

Political cartoons depicting realities of multilateral economic relations between leaders from China and countries from the Horn of Africa

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Abstract: Political cartoons, though hugely humorous and entertaining, are in many ways an effective tool that cartoonists utilize in highlighting social realities, either to expose anomalies or to encourage prevailing realities. Studies have variously affirmed that the efficacy of a cartoon as a meaningful communication medium for the purposive sharing of perspectives and inclinations is largely dependent on the quality of creative vision each cartoon embodies. Thus, this study interpretively examines the following: the creative vision dynamics in the selected cartoons by Gado and Zapiro, focusing primarily on the aesthetics and the artists' inclination intersections in their portrayals of behaviours and pertinent realities of multilateral economic relations between political leaders from China and countries in the Horn of Africa. The study also examines the cartoonists' attempts to situate their narratives within specific contexts, utilizing distinctive symbolic images as variables that distinguish the cartoons as political cartoons. The study also looks at the nuances of subtlety and aggressiveness in the cartoons, the metaphorical polemics in the symbols in the cartoons, and the comparatives in Gado's and Zapiro's authorial point-of-view(s). Lastly, we observe that the selected cartoons reflect different perspectives, inclinations, worldviews, and creative visions regarding public opinions on the behaviours of political leaders concerning economic multilateral engagements between countries in the Horn of Africa and China.

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Introduction

Political cartoons are pro-humour and purposefully distorted drawings or paintings that serve as an artistic medium for authorial expressions of perspectives, reflections, debates, worldviews, inclinations, and suppositions on human realities from differing points of view. Its manifestations, aesthetics, styles, agenda, messages, and ideological bents usually vary from one cartoonist to another; nevertheless, humour is a commonality in all kinds of cartoons. Daniel Hammett (2010, 4) observes that cartoons “provide fruitful avenues through which to engage with the realities of social injustice, exploitation and inequality”. Hence, cartoon is a medium and a platform for presenting pertinent social topics in different political landscapes through their provocative, satirical, and subjective illustrations (Hammett & Mather 2011, 104). Cartoons present interpretations of events as well as ideological framings and illumination on worldviews; thus, Nic S. Terblanche (2011, 157) describes political cartoons as “barometers of a nation’s consciousness” and not just “comedy for entertainment”. The interpretations of political cartoons by different scholars situate them as ‘socially engaged arts’, which, as Onwuasoanya et al. (2023, 110) articulate, is:

An umbrella term encompassing all forms of arts (fine and applied arts, literary arts, and performance) that present various forms of public-oriented advocacy, criticism, or protestation, on topical concerns that are widely acknowledged as socially relevant. While all arts are communication channels, not all are socially engaged, because only some are metaphorical mirrors, reflecting complexities of societal concerns, manifestations, and realities.

Onwuasoanya et al. (Ibid, 113) observe that “political cartoons as a trajectory of political art include all forms of cartoons, which appear in newspapers and magazines as pictorial rhetoric and commentary on any topical social matter”. Further, they state that “although political cartoons are often than not perceived as a form of amusement because they are comical, they are nevertheless a powerful medium of political discourse” (Ibidem). According to Anjali Suniti Bal et al. (2009, 230), “one of the earliest forms of political satire is the political cartoon” and “in the 18th century, political cartoons were known simply as ‘satires’ and widely used in the colonies to criticize English rule”. They opine

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that political cartoons “strive to exploit the most obvious or grotesque features of a leader (a subject) and put them on display, and in so doing, go directly to highlight or attack political image” (Ibidem).

Francisca Onwuasoanya et al. (2023, 113-114) observe that “cartoons are not legally, true copies of what they mimic, even though the images may appear distinctively telling” however, “a critical commonality of cartoons is the creative utilization of satire and hyperbole to present compositions that enhance amusement, which draws and holds the attention of beholders, even though the thematic preoccupation essentially may be a serious matter”. A cartoon is a caricature, and it is describable as “a picture or description, ludicrously exaggerating peculiarities or defects in persons or things” (Bal et al. 2009, 231). Caricature can be classified as “a subset of satire, designed to elicit mirth through the exaggeration of difference” (Ibidem). Meanwhile, satire essentially is “the use of ridicule, irony or sarcasm to lampoon something or someone” or “an artistic composition designed to generate laughter” (Ibidem).

This paper utilizes a concept ‘a model of caricature’ by Bal et al. (2009), which elucidates the centrality of satire in creating an effective caricature (cartoon), to discuss the creative vision in selected cartoons by Gado and Zapiro, which are attempts at lampooning the ineffectual in the socio-economic realities subsisting between China and leaders of countries from the Horn of Africa. In their ‘model of caricature’, Bal et al. (2009, 231) observe that cartoons are satirical art and they are “a highly emotive genre that appeals to all and sundry, including the illiterate”. A ‘model of caricature’ by Bal et al projects the following two questions as fundamentals in interpreting the value of satire in a political cartoon: 1. What are the necessary conditions for someone or something to be caricatured? 2. What is the mechanism for caricature, and how does it relate to the necessary conditions? The two questions suggest that it is through creative vision that a cartoonist should strive to subsume the following variables (sympathy, gap, or differentiation) in his or her cartoons, for efficacy elevation. Bal et al observe that ‘sympathy’ connotes an ‘affective bond’ a cartoon creates between the viewer and the object of satire, that “there must be a perceived gap, disparity or dissonance between image and reality” and that ‘the undifferentiated cannot be caricatured’ (Ibid, 232). The notion here is that the deliberate creative alteration, distortion, or exaggeration of features, forms, or physicality of an object of satire, which distances it from its exact natural appearance, is required to elicit humour.

To generate a plausible explanation regarding the layers of meaning symbols in cartoons, this study adopts Clifford Geertz's 'thick description', an interpretive approach, which stipulates diligent and dependable insider knowledge as major requirements for a plausible interpretation of items and symbols. 'Thick description' advocates proper situating of an analysis within a specific interpretive community before finding extended attribution(s). The expression interpretive theory refers to "a relatively large umbrella category that includes analytical perspectives and theories spanning the fields of communication, sociology, anthropology, education, cultural studies, political science, history, and the humanities" (Vannini 2009, 557).

'Thick Description' falls within 'interpretive study methodology' and a category describable as ontological and epistemological research approaches, which rely on "the ways communities, cultures, or individuals, create meaning from their own actions, rituals, interactions, and experiences" in providing deductions (Ibidem). The conceptual notion of interpretive approaches highlights the need for researchers to pay attention to the history and origin of the texts under study before extending their suppositions to connote and intersect with other broader historical, geographical, political, linguistic, ideological, economic, and cultural milieus, because meaning in texts is first localized before they are deemed interconnected.

In establishing meanings in symbols, Victor Turner's (1967, 50) idea of three levels or fields of meaning, namely, "indigenous interpretation (the exegetical meaning); the operational meaning; and the positional meaning," is an approach, viewed as relevant in this study. Turner explains that it is from native commentary that the exegetical meanings are derived and there are three classifications of it – the nominal (which is derived from the meanings associated with the name of the symbol), the substantial (which is derived from natural and material properties of objects used as symbols) and the artifactual (which are generated from the result of purposive activity) (Turner 1975, 152). In addition, Turner notes that 'operational' meaning(s) of a symbol are equivalent to its description of action and the effective qualities linked to the action, such as aggressive, sad, penitent, joyful, despair, and so on, and 'positional' meaning emanates from structural relationships that symbols have among themselves (Turner 1967, 51). According to Ekenechukwu Anikpe et al. (2021, 6):

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Symbolism can be described as the creative incorporation of specific symbols in the arts to communicate specific or intended message(s) to the beholder(s). However, in some cases, such as in performance arts, symbolism may appear to be unrecognizable, incongruent, or abstruse to varying degrees depending on who the beholder is.

Conscious application of items as symbols in art is symbolism, an expression coined in 1886 by French critic Jean Moréas primarily to describe Stéphane Mallarmé and Paul Verlaine's poetry as a representation of ideas beyond the supposed literal connotations, and the study of symbolism is called symbology. We learn from art history that symbolism is a late nineteenth-century French, Russian, and Belgian art movement relating specifically to poetry and other arts. However, it is plausible to observe that human beings have exhibited the use of symbols to communicate before the late nineteenth century, rather what happened at that period was the increased momentum in art related imaginative representations, driven by symbols that embed intended metaphorical attributions and the effervescent study of the shades of symbols in arts (see Hyland and Bateman 2011; Müller-Brockmann 1971). As Raymond Firth (1973, 77) observes, symbols are “instruments of expression, of communication, of knowledge and of control” and their utility extends to artistic creation of abstractions and ambiguity.

This study examines the artistic utilization of symbols as metaphors, representing public opinions and pertinent realities of multilateral economic relations between leaders from China and countries in the Horn of Africa, as subsumed in selected cartoons by Gado and Zapiro. Rodwell Makombe (2018, 56) observes that “many agree that cartoons are a powerful means of expressing dissent and/or challenging political power” however, political cartoonists usually incur the anger of politicians for their temerity to speak truth to power, for instance, “in December 2010, South African cartoonist, Jonathan Shapiro (Zapiro) was sued for portraying former President Zuma as a rapist” and “in February 2018, his contract of over ten years with *The Sunday Times* was abruptly terminated”. Jonathan Shapiro, widely known as Zapiro, is a cartoonist from South Africa, born on 27 October 1958. His works have appeared in numerous South African publications, and they have been exhibited internationally on many occasions. According to Eileen M. Angelini (2020, 18), “it is in part thanks to the efforts and courage of political and editorial cartoonists that we are better-informed world-citizens” and “one of such cartoonists is Tanzanian Godfrey

Mwampembwa, born in Kenya in 1969, who bears the pen name Gado”. Angelini notes that Gado is “the most syndicated political and editorial cartoonist in East and Central Africa” and that “the sophisticated manner in which he depicts and exposes corrupt dictators is unequalled and unrivalled” (Ibidem). In addition, Angelini adds that Gado’s “political cartoons have been able to accelerate change in the media and perhaps for this one reason alone, he is considered by many to be the most important cartoonist in all of Africa” (Ibid, 20). In addition, Angelini notes that Gado’s “work has stood the test of time, though he has been fired from jobs for expressing his opinion, as he was from the Daily Nation in March 2016 for mocking the Kenyan president” (Ibid, 21). According to Sammy G. Gachigua (2016, 196), “of all the cartoonists in Kenya, Gado’s cartoons have received the most scholarly attention” and “Gado’s works have been categorized by Musila as employing humour that ‘tends to highbrow laughter,’ which is marshalled for social criticism with the intention of creating a positive change in society”. The notion here is that the poignant creative vision and provocative propensity of Gado’s cartoons have brought him a significant amount of upheavals, particularly from the corridors of power; however, “Gado is deeply admired for how, for over twenty years, he has utilized his talent to draw much-needed attention to the political unrest in several African countries” (Angelini 2020, 21). Gado and Zapiro are widely viewed as cartoonists who apply creative vision in their cartoons to interrogate the prevalent economic and political upheavals in parts of Africa, particularly the paradox and polemics of leadership crisis that have continued to undermine African people’s dreams of an uplifting renaissance. Creative vision in the sense applied above “represents an ingenious deployment of functional sublime imagination and skills for the purpose of creating art that is effectively aesthetic and exceptional” (Anikpe et al. 2021, 3).

Political cartoons by Gado and Zapiro: Views and contexts

In the four political cartoons selected for interpretation in this paper, we shall be looking at the quality of clarity projected in the cartoons in attempts to connect to the beholders, bearing in mind that “cartoons provide creative latitude for cartoonists to be significantly exact and at the same time inexact” (Onwuasoanya et al. 2023, 113). The notion here is that “the description of a cartoon as an inexact depiction literally highlights the deliberate creative distortion of the images in

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the cartoon to allow for plausible pictorial resemblances of the target subjects. This creative outcome allows a beholder to achieve sufficient recognition and attribution, even though “the photo-alike and exact features of the represented subjects are artistically diminished deliberately” (Ibidem). In our interpretation, we are guided by the understanding that “art is creative thinking, in other words, it is thinking through images” (Potebnya 1990, 163). Therefore, we are aligning with the position that “the way and manner the relevant symbolic items are brought together in the process of making an art, defines an artist’s creative vision,” which will aid in finding proper attribution (Anikpe et al. 2021, 3).

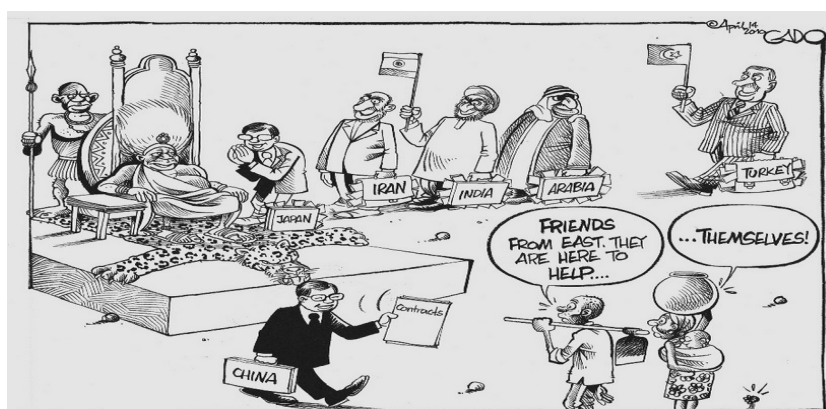


Figure 1 by Gado presents Asian leaders courting Africa Leader’s acceptance of multilateral and bilateral relations

In Figure 1, the cartoonist Gado, through his pictorial narration, presents some prominent Asian country leaders as seekers of commercial bilateral arrangements for contracts and trade deals, as they lined up to have a meeting with an African leader. The narrative indicates that China has secured heart-warming contracts, which is suggested by the demeanour of the individual who represents China in the drawing. In addition, the narrative suggests that China is gladly and proudly showing off its accomplishments, so that other countries will know it is the new preferred business partner. The cartoon indicates that other countries are not relenting; rather, they are advertising their interest and desire to get a chunk of the business deals. The queuing by the Asian major economies mirrored the pattern of their quests, thus highlighting the notion that in the narrative, some of the depicted countries have covered more ground than the others. Meanwhile, some

countries are still in the queue while China has accomplished its mission and is gladly showcasing its conquest.

Also, in the narrative, there are two individuals, a male and a female, who are apparently bystanders but are in proximity to the elites (the leaders), which in reality cannot be, because deliberations of international bilateral agreements are usually closed-door events. Gado's style of utilizing unrealism, such as placing the two peasants in proximate space with the elite leaders whose actions and behaviours directly affect their well-being, is figuratively and aesthetically interesting. The placing of the peasants in that proximity with the elites is a deep metaphor that suggests, among other things, that the actions of the African leaders and their foreign collaborators have propelled specific points of view to the masses, who lament the unending maladministration. The comments made by the two bystanders are so poignant and unequivocal in projecting the above notion. Their comments indicate that the bilateral and multilateral relations existing between these countries (placed as seekers) and the countries in the Horn of Africa have not significantly propelled major economic advancement for the masses, which the two peasants represent in the narrative. The male individual is designated as a farmer, and the woman is designated as a local housewife. Both individuals are symbolic in a number of ways. Literally, as a farmer, which we deduce because of the hoe he is bearing on his shoulder, we say he is a peasant, just as the woman who strenuously has a baby on her back while a pot rests on her head. The hoe on the man's shoulder, the pot on the woman's head, and the baby on the woman's back are symbols that designate low-level peasantry. The symbolic items situate the individuals as those (the masses) who have to go through routine drudgery to make a living and survive.

The depiction of the African leader in Figure 1 can be viewed as metaphoric and symbolic. The African leader is presented as a monarch, who subsumes the connotation designating the individual as an authoritarian leader, and is a symbolic and metaphorical representation of all African leaders that are widely classified as despots, dictators, or totalitarians. Reading the African leader depicted in Figure 1 from a literal, suggestive point-of-view, our mind goes to the possibility of uncanny resemblance, which points us towards reading the image as a caricature of a one-time maximum leader of the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Mobutu Sese Seko, born Joseph-Désiré Mobutu. Mobutu adopted an image of absolute monarchy and a

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traditional authority, typified through continuous iconic images of him sitting on an ornate, elevated throne, often adorned with a leopard skin and other items that suggest African cultural heritage. Metaphorically, we can say that the presentation is a narrative that lampoons the posturing of some African leaders as authoritarian monarchs, who claim that they are born to rule regardless of their abysmal leadership record.



Figure 2. 'Chinese Takeaway' by Zapiro (2015) presents Africa as an acquisition of China

In Figure 2, a picture narrative by Zapiro shows the caricature of the Chinese premier who gladly wheels along the African map in 3D form in his shopping cart. The African map in 3D form is tied with a rope as an item from a supermarket, with the price tag affixed to one end of the rope. The demeanour of the Chinese leader suggests that China has acquired a massive favourable deal that presents Africa as its current acquisition in economic terms. The supposition that the drawing projects indicate that, in many ways, in line with the text, China holds significant political leverage in global politics in matters that concern Africa. The tied 3D map of Africa with a rope and its placement in a cart metaphorically suggests a firm grip, and the tag attached to the rope indicates that China acquired Africa at a price. More so, the image can be read as China being in a firm grip of Africa economically, indicating that Africa's colonial 'masters' are technically edged out by China. Zapiro, through this cartoon, validates the narrative by Gado in Figure 1. The cartoon also suggests that China did not 'acquire Africa' through the barrel of a gun like the colonial masters of Africa, rather the acquisitions come from bilateral deals, which include 'loans, grants and debts' as suggested by Gado in Figure 3 below.



Figure 3, by Gado, presents African leaders soliciting loans and grants from China

Figure 3, by the cartoonist Gado, depicts African leaders as ‘prostitutes’ who are hustling for money from China. In reality, the cartoonist uses this cartoon to draw attention to the shameful manner in which some African leaders have embraced the multilateral economic relations with China. African leaders have been taking huge loans from China, and a great percentage of the loans are stolen through deceitful white-elephant projects. These projects, in most cases, do not impact positively on the masses if they are completed in the end because they are either elitist or are they become moribund just a few years after due to poor quality and gross mismanagement. Again, in Figure 3, Gado appropriates his creative vision by utilizing the ‘unrealism’ technique of bringing together into proximate space, individuals and things that are usually not found in such vicinity in real-life contexts. Hence, the cartoon places evidently poor and suffering, such as the woman having a child on her back and bearing a massive load on her head, beside the flamboyant prostitute hustling for money from a rich benefactor in China. Gado, through this cartoon, exhibits quality creative vision in the utilization of symbolism, which is loaded with metaphors and attributions. The black sedan car is new and in good condition, with the identification plate on the front bumper boldly written China, which is both metaphoric and symbolic. An attribution from the cartoon is the suggestion that China is an affluent patron of African leaders. The prostitutes’ chaotic engagement with their affluent and accommodating patron suggests that many African leaders are engaged

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in seeking loans and grants from China, as indicated by the signpost. The cartoonist applies realism in encoding the truism about prostitutions in most places which usually happens in popular streets in various metropolitan cities which is significantly indicated with the sign post with the inscription Debts, Loans & Grants St. The metaphor we appreciate through the cartoonist's representation of African leaders as women in micro-miniskirt is that African leaders approach to their multilateral economic relations with China is describable as akin to the image 'prostitutes and their patrons' engagement', in which case the prostitutes pursue their endeavour without decorum. The dressing of prostitutes, who usually are scantily dressed, exposing delicate contours for lascivious eyes, suggests a lack of shame. The African political leaders, through this cartoon, are indicative that they lack shame because their behaviours and conduct in the multilateral economic relations with China point in that direction.

Meanwhile, the background of the cartoon is creatively complicated, which in many ways is, in part, a shade of Gado's creative vision. For instance, the high-rise building in the background suggests affluence, whereas the bystanders who appear to be witnessing the shamelessness of the prostitutes are masses, among them is evidence of economic pain and impoverishment. So, the signpost suggests the prostitutes are in the loan domain, which arguably should be in China; therefore, one would ask, are the bystanders (the Africans) in China or are they in Nigeria? In addition, is the cartoonist applying his authorial licence to create a picture in a picture?

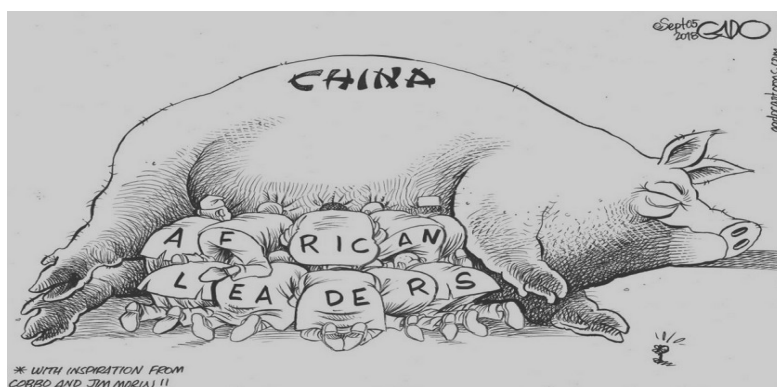


Figure 4, by Gado, presents African leaders as piglets suckling from the mother China

The cartoon tagged Figure 4 presents metaphorically a picture of a very fat pig and ten piglets, which is a caricature of China and some African leaders. The pig is depicted as a mother (China) who is breastfeeding the piglets (the children), which metaphorically connotes that the African leaders depend on China (the mother pig) for their survival. The way and manner the piglets (African leaders) are all over each other, suggests the frenzy and depth of depravity and 'survival dependency complex' they have developed towards the mother pig (China). This frame, in a number of ways, corresponds with the attributions and suppositions in Figure 3. First, in Figure 3, the prostitutes shamelessly seek 'money' from 'patrons', which projects their vulnerability and desperation. In Figure 4, the context of vulnerability and desperation is accentuated, to drive home the notion that African leaders are apparently 'helpless' as piglets, who cannot depend on themselves and be autonomous; they depend on the women's gift (her milk) for their survival. The picture relays an idea of desperation on the part of African leaders, who are all over each other, as they strive for the mother's milk (life-line). Poignantly, through Figure 4, Gado relays his authorial view that African leaders are not only independent but are fragile as 'piglets' that cannot fend for themselves. The way and manner in which the piglets (African leaders) are kneeling can be symbolic and metaphorical in many ways. To kneel suggests 'total submission' and 'weakness', whereas the entity they are kneeling for represents 'dominance' and 'greater strength'. Furthermore, kneeling connotes allegiance to a stronger entity. Another way of looking at the picture is the notion that the pig appears relaxed and healthy, which connotes the idea that China, which the pig represents, is healthy regardless of her assumed frame as a 'mother', the benefactress.

Conclusion: Perspectives on nuances of communication through political cartoons

The paper looked at the depiction-inclinations in the cartoons to appreciate how the cartoons represent an efficacious means of engaging people's attention with pertinent social realities concerning the masses' well-being and the shades of corruption in governance that regress economic development in Africa generally and the Horn of Africa in particular. The paper interpretively explored the shades of artistic techniques evident in the selected cartoons that situate the cartoons as political cartoons, which establish the nuances of the

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aesthetics of ambiguity and how these techniques aid in establishing curiosity, obscurity, subtlety, aggressiveness, authorial inclinations, and narrative extension. The paper also explored the instances of similarities and dissimilarities in their projection of thematic ideas in the selected cartoons.

The paper indicated that reliably in studies discussing communication through art media, “there are plausible explanations illustrating how the utility of art extends beyond leisure and amusement” (Anikpe et al. 2021, 1). This is because “artistic symbols in many ways, act as complimentary narrative tools that elevate and define the message from the artist, which can help to generate efficacious consciousness and mood aggregation in the beholders” (Ibidem). Affirming the above view, Chijioke Onuora et al. (2021, 2) observe that scholarly descriptions of art, are in accord that “art is an efficacious medium of communication through which artists encode ideas, emotions, information, worldviews and knowledge for viewers’ interpretation, reflection, appreciation, fulfilment and enrichment”. The notion here is that art (such as the cartoons of Gado and Zapiro which we discussed) variously possess varying propensity to propel ideas, rouse or dowse mood intensity, thus these cartoons can infuriate, please, displease, motivate, heal, reinvigorate and among other things consistently remind us of the past and the present, and sometimes propel us to think about future. Our submission is that the utilities and functions of the cartoons studied, just like other art forms, “go way beyond the presentation of an aesthetic presence alone, but include projection of strong and efficacious ambiance, which encodes emotions, multiple layers and shades of information and knowledge, didacticism, and political realities” (Onuora et al. 2021, 4). Thus, reading a cartoon as a plausible web of deep metaphors and attributions places a cartoon as a text, essentially embodying authorial trajectories propelling inevitably multiple points of view on the side of the beholders, therefore, the selected cartoons by Gado and Zapiro, “extend the thread of recognition and understanding beyond what previously was seen and known” (Elderfield 2006, 44). On the effectiveness of the studied cartoons as efficacious channels of information dissemination, we summarize by aligning our observation with the conceptualization of Francisca C. Onwuasoanya et al. (2023, 109) that “the efficacy, messages and aesthetic value in a socially-engaged art depend on several variables such as the artist’s creative vision, skill, inclination, worldview, emotional disposition, and

agenda”. We also observe that the selected cartoons we studied are socially engaged because in accord with Onwuasoanya et al. (2023, 112-113) “when art is utilized as a channel of portraying nuances of disenchantment emanating from perceived incompetence, retrogression, aberration, double standards, and injustice in human realities such as politics, international relations, and religion, it is an example of political art, protest art and a socially engaged art”.

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