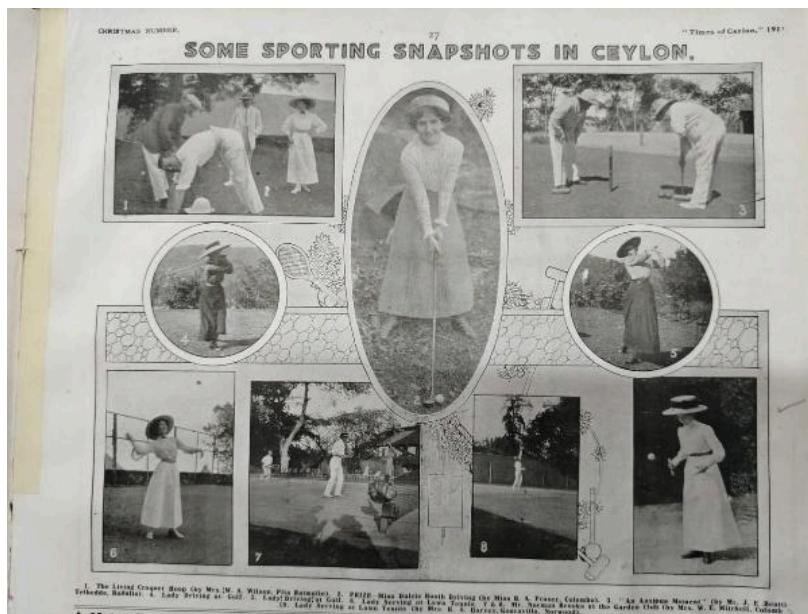


Figure 4. Women playing Golf, December, 1909

Some photos capture important events. For example, “Events of the Year” (TCCN, 1910) includes farewell parties such as Mr. J.P. Lewis' send-off and pictures of the Perahera (a traditional parade). These images help us see what social events and traditions looked like. Another issue (TCCN, 1936, p. 55) included photos of Adam's Peak and Colombo Fort taken from the air. These photos are important because they show what these places looked like in the early 1900s, giving us a view of the landscape and city structure at the time.

TCCN also included some information about other countries. For example, in 1911 (TCCN, p. 20), there was an article with photos about Indian culture. On page 24 of the same issue, the magazine explained aspects of Persian culture. In the 1911 issue (TCCN, p. 17), a photo collection titled “Incidents of the Year” included powerful images from the funeral of Venerable Hikkaduwe Sri Sumangala Thero, a respected Buddhist monk. One caption reads, “Funeral of Sri Sumangala, High Priest of Adam's Peak.” These photos are strong historical evidence of important religious events in Sri Lanka.

Another important photo in the 1911 issue (TCCN, p. 19) shows Mr. H. A. Wickham, known as the father of the rubber plantation industry. The article and photo provide valuable information about his role in starting rubber plantations in Sri Lanka and his visit to the country. TCCN often published photos of children under the title “Young Ceylon at Home.” These pictures usually mentioned the names of the children and their parents (TCCN, 1911, p. 29; 1913, pp. 34–35). These images are useful for studying the clothing and family customs of that time. There was even a tradition of

holding dog shows, which was described in the 1913 issue (TCCN, p. 41). This shows the types of social events the colonial British community enjoyed in Ceylon. Many photographs in these magazines also depict the daily lives of local people. For example, one photo (TCCN, 1914) shows estate kanganies, who were supervisors on tea and rubber plantations. These kinds of images are important for understanding the types of jobs people did, how they dressed, and what their working environments looked like. These photos and illustrations from *TCCN* are not just pictures; they are valuable historical records. They help researchers, students, and readers learn about how people lived, worked, dressed, and celebrated during the British colonial period in Sri Lanka.

Social and Cultural Insights from the *Times of Ceylon Christmas Number*

The *Times of Ceylon Christmas Number* magazines provide valuable information about life in Sri Lanka during the British colonial period. Published once a year, they include articles, photographs (Figure 5), and reports on many aspects of society. When grouped by theme, these materials clearly show how people lived, worked, and interacted during this time.



Figure. 5. Wedding Photos, December, 1911

Sports played an important role in colonial society. For example, an article from 1911 (p. 57) describes a cricket match between Europeans and Ceylonese. This shows that sports were a shared social activity and helped bring different communities together. Photographs from 1911 (pp. 27 & 61) also show women playing golf, indicating that women from certain social classes took part in leisure activities.

Gender Roles, Women, and Family Life

The magazine offers useful information about women's roles in colonial society. Wedding photographs from 1909 (p. 31) and 1911 (p. 45) show clothing, customs, and family traditions among both local and European communities. During wartime, women played an important role in healthcare. Photographs from 1917 (p. 4) show nurses in uniform, as well as their wedding photographs, highlighting how women balanced professional duties and personal lives.

Religion and Cultural Practices

Religion and traditional practices are also well represented. In 1914 (p. 57), an article titled "*The Lady of the Yellow Robe*" discusses Buddhist nuns and includes rare photographs and stories about their lives. A 1921 article (pp. 62–63) describes the Kochchikade Temple and explains Hindu religious practices in Sri Lanka. Another article from 1937 (pp. 25-28) by St. Nihal Singh discusses the birthplace of the Buddha, offering historical and visual comparisons.

Education and Social Welfare

Education and care for vulnerable groups appear in several issues. A 1921 article titled "*Where Dumb Lips Speak and Blind Eyes See*" discusses education for blind and deaf students, with photographs that provide rare insight into colonial education. A 1920 article (pp. 75- 79) focuses on child welfare on estates, showing British approaches to social care during the colonial period.

Transport, Infrastructure, and Public Life

The magazine records important developments in transport and infrastructure. Articles from 1913 discuss the Indo Ceylon railway (p. 29) and the Colombo water pipeline system (pp. 46- 47). Early vehicles are shown in a 1914 article (pp. 6- 9), while

a 1920 article titled “*In Little Banks of Vapour*” (pp. 18-23) describes early airplanes. Public safety issues are also covered, such as a railway accident near Anuradhapura in 1913 (p. 23).

War, Memory, and National Service

Several issues include sections called “*Roll of Honour*”, published in 1916, 1917, and 1918, with photographs of soldiers who died in war. These sections show Sri Lanka’s connection to global conflicts and how war losses were remembered during the colonial period.

Indigenous Communities and Traditional Life

The magazine provides rare visual and written records of Indigenous and marginalized communities. In 1909 (pp. 20- 21), articles and photographs show the Veddas engaging in daily activities such as hunting and travelling through the jungle. In 1921 (pp. 9- 11), R. L. Spittel wrote about Ceylon Gypsies, offering valuable cultural insights. Another 1921 article (pp. 24- 55) focuses on traditional clothing worn by local communities.

Creative Writing and Art

The magazine featured short stories, poems, dramas, and paintings. There was a section called “Our Prize Christmas Story”, which featured the best short stories submitted by readers. For example, one story titled “The Octopus” was written by Mrs. M.H. Yeames from Colombo. Some articles included cartoon-style drawings, such as in the 1913 article “Pen and Pencil in Ceylon”. These helped readers understand how people drew and expressed ideas during that time. The magazine also printed drama scripts, such as those found in the 1917 issues (pages 2-3 and 74-76). These give insight into the kinds of stories people liked to perform or read. One notable poem called “The Anuradhapura Anthem” (1917, p. 67) celebrated the ancient city of Anuradhapura:

“Anuradhapura! city grand and vast
Lanka’s famous capital, in ages of the past...”

This poem mentioned famous Buddhist sites such as Ruwanwelisaya, Abhayagiriya, Jetavanaramaya, and Thuparamaya. Footnotes were added to explain these monuments, showing the importance of historical knowledge at the time.

Paintings Reflecting Life

Paintings were also used to show both social and religious life. For example, in 1918 (pages 38-39), there was a painting titled “Returning from the Buddhist Temple after the Feast of the Full Moon”. Such artworks are helpful for anthropologists studying everyday life and traditions. An article about the Kandyan Art Association (1921) gave details about local efforts to preserve and promote traditional Sri Lankan art. Another story, “The Kobonaya – A True Story,” was about a cobra and was written like a folk tale or moral story.

Advertisements in the *Times of Ceylon Christmas Number*

The *Times of Ceylon Christmas Number* included a wide variety of advertisements, which provide valuable insight into everyday life, consumer culture, and the economy during the colonial period. These ads show how new products were introduced to the public and how commercial activity developed in Sri Lanka under British rule.

Early advertisements were mostly black and white, but over time, color ads became more common. Many ads included photographs or artwork to catch the reader's attention. Some ads promoted schools, such as one for Scotch College, Claremont (1910, iv), which provided information on subjects taught, school fees, the history of the school, travel time from Colombo, and included a photograph of the school building. Well-known businesses also used the magazine to reach customers. For example, the Mount Lavinia Hotel (1910, vii) and Charles Moore & Co., which sold Aero Flasks (1910, vi), placed advertisements. Other products and services advertised included:

- Tires (1936, p. 111)
- Pens (1938, p. 129)
- Painkillers and liquor
- Agricultural services for tropical plantations
- Firearms, such as Webley and Scott pistols (1910, xvii)
- Cars, biscuits (1935, p. 36), toothpaste, and stationery
- Printing machines and jewelry
- Hotels, including some outside Sri Lanka
- Gem museums and decorative lamps (1937)

The advertisements reveal more than just the products available; they reflect the social and economic changes occurring during colonial times. By promoting new commodities, schools, and services, the magazine helped shape consumer habits and influenced lifestyle choices among Europeans and local elites. The ads also highlight how global trade and local commerce were connected, showing the magazine's role as a platform for both information and economic development.

Examples of Long-Running Brands

Some brands continued advertising for many years, showing their lasting popularity. For example: Pears baby soap (1916), LUX soap (1935) (Figure 6) (seen in issues from 1932, 1935, 1937, and 1962) VAT 69 whisky (1937, p. 79) Gold Leaf cigarettes (1965).

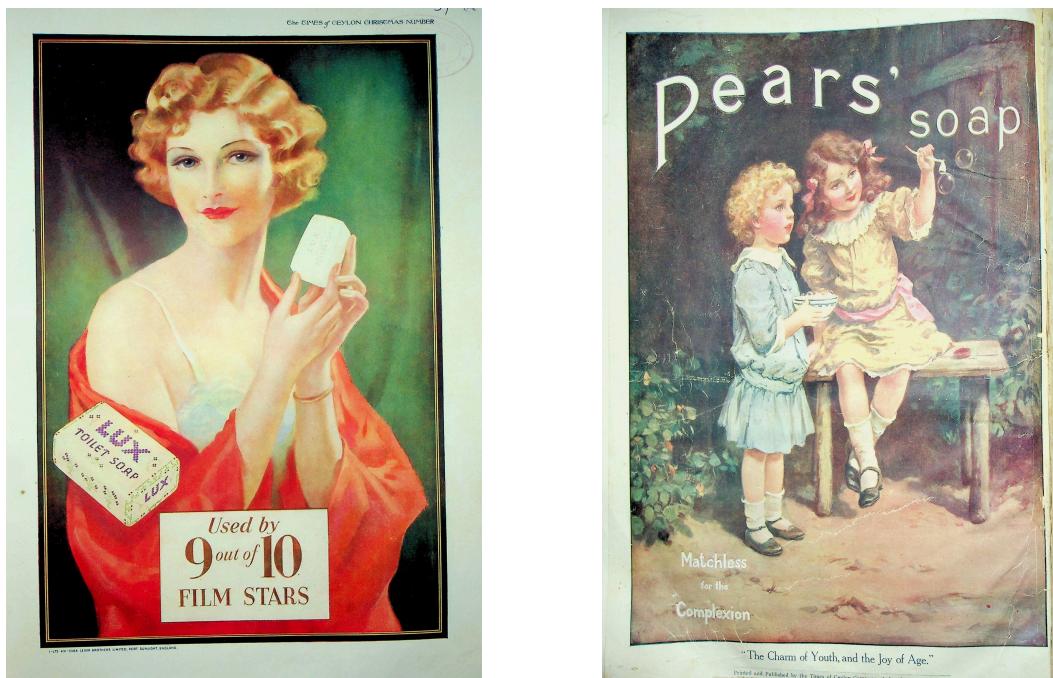


Figure 6. Soap Advertisements 1935 (R) and (L) December, 1916

Advertisements Showing Global Connections

An ad titled “Welcome to New Zealand” (1937) showed facilities in New Zealand. New Zealand was once a colony of Britain. The colonial government aimed to gather more human resources to maximize economic benefits from their colonies. This might have been an effort by the rulers to encourage Ceylonese people to migrate. Some ads were published by foreign government offices, like the New Zealand Government Agent located in the Hong Kong Bank building in Colombo, Hotels like Queens Hotel in Kandy also advertised, giving a glimpse into colonial era tourism. Even lawyers advertised their services, as seen in a 1966 issue.

Special Campaigns and Education

Businesses also used special marketing strategies. For example, a gold and silversmith company ran a Christmas promotion in 1915 (p. 40). The *Times of Ceylon Christmas Number* is more than just a holiday magazine. It is a valuable historical document that covers many sides of life during British rule in Sri Lanka from social customs, religion, and sports, to transport, agriculture, and women's roles. It gives students, historians, and researchers a clear picture of the colonial period, using both words and images. These magazines are an excellent source for understanding Sri Lanka's past and the cultural changes that shaped its present.

Conclusion

The *Times of Ceylon Christmas Number* periodicals serve as invaluable archaeological artifacts that open a window into Sri Lanka's colonial past, revealing the complex interplay of culture, society, and power during British rule. Through a multidisciplinary lens combining archaeology, media studies, and historical analysis, these periodicals emerge not merely as texts but as rich material objects blending visual imagery, literary content, advertisements, and physical design that reflect and mediate colonial ideologies and hybrid identities.

Spanning over seven decades, the TCCN magazines document the evolving print culture, socio-economic conditions, gender roles, religious practices, and cross-cultural exchanges within colonial Sri Lanka. Their rich collections of photographs, illustrations, and artworks offer rare and tangible insights into everyday life, public events, architecture, and traditional customs, making them indispensable for scholars in history, anthropology, and postcolonial studies. Furthermore, the advertisements and promotional materials reveal patterns of consumerism and global connectivity, underscoring the socio-economic dynamics of the era.

This study highlights the critical importance of ephemeral print media like the TCCN as preservers of intangible cultural heritage and as tools to challenge historical narratives. By treating these periodicals as archaeological artifacts, researchers can better understand the colonial experience in Sri Lanka not only as a political and economic phenomenon but as a lived cultural reality shaped by diverse voices and complex interactions. Ultimately, the *Times of Ceylon Christmas Number* stands as a vital resource for reconstructing and reinterpreting Sri Lanka's colonial history, underscoring the need for continued interdisciplinary research into such neglected but deeply revealing historical materials. Given the historical and cultural significance of the *Times of Ceylon Christmas Number*, further in-depth research is necessary. A comprehensive study of this collection can contribute to a deeper understanding of colonial-era media, cultural identity, and the evolution of Sri Lankan society during the 20th century.

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