

Satire, Malay Identity, and National Heritage in Lat's Malaysian Cartoon Stamps Postage, 2008

*Nor Arseha Karimon., Dr Mastura Haji Mohd Jarit., Dr Liza Marziana Mohammad Noh., Fazlina Mohd Radzi., Shaliza Dasuki., Norsharina Samsuri

UiTM Melaka

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ABSTRACT

This paper presents the cultural significance of the Kartun Malaysia, Lat stamp series, which were released in 2008 by Pos Malaysia in celebration of the most popular cartoonist in the history of Malaysia Dato' Lat. This series is based on everyday life, humor, and light satire which are characteristic of Malaysian society as opposed to the other traditional stamps which include legends, national heroes or historical events. Based on the iconography methodology developed by Panofsky, the semiotics developed by Barthes, and the theory of representation presented by Hall, the study will analyse the ways in which the stamps of Lat visually represent the Malay cultural identity, their social values, and the role in the Malay visual heritage.

The results reveal that the stamps represent relevant cultural elements including kampung childhood games, the authoritative schoolmaster, the rural to urban transition and the complications of the Malaysian everyday living. Lat highlights such values as simplicity, creativity, discipline, respect, and multicultural unity with the help of mild satire. His cartoon stamps are a written visual form of text that best entertains but also criticizes modernization and social change. The study also proposes that the stamps that Lat creates transform popular culture into a kind of national heritage that humor and satire can help retain the intangible cultural values and make Malaysia more united.

This paper concludes that the Kartun Malaysia, Lat series plays a vital role in the protection of Malay identity and culture memory and serves to popular cartoons as close to the national cultural heritage as possible. It highlights the importance of perceiving stamps as cultural artefacts that may link tradition, modernity and nationhood.

Keywords: Lat, satire, Malay identity, postage stamps, cultural heritage, Malaysian cartoons

INTRODUCTION

Postage stamps are not only the means of postal transactions, but they are the cultural artifacts containing national narratives, heritage, and identity. The stamping in Malaysia has been long associated with the milestones in politics, natural heritage, and traditional customs and as miniature ambassador of the image of the country to the world. In that regard, the issue of the Malaysian Cartoon Stamps in 2008 by Lat was a historic event in the history of philately. These stamps brought satire, humour, and depictions of daily Malaysian life into an official state approved medium in contrast to the traditional designs which tended to be rather formal and symbolic.

Lat, or Dato' Mohd. Nor Khalid, was certainly considered to be the most iconic cartoonist in Malaysia. He has used articles like the Kampung Boy (1970s) to satirically document his life, growing up in an orthodox Malay village in the 1950s and 1960s. His cartoons reflect the Malay life of the countryside, where family life was

united, the elders were respected, in harmony with nature and the vibrancy of the kampung life. These stories are now converted into stamp form in the 2008 stamp series which includes images of mischievous school children, strict teachers and kampung games. These funny, still, easy to identify with representations emphasize the cultural composition of the Malay identity without excluding a broader audience as they make people laugh.

Satire in the work of Lat serves not only as entertainment but also as a veiled protest against modernization, human conduct and cultural transformation. The use of this sort of satire in national stamps is of special concern in terms of the ways in which identity and heritage are negotiated in visual culture. Although this stamp issue has a rich cultural heritage, there is still limited scholarly research done on the contribution of humor and satire to the Malaysian philately.

This paper therefore seeks to discuss the Lat cartoon stamps of 2008 as cultural texts that use satire to express Malay identity and national heritage. It aims at discussing the modes through which humor, nostalgia, and everyday life are portrayed and the ways the portrayals of these aspects have helped in preservation and reinterpretation of Malaysia cultural values.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Historians often describe postage stamps as miniature posters curated by the state, carrying with them political ideals, cultural memory, and national identity. In almost every context, philatelic design serves three main purposes: to celebrate milestones, to represent heritage symbols, and to act as a form of soft power through its everyday circulation (Suaib et al., 2020). In Southeast Asia, stamps often condense folklore, traditional crafts, and national heroes into brief visual codes, turning them into pocket-sized museums that preserve cultural narratives and collective memory (Muhammad, 2019). In Malaysia, this practice positions stamps as cultural texts that are carefully authorized by institutions such as postal authorities, ministries, and design committees. Yet, much of the focus in the literature has been on commemorative or formal symbols, leaving little space to explore humor or satire within state media. This creates a clear gap that Lat's 2008 cartoon stamps can help to fill.

Visual Heritage and Malay Philately

Studies on Malaysian stamps have highlighted recurring themes: colonial symbols, post-Merdeka nationhood, technological progress, multicultural harmony, and heritage preservation. Common motifs such as batik, flora and fauna, architecture, and festivals are repeatedly emphasized, and the role of stamps as tools of education, tourism, and public display is often acknowledged. However, most of these studies lean toward solemn, formal representations (Muhammad Takari & Fadlin, 2019). Popular culture and humor, though abundant in Malaysian society, are rarely given attention in philatelic studies. And when they do appear, discussions tend to remain descriptive, focusing on details like dates, values, or designers rather than interpretive, exploring meaning, reception, or pedagogy. This is why the 2008 Lat stamps are important: they can be treated not just as collectible objects but as cultural texts that invite deeper reflection.

The Malay Imaginary, Lat, and Satire

Lat (Dato' Mohd. Nor Khalid) is more than a cartoonist, he is a storyteller of Malaysia. His works have long been celebrated for capturing kampung childhood, urbanization, ethnic coexistence, and the texture of everyday life. Scholars have pointed out how his drawings through their lines, composition, and narrative rhythm, offer affectionate critique: strict teachers, restless children, kampung games, and the pasar all become funny yet insightful commentaries on society. *The Kampung Boy* has become a cultural landmark, reflecting Malay ethics such as *gotong-royong*, filial piety, decency, and harmony with nature, while also charting the journey from rural to urban modernity (Abd Hadi et al., 2023). What remains underexplored, however, is how

these same visual languages and cultural codes shift when brought into the official, state-sanctioned world of philately, where audiences are broader, and institutional authority is more pronounced.

Satire as Cultural Pedagogy

Satire has always carried a double role: to entertain and to gently correct. It does this through exaggeration, irony, and incongruity. In Asian visual culture, scholars have noted that humor is often used to soften critique, making it acceptable in societies that value harmony and respect. When satire is placed in public or educational contexts, it sparks cultural literacy by inviting recognition (“that is us!”) and reinforcing shared norms such as respect for teachers, the importance of play, and community bonds. In this way, Lat’s stamps do more than make people laugh, they also teach. They remind Malaysians of their values, turning humor into a vehicle of cultural belonging.

Visual-Semiotic and Iconological Systems

When it comes to interpreting cultural visuals, two main approaches dominate. Semiotics, following Barthes, works through three layers: denotation (what is seen), connotation (the cultural meanings attached), and myth (the broader ideology that becomes naturalized). In Lat’s stamps, denotation points to recognizable figures such as the strict teacher, naughty children, or kampung games. Connotation highlights values like discipline, joy, community, and resilience. Myth connects these visuals to national narratives, seeing the kampung as the moral root, modernity as something balanced with tradition, and multiculturalism as harmonious.

Meanwhile, Panofsky’s iconography/iconology offers another lens: starting with simple description, moving to identification of motifs (like the *songkok*, blackboard, kampung house, or *tarik tali*), and finally, interpretation of worldviews. This shows how stamps reflect bigger cultural associations, such as education as social mobility, kampung as a space of *nilai budi*, and schools as sites of citizenship training. Together, semiotics and iconology complement each other: one explains how the signs work, the other grounds them in history and culture.

Malay Identity, Heritage, and Everyday Life

Malay identity is often described through values like *adat*, *budi bahasa*, seniority, reciprocity, and attachment to place (Abdul Wahab, 2012). Heritage studies also remind us that everyday heritage, schooling, games, market life, is just as significant as monuments or grand architecture. Visual culture research suggests that these small, familiar scenes often carry values more effectively than formal symbols because they are grounded in lived experience (Muhammad Takari & Fadlin, 2019). Lat’s universe reflects this well: humorous yet affectionate, his 2008 stamps present a condensed lesson in Malay lifeworlds and values.

Language and Education Linkages

There is a strong body of educational research supporting the use of culturally familiar visuals in teaching values, citizenship, and language (Youpika, 2024). Stamps, for example, can be used in classrooms through exhibitions, first-day cover anecdotes, or philatelic week projects, helping students build vocabulary, cultural knowledge, and identity. Humor plays a particularly powerful role, as it makes learning memorable and lowers emotional barriers. In this sense, Lat’s stamps are not only cultural objects but also tools of pedagogy, blending humor with cultural education (Andreou, 2018).

METHODOLOGY

The research design of this study is a qualitative one that is based on visual culture. It pays attention to the 2008 cartoon stamp series by Lat as a cultural text and the stamps, miniature sheets, and first-day covers are taken as primary sources. The study is achieved by incorporating semiotic analysis (Roland Barthes) and

iconological analysis (Erwin Panofsky) to analyse the superficiality of the images as well as the underlying culture implied in the designs.

The sources of data for this study were drawn primarily from official philatelic publications. These included the Malaysian Cartoon Stamps Booklet (Lat and Gang) issued in 2008, the individual stamp issues of 30 sen and 50 sen denominations, and the RM5 miniature sheet. In addition, the study examined the accompanying first-day covers as well as explanatory notes and descriptions provided by Pos Malaysia. These materials served as the main corpus for analyzing the visual content, cultural values, and satirical elements embedded in Lat's stamp designs.

Analytical Techniques

The study employed two main analytical approaches, namely semiotic analysis based on Roland Barthes and iconological analysis following Erwin Panofsky.

Through **semiotic analysis**, the process began with denotation, which involved identifying the visual objects such as characters, items, and actions depicted on the stamps. This was followed by connotation, which examined the cultural values represented, including Malay traditions, kampung life, education, and humor. Finally, the analysis moved to the level of myth, which interpreted how these visuals reinforced broader national ideologies such as Malay identity, social harmony, and the preservation of cultural heritage.

Meanwhile, **iconological analysis** proceeded through three stages. The first stage, pre-iconographic description, focused on recognizing observable motifs such as the kampung house, strict teacher, or musical instruments. The second stage, iconographic analysis, explored how these motifs related to cultural themes such as discipline, play, and modernization. The final stage, iconological interpretation, sought to reveal deeper worldviews reflected in the stamps, including Malay heritage as a moral foundation and the role of humor as a form of cultural critique.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

In this chapter, the study findings are provided by analyzing the 2008 Cartoon Stamps of Lat based in Malaysia. The semiotic and iconological theory informs the analysis to uncover how satire works as a cultural conduit of embodying the Malay identity and the act of conserving national heritage. Visual elements are found and the cultural values are interpreted and linked to larger stories of heritage and learning in each stamp.



Figure 1 Stamp booklet *Lat and Gang*, issued by Pos Malaysia in 2008 to commemorate Malaysian cartoons. The design features Lat's iconic Kampung Boy character and highlights rural childhood life, humor, and Malay cultural values

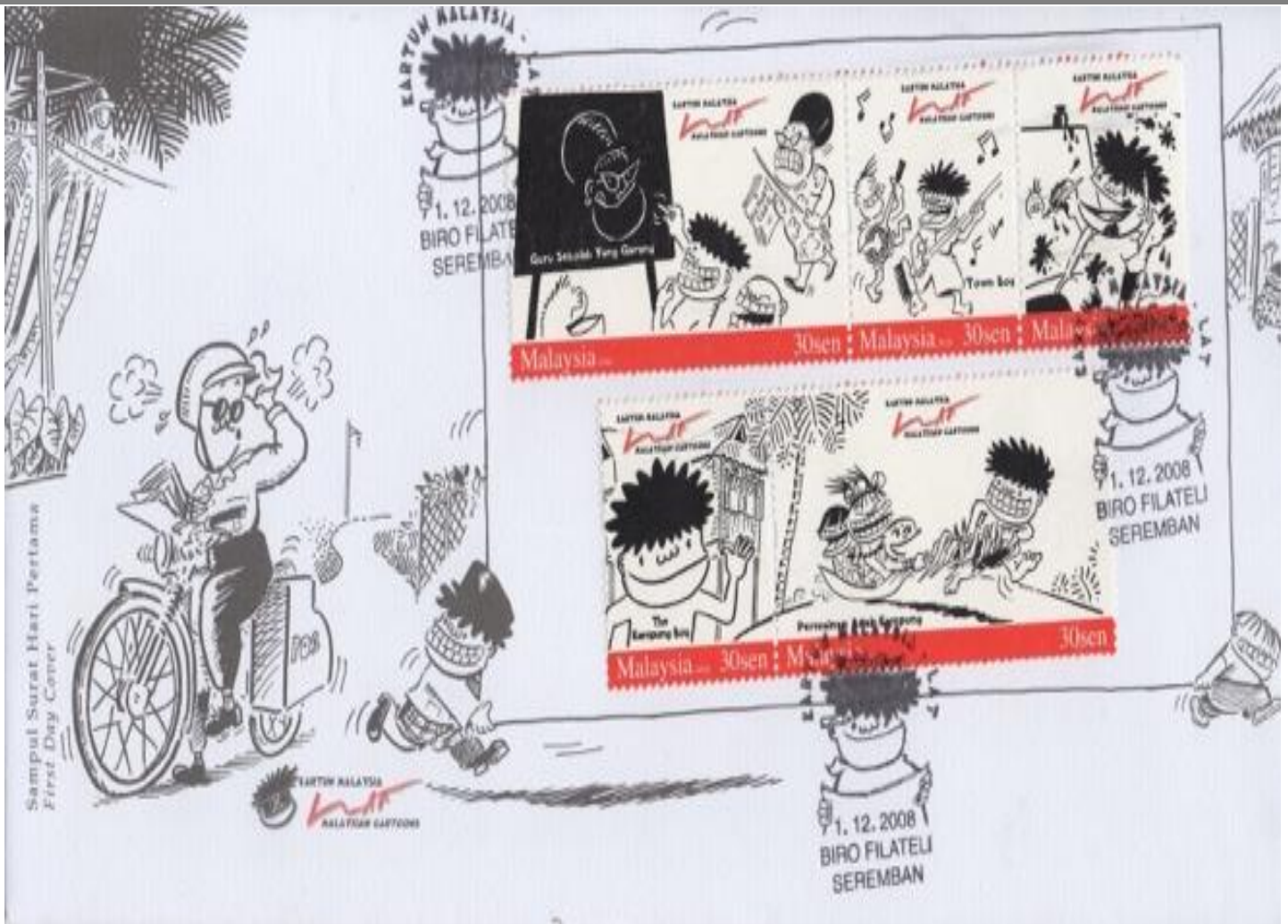


Figure 2 First Day Cover of the *Lat and Gang* stamp series, issued by Pos Malaysia in 2008. The cover features Lat’s iconic Kampung Boy illustrations, with stamps depicting themes of education, kampung games, music, and everyday humor, highlighting Malay cultural values through satire

Analysis of Stamp Designs

The **30 sen stamp, “The Strict Teacher (Cikgu Garang),”** depicts a teacher with exaggerated facial expressions rebuking mischievous schoolboys. This imagery connotes discipline, authority, and respect within Malay education, while the humor emerges from exaggerated features such as large glasses and a stern face. At a deeper level, the school is presented as a miniature of nation-building, where teachers symbolize order and children embody youthful energy. The satire softens criticism of strict discipline by reminding viewers of the Malay value of respecting teachers as moral guides.

The **50 sen stamp, “Childhood Games (Permainan Kampung),”** shows children engaged in traditional kampung games such as *tarik tali* and *layang-layang*. This scene evokes nostalgia for a less digital age marked by communal childhoods. At the mythic level, play represents harmony, cooperation (*gotong-royong*), and resilience. By foregrounding these activities, the stamp contributes to the conservation of intangible cultural heritage, emphasizing traditional games as transmitters of social values. The cultural values embedded here highlight community, teamwork, and the joy of childhood rooted in heritage.

The **RM5 miniature sheet, “The Kampung Boy Scene,”** presents Lat’s Kampung Boy character within a rural village, set against the backdrop of family and neighbors. This representation connotes Malay village life, family bonds, and a harmonious relationship with nature. Iconologically, the kampung becomes an enduring symbol of Malay identity and a moral compass for contemporary Malaysia, echoing the myth of the kampung as the pure root of Malay culture in national consciousness. The cultural values illustrated include family unity, respect for tradition, and living in balance with the environment.

The stamp booklet illustrations, “Mischief and Everyday Life,” feature sketches of children teasing friends, playing music, and being mischievous. These images reflect everyday humor as a mirror of real Malaysian society. At a deeper interpretive level, satire is employed as an affectionate critique, acknowledging mischief as a natural part of growing up while affirming forgiveness, resilience, and moral guidance. The cultural value emphasized here is humor as a survival mechanism, serving as a social bond that strengthens community ties.

Table 1 Analysis of Stamp Designs

Stamp Design	Denotation	Connotation	Myth / Iconological Meaning	Cultural Value
30 sen – The Strict Teacher (Cikgu Garang)	A teacher with exaggerated expressions rebuking mischievous schoolboys.	Symbol of discipline, authority, and respect in Malay education; humor created through exaggerated features (large glasses, stern face).	School as a miniature of nation-building; teachers represent order, while children embody youthful energy. Satire softens critique by affirming respect for teachers as a Malay value.	Respect for elders and teachers as moral guides.
50 sen – Childhood Games (Permainan Kampung)	Children playing traditional kampung games such as tarik tali and layang-layang.	Nostalgia for a less digital age and more communal childhoods.	Play symbolizes harmony, cooperation (gotong-royong), and resilience. The stamp conserves intangible heritage by highlighting traditional games as cultural transmitters.	Community spirit, teamwork, and joy of childhood rooted in heritage.
RM5 Miniature Sheet – The Kampung Boy Scene	Lat’s Kampung Boy character in a village scene with family and neighbors.	Represents Malay village life, family relationships, and admiration for nature.	The kampung as an eternal symbol of Malay identity, serving as a moral compass for contemporary Malaysia; echoes myth of kampung as authentic Malay root.	Family unity, respect for tradition, and harmony with the environment.
Stamp Booklet Illustrations – Mischief & Everyday Life	Sketches of children teasing, playing music, or being mischievous.	Everyday humor reflecting the realities of Malaysian society.	Satire as affectionate critique—recognizing mischief as part of maturation while affirming forgiveness, resilience, and moral guidance.	Humor as a survival mechanism and binding social force.

Table 2 Analysis of Cross-Stamp Synthesis

Stamp Design	Malay Cultural Values	Satirical Element	Heritage Contribution
Strict Teacher (30 sen)	Respect for authority, discipline	Exaggerated angry teacher, cheeky boys	Preserves memory of traditional education culture
Childhood Games (50 sen)	Teamwork, community spirit	Exaggeration of playful energy	Safeguards intangible heritage of kampung games
Kampung Boy (Miniature Sheet)	Family unity, rural traditions	Humor in everyday kampung life	Reinforces kampung as symbolic root of Malay identity
Mischief Scenes (Booklet)	Humor, resilience, moral lessons	Everyday teasing and mischief	Highlights humor as a national cultural trait

CONCLUSION

The results have shown that satire is a means of bridging the culture in the stamps of Lat. Humor is depicted as existing side by side with the state-approved heritage and instead of downplaying the gravitas of cultural representation, humor makes Malay cultural values more accessible and easier to recall by the masses.

It can also be understood through the analysis that the Malay identity is based on the daily heritage. The stamps of Lat confirm that this identity is not just presented in the grand monuments or even the national festivals alone but through simple things like schooling, playing among children and even the kampung life. Such a point of view is very close to the idea of everyday heritage, which emphasizes the cultural importance of everyday lived experience.

The educational implication of the humor and relatability that is integrated into the stamps of Lat has a high pedagogical potential. They can be readily incorporated into the classes in the form of visual instructional tools to foster cultural literacy, citizenship, and moral values in an exciting and pleasant manner. Satire makes the stamps more memorable and thought-provoking, which makes them a good educative instrument among younger generations.

Hereditarily, the stamps serve as mnemonics that can be used to feel nostalgic and retain traditions, which cannot be enshrined. They embody a cultural transition moment and balance between modernity and tradition and make sure that the memories on kampung life and its values are held in the Malaysian collective consciousness.

There are three implications of this study. First, as far as cultural studies are concerned, it makes satire one of the valid and helpful forms of heritage representation. Second, in terms of education it promotes the application of visual satire in class rooms to teach values and cultural literacy. Lastly, in the case of philatelic heritage, it broadens the interpretation of stamps beyond their decorative and commemorative functions, demonstrating that stamps may also convey funny and more mundane elements of the national identity.

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