

Imagining National Identity in Everyday Discourse: Reflections on Political Cartoons in Sri Lanka between 2005 and 2006

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Abstract

This study explores how political cartoons published between 2005 and 2006³ produced a particular version of national identity, leading to the personification of national identity and making it into an everyday discourse in Sri Lanka. We looked at how the visual images in the cartoons produce meaning by analysing their signifiers and the signified as well as the relationships among them through Saussurian semiotic analysis and Gillian Rose's 'Visual Methodologies'. The personification of national identity through the amalgamation of territory, Presidency, and Mahinda Rajapaksa, together with the traditional shawl, the Satakaya, redefines the idea of national identity as a strong everyday discourse.

Keywords: political cartoons; national identity; personification; *satakaya*

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³ As it marks a new political regime in terms of power transfer and the particular cartoons were also published during the same time.

Introduction

National (hegemonic) identity is still the most fundamental geographic identity in the contemporary world that defines, enables as well as constrains social life in the modern world (Taylor & Flint, 2000). Generally, this is built on the territorial boundary of a nation-state with a certain degree of spatial fixity, though this spatial fixity can sometimes be contested. However, this so-called national identity may be subject to new and different interpolations, as social identity, coupled with the territorial boundary changes over time, transforming the space in question into one with different meanings. In other words, these fixed identities are challenged in societies with multiple religious and ethnic diversities, and other differences. Thus, national identity can be described as a social process involving constructing, deconstructing and reconstructing a sense of national-ness where different media such as maps, cultural landscapes, cyberspace, and elements of popular culture such as cinema, music and even cartoons, intentionally or unintentionally play a vital role in it. Kaplan and Herb (2011) describe, for example, how a majority of articles in the journal of *National Identities* constantly use maps to illustrate their findings or refer to the issue of national identity. Whilst illustrating and referencing national identity maps is a relatively common practice, manoeuvring these territorial maps through art such as drawings and political cartoons provides a different medium and a platform for exploring, and in some ways interrogating the discourse of national identity. A series of map-based cartoons published between 2005 and 2006 opened an avenue for us to look at political cartoons related to the issue of national identity in Sri Lanka.

Political cartoons provide a framework for visualising the nation and national identity critically, devoid of inhibitions. Cloke et al. (2004) argue that the purpose of imaginative sources (such as cartoons) is ‘not to make factual statements about the world, but, instead, to entertain, provoke, inspire or move the reader, listener, or viewer; in short, to engage the emotions and, indeed, the ‘imagination’ (p. 94). Thus, cartoons, as a powerful and unique imaginative source of visual communication, have an innate capacity to orient and excavate social issues. Stroescu (2003) also explains the significance of political cartoons for articulating dominant elements of national identity.

The political regime elected in 2005 in Sri Lanka was determined to end the protracted civil war between the Sri Lankan state and the LTTE (The Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam), which had gone on since the 1980s, and which challenged Sri Lankans’ conception of national territory and national identity. The citizenry was also eager to see an end to the conflict and the war. In this context, former President Mahinda Rajapaksa (elected in 2005) became a discursive icon inscribed, described, portrayed, and imaged frequently in all sources of media – newspapers, television, radio etc. – in all three languages. Among these, he was captured in cartoons elaborating his aspirations and expectations of national integrity.⁴ These cartoons provided us a platform to understand how national identity is socially constructed – especially its political articulations and cultural overtones – being inspired by the popular geopolitical⁵

⁴ See *Sarada Mahinda: Wasaraka Cartoon Ekatuwa/* One-year collection of cartoons (2006), Colombo: Ministry of Mass Media and Information.

⁵ Being one of the domains of critical geopolitics, popular geopolitics is one of the ways in which geopolitical knowledge is produced. See O’Tuathail G. (1999).

view that geopolitical ideas are not only shaped by the state, elites, political leaders and intellectual elite, but also through popular culture and everyday life. Cartoons, thus, taken as a medium of popular culture and everyday life, seem to reflect an otherwise unspoken world of national identity-making. Cartoons are unique in that they attempt to mirror reality as well as to craft reality. This study attempts to understand the relationship between the discourse of national identity cum territorial integrity and a selected set of political cartoons published during the mid-2000s to explore how political cartoons depict a particular national identity to be hegemonic with respect to Sri Lanka.

Cartoons and geography

In caricatures, certain geographic elements, such as maps, are incorporated and used to construct meaning. Cartwright et al. (2014, p. 1) explain very clearly that cartoons ‘have the potential to provide a hitherto undetected pattern of geography that complement the conventional geography stored in maps.’ Thus, cartoons, combined with maps, provide a more complete window, for example, into war geography (Cartwright et al., 2014). When including geography into cartoons, the cartoonist considers the actual geography of a country, and cartoons have also been used to make out the ways in which the homeland concept is represented (Kashani-Sabet, 2008).

Within the field of popular geopolitics and political geography, cartoons are now recognised as a medium of popular culture that reveals, critically or otherwise, embedded discourses of identity, hegemony and power cartographies, together with their commanding ideologies, reflecting changing social contexts. Teer-Tomaselli (1997, p. 2) argues that “academic critique has seen a veritable explosion of interest in a whole range of cultural texts and practices which had previously been scorned by, or remained invisible to, academic criticism”, meaning that interest in such media had hitherto been ignored or even despised to maintain the status quo. However, the influence of cultural studies, the paradigmatic shift from modernism to postmodernism, and from thence to postcolonial studies have provided us with a space ‘to blur the boundaries and level hierarchies’, almost as an alternative source to the much-heeded and generally ‘acceptable’ factual, documentary and published material.

The potential contribution of political cartoons to the post-colonising of knowledge has been explored by Hammett (2010), where he argues how cartoons function as a narrative of the changing role and engagement of democratisation in South Africa. Hammett (2010) explains that not only do individual images provide moments of insight into a society’s zeitgeist but that the consideration of a canon of political cartoons can reveal a more detailed, nuanced narrative regarding engagements that take place with changing social, economic and political conditions in the post-colony. He further identifies certain ‘animalised’ and ‘de-territorialised’ forms of political leaders within these caricatures, and that these caricatures are effective means of disrupting dominant power relations and opening up spaces of resistance to the excesses of leaders.

However, in most of these studies, cartoons are generally seen as a source that challenge and disrupt the existing order, expressing and representing subaltern, different and alternative points of view of society. Hammett and Mather (2011) assign a critical role and space with a sense of responsibility towards the cartoon as a form of popular culture, ‘for it can accuse,

encourage, debate, convey opinions and allow the reader to consider an issue from a different point of view'. Nonetheless, most literature relating to popular geopolitics clearly shows that the Western world and American hegemony outside its own territory have become the empirically comfort zone for scholars (Falah et al., 2006; Sharp, 1993), while there is a considerable hiatus of such studies relating to the non-western world; and this subject has received little or no attention in Sri Lanka either.

In this context, it is timely and important to study cartoons as a form of popular culture and their role in a country such as Sri Lanka, which has experienced more than 26 years of civil war that ended militarily, leaving the issue of national identity indelibly contested. It must be emphasised here that the cartoons discussed in this paper are not used merely as a source of data to derive information, but also as a reflection of social engagement. As a result, cartoons become the objects of research in its own right.

Cartoons and popular culture in Sri Lanka

Political cartoons, or, perhaps, western-style cartoons in Sri Lanka, began to appear in the early 19th century, especially during the colonial period. As pointed out by Lent (2001), the history of political cartoons in Ceylon begins with contributions from Bevis Bawa during the 1930s and 1940s. His cartoons, particularly in story formats, were published in two local newspapers, the Daily News and The Observer. The first political cartoon in Sri Lanka was *Mudalali* (businessman), drawn by Fernando in the local newspaper '*Swadesha Mitraya*' (Indigenous Friend), in 1931 (Muthumala, 2013, p. 18). Collette can also be recognised as one of the prominent cartoonists whose drawings attracted a large audience, and here, the cartoon was the most popular feature in the newspaper, Times of Ceylon. Along with Collette, other contemporary cartoonists included *G.S. Fernando* (The Observer), *W.R. Wijesoma* (Times of Ceylon) and *Susil Premarathne* (Lankadipa). *Wijesoma* believed that his cartoon captioned 'What a Life', which appeared both in the Times of Ceylon and the Lankadipa in 1952, was the first pocket cartoon in Sri Lanka. Lent explains *Wijesoma*'s contribution (using new types of cartoons) to the Sri Lankan genre of caricature,

... he [*Wijesoma*] drew a pocket cartoon 'Tikiri-Tokka' (Tiny Nook), for the Sinhalese language Lankadipa, and invented a new style strip, four frames on four separate news events, which he called 'Sittarapati'. *Wijesoma* (1993) described it as having a 'cinema effect with perforated edges (2001, p. 83).

The establishment of the Lake House Group and the *Upali* Media Group in 1968 and 1981, respectively, afforded more opportunities for cartoonists in Sri Lanka. During the 1960s, *S.C. Opatha*, *Jeffrey Yoonoos*, *W.P. Wickramanayake* and *Camillus Perera* were considered the most prominent cartoonists in the island. Among them, *Perera* and *Wickramanayake* were famous for their comical illustrations. *Yoonoos* was the first Tamil language cartoonist in Sri Lanka and he illustrated for the Tamil newspaper *Thinakaran*.

In Sri Lanka's political history, cartoons had always captured the tensions of elections. In 1977, cartoonist *Chanrandran* drew a 30-page booklet of cartoons denigrating the *Bandaranaike* administration, and it was eventually published by the opposition at the time.

As *Opatha* (1993) noted, those cartoons were powerful and strong enough to dent *Sirimavo Bandaranaike's* (Sri Lankan Prime Minister from 1970-77) image and political campaign. For reasons unknown, Sinhalese dailies generally tend to use more political cartoons than newspapers in English do (Lent, 2001). According to *Wijesoma* (1993), most Sinhala newspapers use both an inside page and a front-page pocket cartoon every day; but this format is different in English language newspapers.

The English language newspaper 'The Island' has a daily political cartoon by *Wijesoma* and the *Daily News*, a pocket, 'Laugh it Off' by *Opatha*: The *Observer* does not carry a daily cartoon, although the *Sunday Observer* has a full page, entitled 'Through the Eyes of Cartoonist'. *Wijesoma's* cartoon is translated daily and recycled in the company's Sinhala Paper (Lent, 2001, p. 94).

Lent (2001) explains that most Sri Lankan political cartoonists use the regular character of a 'common man' and that this was possibly influenced by Indian cartoonists. For example, *Hettigoda* has such a regular character called '*Maraputra*'; *Opatha* has '*Silva*'; *Yoonoos* has '*Appu Hamy*' and *Wijesoma* has '*Punchisingho*'. One of the most important observations made by *Lent* (2001) is that cartoons produced by different authors reflect their own particular political stance and/or ideology.

The political cartoonists expectantly espouse different political and social viewpoints. *Hettigoda* believes Marxism/Leninism is the system of the majority. *Yoonoos* (1993) and *Opatha* (1993) think it is vital to look out for the interests of the impoverished (Lent, 2001, p. 94).

However, political cartoons as a form of popular culture have not received much attention in the Sri Lankan social sciences and humanities. *Warnapala* (2012) attempted to understand the caricature of British Ceylon through an analysis of the production, distribution, consumption, and audience related to the illustrations of the cartoon character *Muniandi*. *Warnapala* observes that 'as a magazine torn in its allegiances, *Muniandi* offers a plurality of Ceylonese responses to colonial rule, depending on the different political and social positioning of the contributors and thus, suggests the possibility of reading and interpreting a cartoon character as a text to understand the ambivalent relations between the Ceylonese and the British' (2012, p. 241).

Changing such class-based reflections of society represented by the 'common man' image in cartoons in the aftermath of the war and during the presidency of Mahinda Rajapaksa, a series of cartoons was published in the mainstream, newspapers, which is very expressive of territorialised national identity, state hegemony, and the 'power persona' of the former President. In contrast to and differing from previous cartoons, these recent cartoons, reflecting the conflict and the tensions over the territorial ownership of Sri Lanka, use the geographical map of Sri Lanka as a base on which thoughts and ideas are coded and represented, all of which is of much interest, especially to political geographers. The political cartoons selected for this study demonstrate the tenuous relations between national identity, the territoriality of the state,

the political power of leaders and the role and the gallantry of popular culture in articulating them.

Methodology

Political cartoons and the discourse of national identity in Sri Lanka

As mentioned earlier, the objective of this study is to interrogate the discourse on national identity by engaging with a selected set of political cartoons. We identify cartoons as a powerful, unique, and imaginative source of visual communication that is socially constructed: that is, cartoons as a social product. We are convinced that political cartoons – their form, content and derived meanings, interpretations, and understandings – will relate to, represent, and reflect the particular time-space contexts within which they have been produced. As a source of data, cartoons lie at the border of non-official data sources and imaginative data sources, increasing their relevance and validity, perhaps to shed light on the inhibited, less-spoken or reluctantly spoken political and social worlds, through the imaginative powers of the visual image. Visual images are imaginative in that they deal with meanings, values, emotions, intuitions, desires, hopes and fears, which are not directly and easily accessible, generally relating to people's cognitive worlds.

In Sri Lanka, most cartoons are published in the regular newspapers within a pre-determined and allocated space, either in the first page or middle page, together with the editorial. These cartoons are also thought of as a mode of entertainment, associated with humour. Cartoons, thus, do not derive the same serious attention compared with the written text (replete with facts, figures, and numbers) available in the same newspaper. These very characteristics of cartoons make them less inhibited as means of expression. We believe that this allows a certain sense of freedom of expression for cartoons, compared with written and other visual images: in other words, the power elites consider cartoons as merely satirical and harmless, thus providing to them an effective space for critique without the risk of retaliation. Thus, we find cartoons as an innovative medium through which the discourse on national identity can be explored, with even more relevance than secondary documentary sources (i.e. published articles). It must be emphasised here that we did not choose cartoons as a pre-constructed source of data to speak about national identity, but rather, the cartoons themselves persuaded us to relate them to the issue of national identity.

This study is entirely based on the theoretical position that political cartoons – a subtle form of visual art, a mode of visual communication and a medium of popular culture drawn and published within a specific period – both reflect reality and have the capacity to make new realities. These cartoons are related to the cultural and political circumstances of the specific time-period, and the larger discourse of territorialised national identity, in general. Consequently, we study, analyse and interpret a selected set of political cartoons within the above mentioned broad context.

President Mahinda Rajapaksa: First Year in Cartoons (Serada Mahinda: Vasaraka Cartoon Ekaturvak)

The cartoons are selected from the cartoon collection of President Mahinda Rajapaksa: First Year in Cartoons compiled by the Ministry of Mass Media and Information in 2006. Many

of the cartoons in this collection were published in the daily and weekly newspapers in the period from 2005-2006, and they were drawn by the main cartoonists in Sri Lanka. The entire collection has 137 cartoons. Here, it must be stressed that these cartoons were published by the governing authorities as a collection to further propaganda and gain some political mileage, without considering the inherent satirical nature of the cartoons. Thus, it seems that all cartoons that had some reference to the political regime had been included in the collection. Therefore, it can be seen that the authorities continued to use these cartoons as propaganda, although they offered a subtle critique of the political regime in satirical form.

From the cartoons published in this selection, we chose five that were published during the period of one year from 2005-2006. These cartoons were selected based on their constituent elements. We selected the only five cartoons that referred to the Sri Lankan map in order to frame the manner in which political cartoons depict a particular national identity: these cartoons were not selected in the way that a conventional sample is chosen (See Figure 1) but as an object of the research study itself. We were captured by the geographical signification of these cartoons and noticed how they function as a narrative of the fast-changing ideology of national identity that goes in tandem with the territorial integrity of the island.

We have been influenced by Saussurian semiotic analysis as well as Gillian Rose's 'Visual Methodologies' (2001), as we look at how the visual images in the cartoons produce meaning by analysing both their signifiers and signified as well as the relationships among them. Here, we take the argument of semiotics seriously: that a message is first constructed through signs, and then, that the signs interact with the receivers, producing meanings, especially by reading such a sign as a process through which meanings are constructed and reconstructed through interactions and negotiations with the sign. Thus, it is possible that the same sign can yield multiple interpretations based on the particular social experiences and cultural locations of the reader. Understanding that cartoons, or any visual image, for that matter, are constitutive of three main components – producers (site of production), the image itself (site) and its consumers (consumption of the site) – we further examine as to how cartoons are produced, what kind of components/elements are embodied within these cartoons and finally how these cartoons are received and interpreted by viewers. These three components can be analytically distinctive, but it is important to understand that they are socially integrated as a single process. Such an analysis allows us not only to establish the connotations but also the larger texts and discourses within which these cartoons are produced and reproduced.

To understand the 'site of production' in Gillian Rose's (2001) sense, two of the four cartoonists who drew the selected cartoons were interviewed, and the headlines of the same newspaper were reviewed to obtain an understanding of the contemporary social context within which the respective cartoons were constructed. The compositional interpretation of the cartoons (the site itself) was carried out based on basic symbols, shapes and reference objects, paying attention to their denotations and connotations. This was done based on our own intuition as well as on the opinions derived from the survey with the students. As a way of understanding the social impact of the cartoons and their reception by viewers or how they have been consumed, a simple questionnaire was administered to 72 university students (61 Sinhalese and 11 Tamils), predominantly from rural Sri Lanka, who had followed, or were following Political Geography course in the English medium. Their responses were

subsequently screened to identify the dominant themes and meanings secreted from the cartoons.

We have also been influenced by Stuart Hall's work on "Encoding and decoding" (2006) in the process of analysing the production and consumption of cartoons. Hall argues that 'decoding does not follow inevitably from encodings' and thus have 'no necessary correspondence' (2006, p. 171). Hall's threefold schema of encoding/decoding-dominant/hegemonic code, negotiated code and the oppositional code is useful in understanding the nuances involved in the interpretations of the production and consumption of cartoons.

Results and Discussion

Production of cartoons

Cartoonists themselves are the immediate and sole producers of cartoons. There is a general tendency to consider such artists or authors of visual images as being gifted and endowed with an innate capacity for imagination and thus to perceive the product as an outcome of that inherent individuality. However, Cloke et al. (2004) explain this in the context of imaginative sources of data as follows,

Generally, we tend to think that artists are privileged with 'powers of insight and revelation' that others do not have. Emotional feelings, intuition are not the only assets of artists. They have distinctive qualities, but they arise from social contexts. They are not emerging from some mysterious capacity. (p. 94)

As revealed from the interviews with the cartoonists, cartoons are produced to depict the major political events that occurred on the day before the newspaper was published. Since most newspapers are owned by the state, it is quite evident that the cartoons published in these newspapers reflect state hegemony. On the other hand, cartoonist who work for non-state newspapers mention that the cartoon of the day is chosen by the editor of the respective newspaper. In that context, the production site of cartoons in Sri Lanka is a highly politically contested space with constrained capacity to generate a critical discourse among viewers.

Although visual images such as cartoons may be governed by certain conventions and regimes of production, by and large, their content and intended communicues are deeply embedded in the social and political ideologies, desires, and circumstances of the day. Taking this into account, we not only spoke to the cartoonists, but also examined the ways and means through which it is possible to understand the social context within which these cartoons would have been produced. The cartoons were published in the English newspapers of the day, namely, The Island, Daily Mirror, Daily News and in two Sinhala newspapers, Divaina and Lankadeepa, at a time when the country was preparing for a military response to the civil war that had been protracted for almost four decades. Cartoons were published immediately before and after the presidential election held on November 17, 2005. To sense the overall social context within which these cartoons were produced, they were screened against the editorial and the main headlines of the particular newspaper on the day the cartoon was published, and the underlying themes/messages of the cartoons were correlated with those findings.

Reviewing the headlines published during the period of 2005-2006 clearly shows the politically turbulent nature of society. The most revered Sri Lankan Foreign Minister Lakshman Kadiragamar was assassinated on August 12th of 2005. Three months later, Mahinda Rajapaksa was sworn in as the President. The months of August and September of 2006 recorded many LTTE offensives in Muttur, but the government gained full control of the Mavil Aru reservoir and later, recaptured Sampur from the LTTE. The atrocities of war, the prolonged conflict, and ethnic antagonisms were heightened by the explosion targeting the then-Defense Secretary, Gotabhaya Rajapaksa who is also the brother of then-President Mahinda Rajapaksa, on the 1st of December 2006. Thus, cartoons published during the same period must be located and analysed in relation to these events.

It is interesting to distinguish between the images and intended messages of the English and Sinhala newspapers of the time. The cartoons published in the English newspapers, read by all ethnic groups (see Cartoons B, C, and E), seem to be more politically oriented; that is, they deal with the aptness of the leader to unite and liberate the nation, politically. Cartoon A, published in a fairly popular Sinhala daily, the Lankadeepa, directly addresses the rural, poor electorate with a more economic and class-based interpretation of the political leadership represented by the 'tie' and the 'satakaya' (shawl used by a man)-a classic advertisement that canvasses votes for the upcoming election (See Figure 3). These cartoons portray the former President as the 'representative of the poor man', and as the saviour of the territorial integrity and national identity of the country, thus capturing the hearts and minds of almost the entire electorate.

However, do cartoonists attempt to represent a kind of 'collective consciousnesses' of the electorate? Garlanding the map of Sri Lanka with the 'satakaya' and hanging it on the wall expresses a sense of stability, when compared with a Sri Lanka garlanded with a tie, and this remains a relevant question. The issue of whether cartoonists conform to or represent popular ideology and/or whether cartoons function as a means of encoding political propaganda demands serious attention in the Sri Lanka context.

Constitutive elements of cartoons

The selected cartoons are, in a way, visually simple, with a small number of elements. Kleeman (2006) defines these elements of a cartoon as 'the devices used to communicate the cartoonist's point of view'. He identifies eight such elements (symbolism, stereotyping, caricatures, exaggeration and distortion, captions, perspectives, humour, and visual metaphors) and further implies that the cartoonist's message filters through a permutation of these elements. Our attempt to figure out the constitutive elements of cartoons was twofold: first we tried to apply Kleeman's eight-element scheme to the selected cartoons, and second, we entrusted the task to the respondents themselves. The respondents gave priority to identifying the visible features of cartoons and their implied meanings. This constituted step one of the survey, and this step was subsequently useful in the analysis and interpretation as it provides an idea about the respondents' visual attention to the cartoons (see Table 1). One of the most interesting findings here is the resemblance cartoonists reveal (through constructed meaning) between the territory of Sri Lanka and the 'satakaya', For example, in cartoons C and D,

respondents identify the outline of the map to be the '*satakaya*'. This could be due to the impact of the previous two cartoons, in which the '*satakaya*' plays an important role in the image.

The main elements in the selected cartoons are the map of Sri Lanka, former President Mahinda Rajapaksa and the '*satakaya*'. These represent, respectively, the territory cum state, political power, and indigenusness/localness and the sense of switching classes. This personification translates the abstract political concept of the territorial state into a more imaginative, emotional and close-to-the-heart everyday feeling. Wrapping up the map of Sri Lanka with the '*satakaya*' allows people to imagine that the former president is the saviour of the island, inculcating a sense of inseparability between territorial integrity, national identity and the president. The '*Satakaya*' comes to signify a sense of indigenusness and localness with an anti-western flavour, as well as working class sentiments.

Thus, we find cartoons to be a satirical mode of visual communication that offer an intense personification of national identity. This explains the fact that the national identity and security of Sri Lanka was, at the time, closely tied up with the '*satakaya*', a predominantly Sinhalese symbol and interpretation: The territorial outline of Sri Lanka is the most significant and defining element of the political iconography of Sri Lanka. Its contested discourses of nationalism and sub-continental geopolitics is draped around a piece of personal attire of the presidential candidate (cartoons A, C, D) and embossed with the contestant's face (cartoon E). Further, to bring the tie and the '*satakaya*' into focus (through caricature), it can be observed that at the dawn of an election, the always prevalent, yet less vocal class tensions are present, and this is revealed in the manner in which the two main political parties have been historically associated with the rich (the tie) and the poor (the *satakaya*). It seems that the cartoonists foresee and understand that this is how Sri Lankan society would like to comprehend the national identity of Sri Lanka, and the visualisation and imagination embedded in these cartoons follows directly from that understanding. Then, it can be plausibly argued that the constitutive elements of these caricatures clearly correspond to the hegemonic order – 'representing situations and events which are "in dominance" and related inevitably to the "national interest"' (Hall, 2006, p. 172), working back to a personalised everyday discourse and reflecting a prospective social demand. We thus argue that the constitutive elements of a cartoon (source) are not a set of innocent signs surfacing from the (abstract) imaginative powers of the cartoonists, but are socially instigated, in this case symbolising a predominantly Sinhala-Buddhist ideology.

Consumption of cartoons: viewers' perspectives

It is extremely important to understand the process through which viewers or readers of cartoons would understand and interpret the messages embedded in these visual images, along with the production of the site and its constitutive elements. Kleeman (2006) captures the significance of the consumption aspect of cartoons as follows,

A well-crafted cartoon can distil quite complex issues into a form that is accessible to a wider (non-expert) audience. Appreciating this distinctive form of artistic expression is not, however, simply a matter of finding them amusing – it is more about understanding the context of the issue addressed, identifying the perspective of the

cartoonist, and agreeing or disagreeing with that perspective. The most effective cartoons are those that use cleverly constructed visual satire to illustrate a point of view, and which elicit a response from the viewer (p.144).

It is clear from the above quotation that cartoons A, B, and C are embedded in satire and irony: the smile, the expressions in the eyes, and the head and hair in cartoon B; the Sri Lankan maps wrapped or garlanded in/by the western tie versus the local '*satakaya*' in cartoon A; and the facial expressions of the figures in cartoon C all invoke a sense of humour, ridicule, or scorn. This suggests, then, that the cartoonists as artists strategically play out dramas within the hegemonic space (i.e. state media) itself, using their imaginative powers, and through the signification of their images and the portrayal of possible scenarios, demand a response from the viewers as well. Consequently, the cartoonists seem to provide a space for the viewers to interrogate themselves, utilising a given image, of what ought to happen.

The respondents of the survey interpret the constitutive elements of cartoons to be related and located within wider social discourses and practices (see Table 2). For example, former President Mahinda Rajapaksa is related, in different degrees, to Sinhala-Buddhist nationalism, representation of patriarchy, and a spokesperson for the rural poor class or the non-elites. His personal attire, the *satakaya*, depicts the unitary state and national identity, hegemony and, quite interestingly, political dictatorship. Obviously, the tiger is connected with terrorism and Tamil nationalism. Ranil Wickremesinghe (former Prime Minister, Sri Lanka) is rendered through symbols of modernisation, liberal economy, and as a spokesperson for the rich and the non-Sinhalese elite. In Cartoon E, the Sinhalese respondents observed a divide between north and south, and, when reading the newspaper, almost all imagined a north-east separated from the rest of the country, while Sri Lanka is revealed to the Tamil respondents through Mahinda Rajapaksa's face.

Figure 2 summarises how the Tamil and Sinhala respondents reacted to the cartoons in terms of emotions and feelings. Both Tamil and Sinhala speaking respondents seemed to respond to Cartoon A similarly with a sense of worry and anxiety. The Sinhalese respondents showed extreme frustration as well as anger and worry over Cartoons A and E, while they exhibited mixed emotions with respect to the other three cartoons. For the Tamil respondents, while Cartoons B and C seemed to generate mixed feelings, Cartoons A, D and E seemed to generate some extreme emotions such as happiness, worry, and sarcasm. Tamil-speaking respondents do not necessarily view these cartoons as explicitly representing or contributing towards a form of Sinhala national identity.

One of the most interesting findings related to Cartoon A is that, although this was produced during the period 2005-2006, its reading is influenced by the prevailing socio-political context at any given point of time. For example, both groups make a comparison between Mahinda Rajapaksa and Ranil Wickremesinghe through this cartoon, representing the rich and the poor, respectively. Both Sinhala and Tamil respondents take Cartoon E to reflect a sense of dictatorship and Mahinda Rajapaksa's powers sweeping over the entire country. But the Sinhala respondents view Cartoon E as more reflective of a dictatorship than the Tamil respondents. However, when these different versions or readings are interpolated, it is clear that the Sinhalese are happy about the defeat of the LTTE (Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam),

while the Tamil respondents express a sense of sadness, anger and sarcasm. The rural Sinhalese respondents seem to read these cartoons as being deeply entrenched within the dominant-hegemonic point of view, that is, that Sri Lanka belongs to the Sinhala Buddhists.

In the independent observations (Tables 3 and 4) made by the Sinhalese and Tamil respondents, there is no significant difference in the way they read and relate to the cartoons. In other words, most people are well able to understand the iconography emitting from these cartoons. Therefore, we suggest that caricatures have an immense potential to engage viewers critically. Hall (2006) argues that ‘decoders’ become the source of production or encoding. Thus, the question remains whether these cartoons are actually drawn in such a way that anticipates the aspirations of the Sinhalese rural electorate. Those readers or viewers who comply with the hegemonic order tend to read it as being compliant with their notion of a territorial- national identity, now symbolised and ‘guarded’ by the ‘*satakaya*,’ which resonates with the idea that Sri Lanka is a Sinhala-Buddhist (nation) state. However, those who attempt a more negotiated reading (as in Hall’s typology) grasp the hegemonic logic, yet are unable to understand these cartoons’ subtle sense of satire, sarcasm, and danger, as revealed from the interpretation of certain cartoons as depicting dictatorship and future uncertainty. A radically oppositional reading is derived from certain cartoons. Here, the connotations are that these cartoons are not about territorial, national integrity but about the possibility, nay the certainty, of dictatorship.

Conclusions

In this study, we did not use cartoons as a mere source of data but in fact, as our object of study. We were interested in engaging with political cartoons – a popular visual media – as a moment of political iconography in Sri Lanka that has not been previously studied. In other parts of the world, cartoons function as ‘an effective alternative to prohibited words’, even within regimes of strict censorship (Hammett, 2010; Hammett & Mather, 2011; Plumb, 2004). Kleeman (2006) points out that cartoons ‘are a powerful instrument in shaping the parameters of public discourses and debates.’ Thus, we were interested in the way in which national political identity is translated into a personified everyday discourse through these cartoons.

In the Sri Lankan case, such caricatures at the site of production – within the state-sponsored media framework – confirm and legitimise the prevailing dominant ideology of a unitary state, its territorialised identity, and the powerful persona of the former president. It is evident from this study, how these cartoons have been used during times such as elections to win over the electorate by encapsulating its collective imagination, thus reinforcing, and reifying the dominant Sinhala-Buddhist ideology. Even the site itself seems to be heavily biased towards the dominant-hegemonic ideology on national identity. Nevertheless, it must be noted that cartoons as an alternative repository of political interpretation are subject to diverse and multiple readings, especially in a society such as Sri Lanka with multiple ethnic and social identities. It is also possible that some such readings will be framed along ethnic identities.

A most important aspect of this study is how a personal piece of attire – the *satakaya* – is integrated and placed within the discourse of national identity. Penrose and Mole (2008) relate national identity to a psychological condition whereby ‘a mass of people not only identify

with national symbols but also accrue emotive powers to them'. Connecting the *satakaya* with territorial integrity and national identity creates a new space in the political discourse of Sri Lanka, thus enhancing its emotive powers. The unitary character of the nation-state of Sri Lanka is visualised by draping the island with a figurative *satakaya*. In these cartoons, the *satakaya* has become a powerful visual metaphor that invokes a networking effect between territorial integrity, the unitary state, and national identity. The *satakaya*, compared to the Western necktie (the latter symbolising the urban rich or elite), has become an icon not only of the rural poor, but also of the Sinhala-Buddhist leadership. These cartoons have elevated the *satakaya* to a position beyond its mere value as a piece of attire and elevated it to a symbol of political iconography of the Sri Lankan state, thus translating national identity into everyday discourse. The '*satakaya*,' then, enters into the cultural life of Sri Lankans as something that makes meaning and builds relationships on a national scale. Pinney (2004), of course, has emphasised that what is important is not how images 'look', but what they do.

Although cartoonists strategically play with the hegemonic space within its own apparatus (i.e., state media) in order to assert an already existing dominant ideology, they cannot exert any influence over the process of decoding of the meanings of cartoons or their subsequent readings. Therefore, such visual media escape their own context of production providing an opportunity for viewers/readers to question, de-contextualise and re-contextualise them. Although political cartoons may be produced within particular social contexts, they can be read and relocated in/within/to different time-space contexts. Therefore, cartoons, given their enhanced communicative power to present deeply complex issues in a simplified and accessible form, may even be used to manipulate people's imaginations, although as a visual media, cartoons have an incredible pedagogical potential to promote and enhance reflective thinking.

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Figure 1
Political Cartoons selected for this study

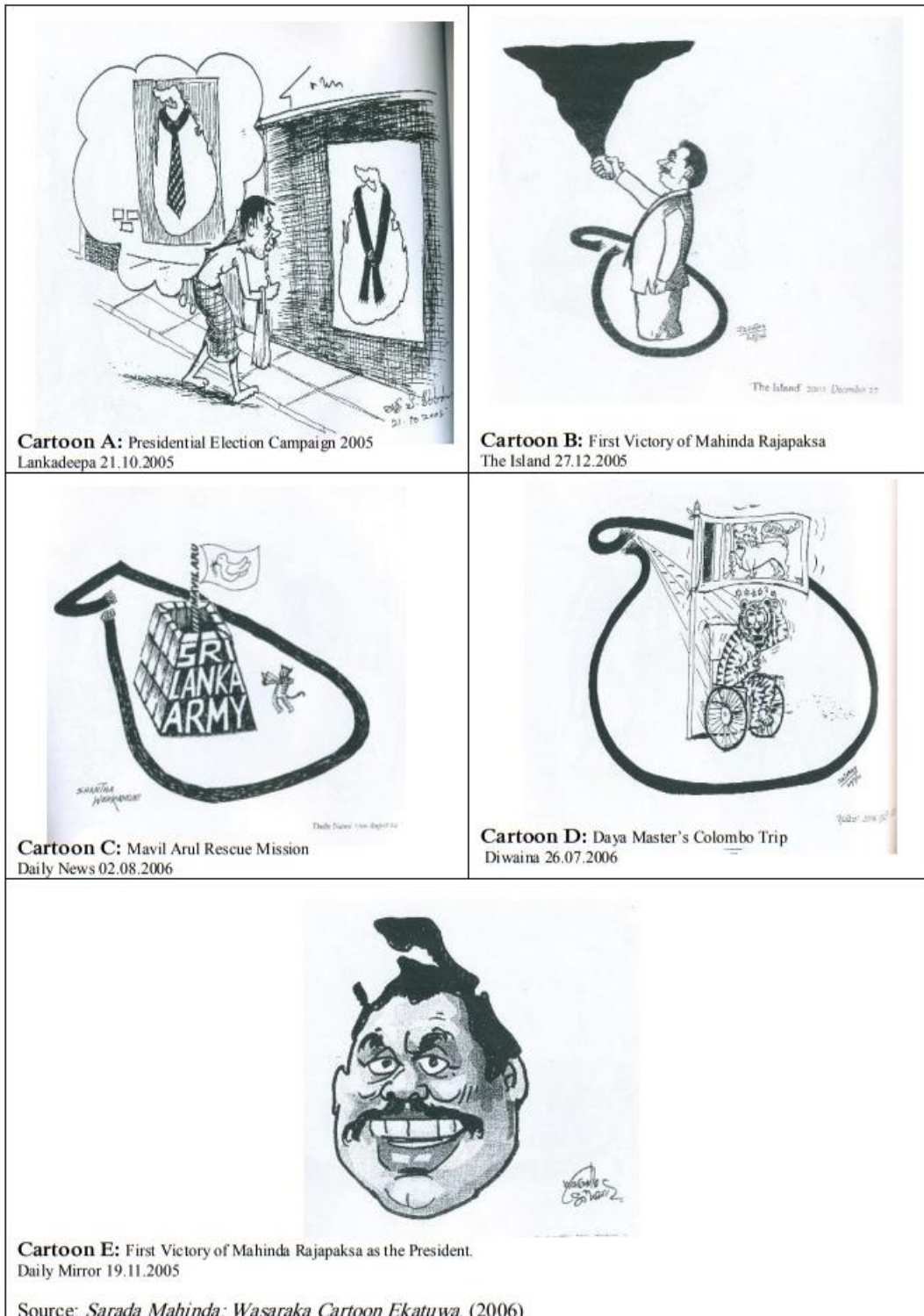
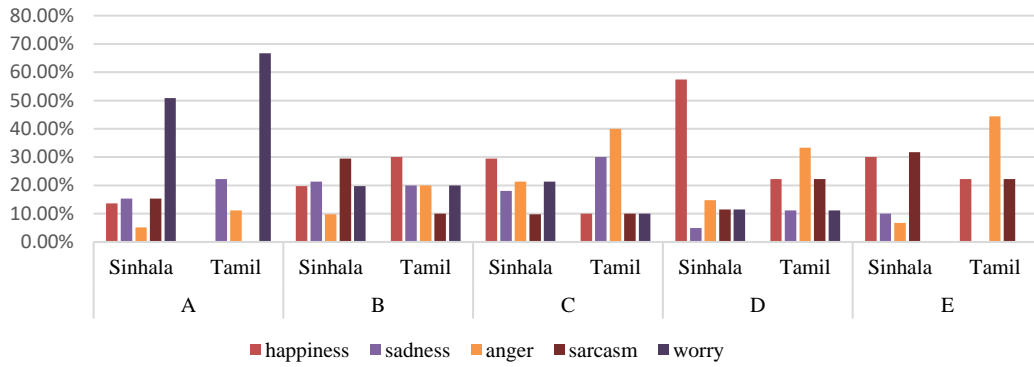


Figure 2



Feelings of the Sinhala and Tamil respondents towards the cartoons

Figure 3
Former President attending the State Oil Kirivehera Temple in Sri



Mahinda Rajapaksa Anointing in 2013 at the Lanka

Table 1
Identification of constitutive elements (N=72)

Cartoon	Constitutive elements (signifiers)	Meanings attached (signified)
Cartoon A	Map of Sri Lanka Tie <i>Satakaya</i> Poor, common man	Sri Lanka (implying state) UNP* and Ranil Wickremesinghe Mahinda Rajapaksa, Mahinda's government Poor, common man
Cartoon B	India Sri Lanka <i>Satakaya</i> /Sri Lanka Man Mahinda Rajapaksa	Sri Lanka-India relations (positive) Sri Lanka-India relations (negative) Satakaya as Sri Lanka
Cartoon C	<i>Satakaya</i> Tiger Sri Lankan Army Mavil Aru Pigeon	Sri Lanka LTTE** Defeat of LTTE Rescue mission of Mavil Aru Peace
Cartoon D	<i>Satakaya</i> National flag of Sri Lanka Tiger Wheelchair	Sri Lanka Unity LTTE Destruction of the LTTE
Cartoon E	Mahinda Rajapaksa Face of Mahinda Rajapaksa Hair of Mahinda Rajapaksa	As Sri Lanka/Role model of Sinhalese Sri Lankan South Sri Lankan North/East
UNP*: United National Party LTTE**: Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam		

Table 2
Interpretation of the constitutive elements (N=72)

Constituent Element (abstract)	Constituent Element (relative)	Relation to the larger discourse
Person	<i>Mahinda Rajapaksa</i>	Savior of the island; his relationship with Sri Lanka Freedom party; ultra-Sinhala nationalism; Sinhala-Buddhist. Farther figure to the rural poor, patriarchal
Person	Common Man	The non-elite group in Sri Lanka; people under poverty; voiceless people
Shawl	<i>Satakaya</i>	Mahinda Rajapaksa; hegemony; dictatorship; Sinhala-Buddhist; one Sri Lanka, common man, rural poor

Tie	Ranil Wickremesinghe	Modernisation; United National Party; Liberal Policy; non-Sinhalese, rich upper class
Tiger	LTTE (Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam)	Terrorism, Tamil terrorists, Tamil nationalism

Table 3

Predominant versions of reading among the Sinhalese and Tamils

	Sinhalese respondents	Tamil respondents
Cartoon A	Uncertainty of local politics Common man's expectations	Uncertainty of local politics
Cartoon B	Positive relations with India	Positive relations with India Dependency of Sri Lanka on India
Cartoon C	Defeat of LTTE*	Defeat of LTTE
Cartoon D	Defeat of LTTE	Defeat of LTTE
Cartoon E	Dictatorship Power over the entire country Power of Mahinda Rajapaksha in the south	Mahinda Rajapaksa's power over the entire country
*LTTE: Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam		

Table 4

Independent Observations by Sinhalese and Tamils

	Sinhala	Tamil
Cartoon A	Uncertainty of local politics (58%)	The uncertainty of local politics (46%)
	Common man's expectation for UNP* (3%)	Mahinda Rajapaksa vs Ranil Wickremesinghe (9%)
	Common man's expectation for Mahinda Rajapaksa (25%)	
	Mahinda Rajapaksa vs Ranil Wickremesinghe (13%)	Dictatorship (18%)
	Dictatorship (7%)	
Cartoon B	Positive relations with India (61%)	Positive international relations with India (46%)
	Negative International Relations with India (25%)	The dependency of Sri Lanka on India (46%)
	The dependency of Sri Lanka on India (10%)	
Cartoon C	Defeat of LTTE** (75%)	The defeat of LTTE (46%)

	Threat of LTTE (3%)	The threat of LTTE (18%)
	Mavilaru rescue mission (21%)	Mavilaru rescue mission (18%)
	Light of peace (15%)	Light of peace (18%)
Cartoon D	Defeat of LTTE (89%)	The defeat of LTTE (63%)
	One country/Unity (26%)	One country/Unity (27%)
Cartoon E	Dictator (33%)	Dictator (9%)
	Power of Mahinda Rajapaksa over the entire country (30%)	Power of Mahinda Rajapaksa over the entire country (55%)
	Power of Mahinda Rajapaksa in South (except NE) (28%)	North-South divide (9%)
	North-South divide (3%)	Role model of Sinhalese (9%)
<i>UNP*: United National Party</i>		<i>LTTE**: Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam</i>