

NATIONAL IDENTITY AS AN EVERYDAY DISCOURSE: REFLECTIONS FROM CARTOONS

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Introduction

National identity is still the most fundamental geographic identity (Taylor & Flint, 2000) that defines modern social life. Generally, this is built on, though contested, around territorial fixity of a nation state. However, such national identity may be subjected to new and different interpolations, as social identity coupled with the territorial boundary changes with/over time, transforming the space in question with different meanings. Political cartoons, as a unique form of visual communication, provide a powerful framework for visualizing and articulating national identity critically, devoid of inhibitions and have an innate capacity to orient social issues (Abraham, 2009; Stroescu, 2003). The period from 2005 to 2006 in Sri Lanka was crucial as national identity was challenged by the prolonged civil war since the 1980s and the citizenry was eager to see an end to the conflict and war. In this context, the former President became a political icon cartooned frequently in the newspapers and these cartoons taken as a medium of popular culture and everyday life seem to reflect an otherwise unspoken world of national identity making.

This study explores how these satirical political cartoons published between 2005 and 2006 produced a particular version of national identity leading towards personification of national identity and making it into an everyday discourse.

Methodology

The methodology of this study is entirely based on the theoretical position that the political cartoons - as a subtle form of popular culture is reflective of a social demand as well as a critique of the ongoing political practices. The cartoons for this study are selected from the publication 'President Mahinda Rajapaksha-First Year in Cartoons' (Sarada Mahinda (2006)). A compositional interpretation was done by analyzing the embedded symbology to derive denotations and connotations to understand the discourses within which these cartoons are produced and received. A simple questionnaire was administered to a purposive sample

to measure the social impact of the cartoons while the artists of the selected cartoons were interviewed to clarify the context of production.

Results and Discussion

This study clearly reveals that cartoons play a heuristic and a critical role in interrogating the emerging discourse on national identity and the incorporation of the persona of the former President, along with his *satakaya* allows people to personalize national identity while ascertaining his political power. *Satakaya* and territorial integrity is visually intertwined even depicting class inequalities contrasted with the western dress-tie. *Satakaya* has obviously become an icon of poorer people and the rural, Buddhist Sinhalese.

The survey helps identify the constitutive elements and the meanings of the cartoons. The respondents identify a tension between the rich and poor epitomized by the two leaders Ranil Wickramasinghe and Mahinda Rajapaksha, a clear relationship between *satakaya* and the Sri Lankan map, and a north and south divide in Sri Lanka. The survey results also show how the Tamil and Sinhala respondents react to the cartoons. Very interestingly, Tamil speaking respondents do not view these cartoons as explicitly representing a form of Sinhala national identity. However, the survey signaled the need for follow up interviews with the respondents in order to verify their positions.

It is also interesting to find that one of the cartoons though produced in 2005-2006, is read by the respondents to be reflective of a comparison of Mahinda Rajapaksha and Ranil Wickramasinghe today. Both Sinhala and Tamil respondents derive a sense of dictatorship and Mahinda Rajapaksha's sweeping powers over the entire country from one of the cartoons, but the Sinhala respondents seem to emphasize more on dictatorship than the Tamil respondents.

All five cartoons in the sample use the *satakaya* to symbolize the united territorial space of Sri Lanka and it is recognized as a powerful and a major signifier of the cartoons. Wrapping the territorial space of Sri Lanka with the *satakaya* by both Weeramuni and Jeferey (2006) can be interpreted as a conceptual rejection of 'Tamil Homeland'. The unitary nation-state of Sri Lanka is made visible by demarcating the island with *satakaya* and the former President Mahinda Rajapaksha. Jeferey (2006) in his cartoon again visualizes national identity of Sri Lanka through symbols of *satakaya* and Mahinda Rajapaksha. Wasantha (2005) has

conceptualized the victory of Mahinda Rajapaksha in 2005 with the theme of ‘Mahinda as Sri Lanka’ by embossing his entire face within the map of Sri Lanka, making the North and East as part of his head and hair. It appears that these cartoons suggest that *satakaya* has gone beyond its dress value as a piece of attire and has become an emotive symbol of iconography of the Sri Lankan state.

Conclusion

National identity is a key element in the production of political space. The cartoons appear to be a unique medium in producing a mental landscape of national identity in Sri Lanka during the first term of the former president. National identity is generally talked about in specific contexts –among political groups, news media, academic groups etc. - as a public discourse. The most interesting finding of this study is how national identity is transformed into an everyday discourse through the persona of the former President and especially *satakaya*. It appears that this personification of national identity through the amalgamation of territory (map of Sri Lanka), Presidency (power, politics, state), Mahinda Rajapaksha (Sinhalese, Buddhist, Male from the south) together with the traditional *satakaya* transforms the idea of national identity into a strong everyday discourse.

References

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