



Research Article

Visualizing Colonial Power: A Qualitative Pictorial-Semiotic Analysis of Identity, Resistance, and Nation-Making in Philippine Political Caricatures, 1900–1941

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Abstract. Political caricatures offer critical visual records of how societies represent power, identity, conflict, and social change. This study examined the political and social narratives conveyed in 36 editorial cartoons from *Philippine Cartoons: Political Caricature of the American Era, 1900–1941*, edited by Alfred W. McCoy and Alfredo R. Roces. Using qualitative historical research, the study integrated pictorial-semiotic analysis, critical visual discourse analysis, and historical contextualization to interpret the cartoons' visual and textual elements, ideological positions, and historical meanings. The findings revealed six interconnected themes concerning unequal colonial modernity, paternalistic tutelage, elite-dominated democracy, religious authority, racialized national boundaries, and the emergence of Filipinos as political subjects. The cartoons depicted American colonial rule as a contradictory project that introduced modern institutions while sustaining foreign domination, economic exploitation, elite patronage, religious privilege, and unequal citizenship. Although they encouraged political criticism and contributed to Filipino national consciousness, some images also reproduced gendered, class-based, religious, and ethnic exclusions. The study concludes that political caricatures are multimodal historical texts that not only reflected colonial realities but also shaped public understandings of authority, citizenship, resistance, and nationhood. It advances an integrative framework for interpreting caricature as historical evidence, ideological discourse, and social criticism, with implications for Philippine history education, historical thinking, visual and media literacy, and citizenship formation.

Keywords: *American colonial period; Critical visual discourse; Filipino nationalism; Pictorial-semiotic analysis; Political caricature.*

Political cartoons are enduring forms of visual political discourse that document controversies, question authority, influence public opinion, and preserve competing interpretations of society. From their circulation in print newspapers and periodicals to their contemporary dissemination across digital platforms, political cartoons have functioned not merely as humorous illustrations but as ideologically charged texts. Their meanings emerge from the interaction of imagery, captions, metaphors, caricatural distortions, spatial arrangements, and culturally recognizable symbols. Consequently, political-cartoon research has become increasingly interdisciplinary, drawing from history, semiotics, communication, visual culture, political science, and critical discourse studies. This interdisciplinary development reflects a growing recognition that cartoons do not simply mirror political realities; they select, exaggerate, legitimize, ridicule, or challenge particular people, institutions, identities, and relations of power.



Recent scholarship demonstrates the value of political cartoons as multimodal sources of social and political meaning. Abdel-Raheem (2022) found that political cartoonists creatively recontextualize metaphors from news discourse, combining visual and verbal resources to express political positions and attract public attention. In the Philippine context, Nares and Montaña (2022) examined editorial cartoons concerning the 2022 Philippine elections and found that culturally recognizable signifiers—including clothing, animals, colors, gestures, and personifications—were used to construct political myths concerning candidates, foreign influence, political conflict, and power. Arañas et al. (2024) similarly analyzed editorial cartoons published in *The Philippine Artisan* and identified visual signs and symbols communicating criticism of corruption, abuse of power, government inaction, capitalism, ineffective leadership, and institutional problems. Alvero's studies demonstrate that Philippine history and General Education courses strengthen students' historical understanding, critical thinking, Filipino identity, social responsibility, and global citizenship competencies (Alvero, 2024, 2025a). Related research further shows that engaging with primary sources and reflective questions promotes heritage appreciation, historical consciousness, and active interpretation of national narratives, supporting the use of political caricatures as sources for examining power, citizenship, and collective memory (Alvero, 2026a, 2026b). More recently, Scully (2025) emphasized that political cartoons must be interpreted within their historical and historiographical contexts because they operate both as records of political attitudes and as active interventions in public discourse.

Collectively, these studies establish that political cartoons can condense complex political issues into accessible visual narratives. They also demonstrate the continuing analytical value of semiotics, metaphor analysis, and historically informed interpretation. Nevertheless, several interrelated gaps remain. First, recent Philippine studies have largely concentrated on cartoons addressing contemporary elections, political personalities, institutional concerns, and current social issues. While these studies clarify how modern editorial cartoons communicate political meanings, they provide limited insight into the historical development of Philippine political caricature under colonial rule.

Second, historical cartoons are frequently included in textbooks, historical accounts, and classroom materials as supporting illustrations. Such use may identify the personalities or events depicted without fully examining how visual and verbal elements construct particular versions of historical reality. Treating cartoons primarily as illustrations can obscure their status as produced, mediated, and ideologically situated texts. It can also overlook the editorial interests, political affiliations, intended audiences, and cultural assumptions that shaped their production and circulation.

Third, historical cartoons are often examined individually rather than as part of a bounded corpus covering an extended period. An image-by-image approach may reveal the meaning of particular cartoons, but it is less capable of tracing recurring patterns, representational changes, and ideological contradictions across time. Limited attention has therefore been given to how portrayals of colonial officials, Filipino politicians, ordinary citizens, women, religious figures, and foreign communities changed during different phases of American colonial rule.

Fourth, existing studies commonly emphasize the identification of signs, symbols, metaphors, and denotative or connotative meanings. Although such analysis is essential, identifying what a visual sign represents does not fully explain whose interests the representation serves, which groups are granted political agency, what social hierarchies are normalized, and how particular identities are included in or excluded from the imagined nation. There remains a need to integrate pictorial-semiotic analysis with critical visual discourse analysis and historical contextualization to explain both the meanings of individual signs and the broader power relations within which those signs operated.

Fifth, the contradictions embedded in anticolonial visual discourse remain insufficiently examined. A cartoon may criticize American domination, colonial governance, or Filipino elite collaboration while simultaneously reproducing gendered, racialized, religious, or class-based stereotypes. Resistance to colonial authority does not automatically make a representation inclusive or emancipatory. Examining such contradictions is necessary to understand how nationalism could oppose foreign rule while privileging particular social groups and marginalizing others. These temporal, methodological, representational, and ideological gaps establish the need for a systematic examination of colonial-era Philippine political caricature.

These gaps are especially significant in relation to *Philippine Cartoons: Political Caricature of the American Era, 1900–1941*, edited by Alfred W. McCoy and Alfredo R. Roces (1985). The collection contains cartoons drawn from periodicals such as *Lipag Kalabaw*, *The Independent*, *Philippines Free Press*, and *Bag-ong Kusog*. Collectively, these materials provide an extensive visual record of American colonial administration, Filipino political collaboration, electoral patronage, economic inequality, religious intervention, racial and gender representation, and the development of Filipino national consciousness. As a bounded corpus covering more than four decades, the collection offers an opportunity to examine not only individual political representations but also the continuities, transformations, and contradictions that characterized visual political discourse during the American colonial period.

A renewed examination of the collection is necessary because visual historical sources do not transparently reproduce the past. Political cartoons are created and circulated within specific political, institutional, editorial, and commercial environments. Cartoonists selectively frame events, exaggerate physical features, mobilize stereotypes, assign symbolic roles, and appeal to the cultural assumptions of their intended audiences. Their representations may reflect the partisan positions of cartoonists, editors, publishers, political organizations, and the periodicals through which they circulated. Therefore, the cartoons must be read not simply as records of what happened but as visual arguments about how political events, social groups, and historical changes should be understood.

This interpretive problem is particularly important when examining colonial power and national identity. Cartoons criticizing American control or Filipino elite collaboration may express nationalist resistance while simultaneously marginalizing women, religious communities, lower social classes, or foreign ethnic groups. Conversely, cartoons produced within colonial or elite-controlled publications may reinforce dominant political arrangements while unintentionally revealing social anxieties and resistance. The central concern is therefore not merely what historical events the cartoons depict, but how their visual and verbal resources construct political realities, legitimize or contest unequal power relations, and define who may speak for, participate in, and belong to the Filipino nation.

Responding to these gaps, this qualitative study examines the political and social narratives emerging from selected caricatures in *Philippine Cartoons* through pictorial-semiotic analysis, critical visual discourse analysis, and historical contextualization. It investigates how symbols, characters, captions, metaphors, exaggerations, visual contrasts, and compositional arrangements communicate political meanings. It further examines how American authorities, Filipino elites, ordinary citizens, women, religious figures, and foreign communities are represented; how colonial ideologies and unequal power relations are reproduced, negotiated, or challenged; and how Filipino identity, citizenship, nationalism, political participation, and resistance are visually constructed. By situating these representations within the changing political and social conditions of American colonial rule from 1900 to 1941, the study approaches political caricature simultaneously as visual historical evidence, colonial discourse, ideological intervention, and social criticism.

The study contributes to the literature in several ways. Historically, it recovers political attitudes, social tensions, and counter-discourses expressed through the colonial periodical press. This educational relevance also connects with Alvero's (2023) examination of teaching historical significance in relation to contemporary Filipino culture and cultural heritage preservation. Methodologically, it moves beyond the isolated interpretation of individual cartoons by applying an integrated analytical framework to a bounded historical corpus. Conceptually, it examines how cartoons could challenge colonial power while reproducing other forms of social exclusion. It also extends recent Philippine semiotic research, which has primarily examined contemporary editorial cartoons, by investigating how political meanings and social representations developed across several decades of colonial rule. Within visual and media studies, the study demonstrates how caricature participated in constructing colonial subjects, political identities, social hierarchies, and competing understandings of the Filipino nation.

The study also has educational significance. The Recommendation on Education for Peace, Human Rights and Sustainable Development adopted by UNESCO's member states emphasizes critical thinking, media and information literacy, human rights, global citizenship, cultural diversity, and the capacity of learners to respond responsibly to contemporary social challenges (UNESCO, 2023). Examining historical cartoons can support these objectives by teaching learners to interrogate the authorship, audience, symbolism, historical context, ideological

assumptions, and representational silences of visual sources. Alvero (2025b) identified limitations in students' ability to synthesize multiple perspectives and recognize complex global interdependencies, providing a rationale for learning activities that require comparison and contextual interpretation of historical representations. Such engagement can strengthen historical thinking, critical visual literacy, and responsible interpretation of both historical and contemporary media. Alvero (2026c) found significant positive relationships among historical thinking, AI and digital historical literacy, civic agency, and democratic citizenship, providing complementary evidence for connecting historical literacy with civic education.

In this respect, the study supports Sustainable Development Goal 4, particularly Target 4.7, which promotes education for sustainable development, human rights, gender equality, peace, global citizenship, and cultural diversity. It also relates to Sustainable Development Goal 16 through its emphasis on informed participation, inclusive societies, accountable institutions, and public access to information. By examining how historical images shaped understandings of authority, citizenship, and national belonging, the study demonstrates how critical engagement with visual history can contribute to more reflective, inclusive, and democratically informed citizenship.

Methodology

Research Design

This study employed a qualitative historical research design integrating pictorial-semiotic analysis, critical visual discourse analysis, and historical contextualization. This design was appropriate because the study sought to interpret political cartoons as visual-historical texts produced and circulated within the political, social, and cultural conditions of the American colonial period in the Philippines. Rather than measuring the frequency of visual elements, the study examined how characters, captions, labels, symbols, metaphors, exaggerations, stereotypes, and compositional arrangements constructed meanings concerning colonial authority, political leadership, Filipino identity, citizenship, nationalism, political participation, and resistance. Each cartoon was treated as a multimodal political text rather than as a transparent depiction of a historical event. Accordingly, the analysis considered not only what appeared in the image but also how individuals and groups were positioned, which perspectives were privileged, what ideological assumptions were normalized, and how visual and verbal elements reproduced or challenged unequal relations of power.

Research Corpus and Unit of Analysis

The research corpus was drawn from the 121-page digital selection of *Philippine Cartoons: Political Caricature of the American Era, 1900–1941*, edited by Alfred W. McCoy and Alfredo R. Roces and published by Vera-Reyes, Inc. in 1985. The compilation contains political cartoons originally published in periodicals such as *Lipag Kalabaw*, *The Independent*, *Philippines Free Press*, and *Bag-ong Kusog*. It also includes captions, translations, publication details, identification notes, and historical explanations provided by the editors. The individual political cartoon constituted the primary unit of analysis. When several panels formed a continuous narrative or political commentary, they were analyzed as a single unit. When independent cartoons appeared on the same page, each was treated as a separate unit. Editorial introductions, captions, translations, and historical notes supplied by McCoy and Roces were treated as secondary contextual materials. They assisted in identifying historical personalities, events, institutions, and controversies but did not replace the researcher's independent interpretation of the visual evidence.

Sampling and Selection of Cartoons

Criterion-based purposive sampling combined with maximum-variation sampling was used to select 36 cartoons from the digital corpus. Criterion-based sampling ensured that each selected cartoon was relevant to the research questions, while maximum variation allowed the corpus to reflect differences in publication source, historical period, political subject, represented social actors, and ideological position. The selection process proceeded in four stages. First, the 121-page digital copy was reviewed page by page to identify and inventory all potentially eligible cartoons. Introductory essays, editorial notes, translations, and other non-cartoon materials were separated from the visual corpus. Second, the identified cartoons were screened using the established inclusion and exclusion criteria. Third, the eligible cartoons were classified according to their historical period, publication source, political issue, represented actors, and dominant visual features. Finally, 36 cartoons were selected to provide sufficient thematic, historical, and representational variation while maintaining a corpus appropriate for intensive qualitative analysis.

Cartoons were included when they appeared in the specified digital selection; contained sufficiently legible images, captions, labels, or other essential elements; and had publication details or historical contexts that could be reasonably established through the collection or corroborating historical sources. They also had to address at least one concern relevant to the research questions, including colonial governance, Philippine-American relations, political leadership, electoral practices, patronage, economic inequality, land and labor, religious authority, ethnicity, gender, citizenship, nationalism, nationhood, or resistance. In addition, each selected cartoon had to contain sufficient visual or verbal material to support denotative, semiotic, ideological, and historical analysis and contribute thematic, chronological, representational, or source-based variation to the corpus.

Cartoons were excluded when their images or essential textual elements were incomplete, severely blurred, cropped, or otherwise illegible; their historical referents could not be established with reasonable confidence; or they substantially duplicated the subject, imagery, and interpretation of another selected cartoon without contributing a distinct perspective. Cartoons whose relevance to the research questions was marginal or whose interpretation depended primarily on unsupported speculation were also excluded. Maximum variation was achieved by selecting cartoons representing different dimensions of colonial society, including urban corruption, provincial administration, American colonial governance, Philippine-American relations, electoral politics, Filipino political elites, religious intervention, labor and economic inequality, foreign communities, gender representation, popular participation, nationalism, and resistance. Cartoons expressing contrasting positions, such as resistance and collaboration, criticism and accommodation, or antagonistic and paternal representations of colonial power, were deliberately included.

The sample was not intended to statistically represent all cartoons published from 1900 to 1941. Instead, its size was determined by analytical relevance, variation, and interpretive sufficiency. Interpretive sufficiency was considered attained when the later stages of selection and analysis continued to reinforce established categories without producing substantially new representations, ideological positions, or thematic insights relevant to the research questions.

Analytical Framework

The analysis integrated visual semiotics, visual grammar, critical visual discourse analysis, and historical contextualization. Barthes' semiotic concepts guided the examination of denotation, connotation, and ideological myth. Denotation referred to the directly observable contents of a cartoon, including its characters, objects, actions, captions, labels, gestures, and setting. Connotation referred to the cultural, emotional, historical, and political meanings associated with these elements. Ideological myth referred to broader assumptions presented as natural, legitimate, or self-evident, such as American political maturity, Filipino incapacity for self-government, elite entitlement, religious authority, or gendered conceptions of citizenship.

Kress and van Leeuwen's visual grammar guided the examination of salience, size, placement, framing, gaze, angle, distance, contrast, directionality, and relationships between written and pictorial elements. Critical visual discourse analysis was employed to examine how visual representations distributed agency, legitimacy, visibility, and power. It focused on whose perspectives were privileged, who was represented as acting or being acted upon, which groups were marginalized or stereotyped, and how colonial, political, racial, religious, class-based, and gendered relations were reproduced or challenged. Historical contextualization connected these visual and ideological meanings to the events, institutions, political actors, public controversies, and publication environments of the American colonial period. It also guarded against interpreting historical images solely through contemporary political categories.

Research Instrument

Data were organized using a researcher-developed Pictorial-Semiotic Analysis Guide. The guide recorded each cartoon's identification code, page, date, original publication, relevant historical event or controversy, visible characters and objects, actions, gestures, labels, captions, symbols, metaphors, stereotypes, exaggerations, personifications, and compositional features. It also covered denotative and connotative meanings, representations of different social actors, the distribution of agency and authority, apparent ideological positions, initial codes, analytical categories, emerging themes, supporting evidence, alternative interpretations, and reflexive observations. Using the same guide for all 36 cartoons ensured that the corpus was examined

systematically and consistently.

Before the formal analysis, experts in relevant fields reviewed the guide to assess its clarity, relevance, theoretical alignment, and historical appropriateness. It was subsequently pilot-tested using cartoons that were not included in the final analytical corpus. The pilot analysis helped clarify the distinction between visual description and interpretation, reduce overlapping analytical prompts, and strengthen the recording of historical context, ideological assumptions, and alternative readings.

Data Collection Procedure

The digital compilation was first examined page by page, and a sampling inventory was prepared for every potentially eligible cartoon. The inventory recorded the page number, available date, source publication, political subject, represented social actors, major visual elements, caption or label, and image quality. The inclusion and exclusion criteria were then applied to the inventory. Cartoons that met the criteria were grouped according to their historical period, publication source, political issue, represented actors, and preliminary subject matter. Maximum-variation considerations were subsequently applied to construct the final corpus of 36 cartoons.

Each selected cartoon was assigned a unique identification code to maintain a clear link among the original image, analysis sheet, initial codes, analytical categories, and final themes. The researcher initially conducted an independent denotative reading without consulting the editors' explanatory discussion. At this stage, only directly observable features—including people, clothing, bodily characteristics, objects, actions, gestures, written labels, captions, spatial positions, and compositional relationships—were recorded. After completing the initial description, the researcher examined the accompanying captions, translations, identification notes, and historical explanations. Relevant historical sources were then consulted to identify personalities, policies, institutions, events, and controversies. This sequence reduced the possibility that the editors' interpretation would predetermine the initial visual reading. Historical evidence was used to confirm, refine, qualify, or reject the preliminary interpretations.

Data Analysis and Interpretation

Data analysis proceeded iteratively through six interrelated phases. The first phase involved denotative description, during which each cartoon was described according to its directly observable visual and verbal content without immediately assigning ideological meanings. This procedure established an evidentiary record of what was visibly present before interpretive conclusions were drawn. The second phase involved pictorial-semiotic interpretation. The researcher examined the connotations attached to characters, clothing, bodily exaggerations, gestures, animals, objects, settings, labels, captions, and visual metaphors. Culturally and historically grounded meanings were prioritized, and symbolic interpretations unsupported by evidence were avoided.

The third phase examined each cartoon's compositional organization, including salience, size, framing, gaze, angle, distance, contrast, directionality, and spatial positioning. This phase determined how the composition directed the viewer's attention, established visual hierarchies, created alliances or oppositions, and positioned viewers in relation to the represented actors. The fourth phase involved critical ideological analysis. Each cartoon was examined for its construction of power, agency, legitimacy, identity, and exclusion. The analysis considered how the image reproduced, negotiated, or challenged colonial tutelage, political patronage, elite privilege, economic exploitation, religious authority, racial hierarchy, gendered citizenship, nationalism, and popular resistance. The analysis examined whose voices and actions were granted legitimacy, whose were mocked or suppressed, and which social arrangements were portrayed as natural or open to challenge.

The fifth phase consisted of historical contextualization. Preliminary interpretations were compared with the available publication details, editorial explanations, contemporary events, political institutions, and relevant historical scholarship. An interpretation was retained only when supported by a defensible combination of visual, textual, and historical evidence. When historical evidence did not support the initial reading, the interpretation was revised, qualified, or excluded. The sixth phase involved cross-case comparison and thematic synthesis. Codes from individual cartoons were compared across the corpus, after which related codes were clustered into broader analytical categories. These categories were developed into themes when they addressed the research questions, expressed a coherent central idea, were supported by several cartoons or a particularly information-

rich historical case, were grounded in identifiable evidence, and remained conceptually distinct from the other themes.

Recurring figures—including Uncle Sam, Filipinas, Juan de la Cruz, Filipino political elites, friars, women, workers, and foreign communities—were compared across different cartoons and historical periods. Contradictory and deviant cases were deliberately retained through negative-case analysis. For example, antagonistic portrayals of Uncle Sam were compared with paternal, cooperative, or ambivalent representations to avoid reducing Philippine-American relations to a single narrative. Themes were consequently refined to account for recurring patterns, historical changes, tensions, and ideological contradictions across the corpus.

Trustworthiness and Reflexivity

The credibility and consistency of the findings were established through historical and documentary triangulation, systematic use of the analysis guide, repeated viewing, code-recode examination, peer examination, negative-case analysis, consideration of alternative readings, thick description, and maintenance of an audit trail. Interpretations were compared with captions, publication information, editorial notes, historical events, and relevant historical scholarship. No major interpretation was based solely on an assumed symbolic meaning. The same Pictorial-Semiotic Analysis Guide and analytical sequence were applied to all 36 cartoons to promote procedural consistency.

The cartoons were examined repeatedly at different stages of the study. Preliminary codes and interpretations were revisited and compared with the original visual evidence. Inconsistencies were documented and resolved by re-examining the image and its historical context. A qualified peer or expert familiar with Philippine history, qualitative research, visual analysis, semiotics, or political discourse also examined selected analysis sheets and interpretations. Differences in interpretation were addressed by returning to the visual, textual, and historical evidence rather than relying solely on agreement.

Cartoons that contradicted emerging interpretations were retained and used to qualify overly broad claims and refine the thematic findings. Plausible alternative interpretations were documented in the analysis guide, and the final reading was selected based on its explanatory strength and evidentiary support. An audit trail was maintained containing the sampling inventory, inclusion and exclusion decisions, completed analysis guides, preliminary descriptions, codes, category development, theme revisions, contextual sources, peer comments, and final interpretive decisions. Thick descriptions of the cartoons, their compositional features, historical circumstances, and ideological implications were also used to allow readers to assess the plausibility and potential transferability of the findings.

Reflexive memoranda were maintained throughout the analysis to document the researcher's assumptions, emotional responses, uncertainties, initial interpretations, and changes in understanding. Particular attention was given to avoiding presentism or the uncritical application of contemporary political concepts to colonial-era materials. The researcher also recognized that the cartoons did not represent a unified Filipino perspective but reflected the political orientations, editorial priorities, commercial interests, and intended audiences of particular cartoonists, editors, publishers, and periodicals. The findings were therefore presented as historically situated and evidence-supported interpretations rather than definitive statements of authorial intention.

Ethical Considerations

The study used publicly available documentary and visual materials and did not recruit human participants or collect personal information. Nevertheless, the study maintained responsible attribution, historical sensitivity, and copyright observance. The cartoons were analyzed as historical representations and were not accepted as factual descriptions of the individuals or communities they portrayed. Racial, religious, gendered, ethnic, and class-based stereotypes were discussed critically without reproducing them as legitimate characterizations. The original publication, date, cartoonist, and immediate documentary source were acknowledged whenever available. McCoy and Roces were identified as the editors and historical commentators of the collection rather than as the creators of all the cartoons. Only images necessary to substantiate the findings should be reproduced in the final publication, subject to applicable copyright, public-domain, publisher, and journal requirements.

Methodological Limitations

The study was limited to the cartoons available in the 121-page digital selection and did not represent the complete contents of the original 1985 volume or the full population of cartoons published during the American colonial period. The corpus was also influenced by the original editors' decisions regarding which publications, cartoonists, regions, personalities, and controversies to preserve. The study therefore analyzed a mediated historical collection rather than an exhaustive archive of Philippine colonial-era cartoons.

Some cartoons contained Spanish, Tagalog, Cebuano, or English captions whose humor, idiomatic meanings, and cultural nuances may not have been completely preserved in translation. Moreover, political cartoons are partisan and rhetorical sources that use distortion, exaggeration, symbolism, and stereotyping. They cannot independently establish the factual accuracy of the accusations or events they depict. Their principal evidentiary value lies in revealing how political personalities, institutions, communities, and controversies were represented within particular forms of public discourse. Finally, pictorial-semiotic and critical visual interpretation inevitably involved researcher judgment. This limitation was addressed through explicit selection criteria, a standardized analysis guide, historical triangulation, repeated examination, code-recode procedures, peer examination, negative-case analysis, consideration of alternative readings, reflexive documentation, and maintenance of an audit trail.

Results and Discussion

A qualitative pictorial-semiotic analysis was conducted on 36 purposively selected editorial cartoons reproduced in *Philippine Cartoons: Political Caricature of the American Era, 1900–1941*. The cartoons were selected to represent the major sections available in the uploaded volume, including the distant provinces, the colonial condition, Philippine-American relations, foreign communities, political contests, and the emergence of the Filipino nation. The analysis generated six interconnected themes:

Table 1. *Themes generated*

Theme	Central interpretation
1. Colonial modernity as unequal development	Modernization frequently benefited colonial and commercial interests while imposing costs on Filipinos.
2. Tutelage, paternalism, and negotiated colonial dependence	American rule was represented as a relationship that combined domination, instruction, patronage, and Filipino negotiation.
3. Elite democracy as political spectacle	Electoral politics was portrayed as theatrical, personality-driven, factional, and vulnerable to patronage.
4. Religious authority as colonial power	Anti-friar cartoons represented religious institutions as economic and political actors rather than purely spiritual authorities.
5. Racialized boundaries of the imagined nation	Foreign communities were constructed as economic and cultural threats, revealing exclusionary dimensions of nationalism.
6. From colonial subject to political nation	Juan de la Cruz, Filipinas, workers, peasants, and women embodied the gradual assertion of national and civic agency.

Theme 1: Colonial Modernity as Unequal Development

Colonial modernity emerged from the cartoons as a contradictory project in which infrastructure, bureaucratic regulation, private property, public health, and commercial expansion signified advancement, while their benefits and burdens remained unevenly distributed. In the cartoon depicting Juan de la Cruz being dragged by the Manila Electric Railroad and Light Company as pesos are extracted from his emaciated body, electrification and urban transportation are visually transformed from emblems of progress into instruments of monopoly and economic exploitation (McCoy & Roces, 1985). Juan de la Cruz's weakened body represents the burden imposed on ordinary Filipinos, while the tramway and extracted pesos signify how infrastructural modernization could facilitate accumulation without ensuring equitable access to its benefits. This interpretation is supported by Pandey et al. (2025), who found long-term positive associations among urbanization, economic development, and infrastructure inequality. Their findings demonstrate that infrastructure expansion does not inherently produce distributive development. Crabb et al. (2024) similarly showed that infrastructure promoted as national development can create opportunities for capital accumulation while displacing burdens onto local and Indigenous communities. The cartoon thus exposes a development narrative in which visible modernization conceals the unequal allocation of its costs and benefits.

A similar contradiction appears in *A New Wrinkle in the Art of Thieving*, which contrasts the peasants who cultivate the land with the documentary authority of the Torrens title (McCoy & Roces, 1985). The juxtaposition separates productive labor from legally recognized ownership: those who physically work the land are rendered

vulnerable, while those who possess state-sanctioned documents acquire legitimate control. The finding suggests that colonial bureaucracy did not simply regulate property but also transformed documentary recognition into a source of political and economic power. This interpretation resonates with Crabb et al. (2024), whose analysis of New Clark City demonstrates how development projects can reproduce center-periphery relations, facilitate the transfer of land and resources to powerful actors, and marginalize customary and livelihood-based claims. Read together, the land title, cultivated field, and laboring peasant reveal how formal institutions may present dispossession as lawful modernization. The cartoon therefore critiques a form of development in which administrative legality obscures the unequal power to define ownership and control resources.

The representation of the indifferent physician in *The Doctor Is Busy* extends the critique of unequal development from infrastructure and property to social services. The physician's professional authority and institutional position symbolize modernization in medicine, but his indifference reveals the emptiness of institutional advancement when poor citizens remain unable to obtain care (McCoy & Roces, 1985). The finding indicates that the presence of trained professionals and formal institutions does not necessarily guarantee accessible or responsive public service. This historical representation remains relevant to Leyso and Umezaki's (2024) nationwide spatial analysis, which identified disparities in access to inpatient and outpatient healthcare facilities in the Philippines, particularly in the country's central and southern regions. They further found that rural municipalities generally experienced poorer spatial accessibility than urban municipalities. The cartoon and contemporary evidence consequently point to the same structural problem: institutional availability cannot be equated automatically with equitable access.

Across these cartoons, the peso, tramway, corporate label, land title, cultivated field, physician, and impoverished body function as interconnected semiotic signs of a development mythology that equates institutional and physical expansion with collective progress. Their arrangement makes inequality visually intelligible by translating abstract structures—monopoly, dispossession, exclusion, and institutional neglect—into recognizable bodies, objects, and social relationships. This interpretive function is consistent with Nares and Montaña's (2022) finding that Philippine editorial cartoons use culturally recognizable signifiers to deconstruct political myths concerning power, elite rivalry, foreign influence, and deceptive political promises. Arañas et al. (2024) likewise found that Philippine editorial cartoons communicate criticism of corruption, abuse of power, capitalist disorder, government inaction, and ineffective leadership through visual signs and symbols. These studies support the finding that caricature does more than document hardship; it exposes the institutional arrangements producing it and challenges dominant narratives that present modernization as universally beneficial.

The findings imply that development should be evaluated not solely through completed infrastructure, commercial growth, administrative regulation, technological modernization, or the presence of public institutions. It must also be assessed in terms of distributive justice, or who receives its benefits and bears its costs; procedural justice, or who participates in decisions; and recognition justice, or whose labor, identity, and claims are acknowledged. In historical and citizenship education, these cartoons may be used as critical primary sources through which learners examine the interests and exclusions concealed beneath narratives of progress. For contemporary policy, the findings underscore the importance of participatory infrastructure planning, protection of customary and livelihood-based land claims, regulation of monopolistic services, equitable geographical allocation of healthcare resources, and accountability mechanisms that prevent modernization from reproducing patterns of extraction and exclusion.

Theme 2: Tutelage, Paternalism, and Negotiated Colonial Dependence

The changing portrayals of Uncle Sam, Filipinas, and Juan de la Cruz construct Philippine-American relations as an unequal but evolving relationship characterized by coercion, guardianship, bargaining, accommodation, and resistance (McCoy & Roces, 1985). In the earlier cartoons, Uncle Sam's grotesque face, enlarged body, and elevated position signify the political and material superiority of the colonial power, while the smaller and fragmented Filipino figures convey restricted agency. These representational contrasts do more than distinguish the colonizer from the colonized; they naturalize a hierarchy in which the United States appears capable of directing, disciplining, or protecting Filipinos. Scully (2025) explains that political cartoons must be interpreted within their historical and ideological contexts because caricatural exaggeration and personification function as political arguments that shape public understandings of authority, character, and power. Viewed through this perspective, Uncle Sam's exaggerated body visually converts geopolitical dominance into an immediately recognizable

relationship of unequal authority.

The courtship of Filipinas translates colonial control into a gendered metaphor. Filipinas personifies the colonized territory as a woman whose apparent consent is pursued within a relationship already structured by unequal power. Courtship softens the appearance of conquest by presenting colonial control as attraction, persuasion, or voluntary association, yet the imbalance between the figures complicates any interpretation of consent as freely given. The image therefore illustrates how paternalistic rule could be represented as benevolent partnership while concealing the conditions under which the relationship was negotiated. Its gendered structure also situates masculine colonial authority as active, protective, and commanding, while the feminized nation is positioned as desirable but politically dependent.

The representation of Juan de la Cruz as a youth being instructed, restrained, or protected similarly transforms colonial hierarchy into a generational relationship. Juan's youthfulness signifies a nation considered politically immature and therefore presumed to require American guidance before becoming capable of self-government. McConnell et al. (2024) conceptualize tutelage as a relational practice in which guardianship and instruction are held in tension: the tutor claims to prepare the learner for eventual autonomy while retaining the authority to define competence, readiness, and acceptable political behavior. Applied to the cartoons, this framework reveals that instruction was not politically neutral. It positioned the colonial authority as the evaluator of Filipino maturity and made independence conditional upon standards established by the colonizer.

Juan's gradual transition from a dependent youth into a questioning or negotiating citizen, however, indicates that tutelage did not eliminate Filipino agency. His changing posture and interaction with Uncle Sam suggest increasing political awareness, resistance, and capacity for bargaining. This development should not be interpreted as either complete submission or immediate emancipation. Rather, it signifies the formation of agency within a political structure whose boundaries remained unequal. Filipino political actors could question decisions, demand concessions, and demonstrate competence, yet their opportunities for action were still shaped by institutions and standards established under colonial authority. The visual progression therefore exposes the central contradiction of colonial tutelage: it claimed to prepare Filipinos for autonomy while preserving the colonial power's right to determine when and how that autonomy could be exercised.

The later cartoons' more favorable portrayals of Uncle Sam, particularly during periods of international conflict and heightened security concerns, show that colonial consciousness was not static. Cooperation became more acceptable when American protection appeared strategically useful, indicating that representations of the colonial power changed in response to external threats, political concessions, and Filipino interests. De Castro (2022) found that the durability of the Philippine-U.S. alliance resulted from the continuous reinterpretation of the 1951 Mutual Defense Treaty and the adjustments made by both countries to sustain its relevance under changing security conditions. This contemporary pattern clarifies the cartoons' movement from hostility toward qualified cooperation: dependence could be renegotiated when security guarantees and strategic resources became politically valuable, even though the relationship remained asymmetrical.

The cartoons consequently construct Filipino actors neither as completely passive colonial subjects nor as fully autonomous participants. Their agency appears through bargaining, selective cooperation, resistance, and the strategic use of the stronger power's protection and resources. This pattern represents negotiated colonial dependence, in which a weaker actor acquires recognition, security, concessions, or political space while operating within an unequal relationship. Quilop (2024) similarly demonstrates that apparent shifts in Philippine alignment between the United States and China are shaped by continuing national priorities involving territorial integrity and sovereignty, economic development, and the protection of overseas Filipinos. This continuity suggests that cooperation with a more powerful state does not necessarily indicate the absence of agency; it may reflect an attempt to pursue national interests under conditions of constrained choice.

Taken together, the changing representations of Uncle Sam, Filipinas, and Juan de la Cruz reveal that paternalism and agency could coexist within colonial discourse. Guardianship justified American authority, while Filipino figures increasingly negotiated the meaning and limits of that authority. The cartoons thus complicate interpretations of Philippine-American relations as either a purely benevolent partnership or an uninterrupted history of passive subordination. Instead, they expose a relationship in which protection could reinforce

dependence, instruction could regulate autonomy, and cooperation could simultaneously expand Filipino political space and preserve unequal power.

For historical and citizenship education, the findings imply that Philippine-American relations should be taught through the tensions among paternalism, coercion, negotiation, security, and Filipino agency. Learners should be encouraged to examine how gendered and generational metaphors make unequal authority appear natural, benevolent, or necessary. In foreign-policy education, the findings underscore the importance of sovereign decision-making, critical evaluation of security guarantees, and recognition of Filipino actors as strategic agents rather than permanent recipients of foreign guardianship. Future research may compare colonial portrayals of Uncle Sam and Juan de la Cruz with contemporary editorial cartoons concerning the Mutual Defense Treaty, the Enhanced Defense Cooperation Agreement, and the South China Sea to determine whether tutelary imagery continues to influence public understandings of Philippine sovereignty, security, and alliance politics.

Theme 3: Elite Democracy as Political Spectacle

The third theme represents electoral democracy as a public spectacle in which formal political participation coexists with elite domination. In “Political Pageant,” politicians are depicted climbing, fighting, pleading, and riding upon one another, transforming electoral competition into a theatrical performance motivated by personal advancement rather than public service. Similarly, the exaggerated elevation of Sergio Osmeña after Governor-General William Howard Taft identified him as the Philippines’ “second personage” satirizes elite self-importance and suggests that the prestige of Filipino politicians remained partly dependent on recognition from American colonial authorities. The cartoons’ theatrical, sporting, animal, and spatial metaphors—including fighting cocks, crabs, beasts of burden, and elevated political figures—translate abstract relations of rivalry, obstruction, subordination, and colonial approval into immediately recognizable visual forms (McCoy & Roces, 1985, p. 256). Broader political-communication research confirms that metaphor functions as a framing device that can influence political interpretation and increase audience engagement by connecting political issues with familiar experiences and culturally recognizable associations (Prabhakaran et al., 2021). In these cartoons, metaphor therefore does more than create humor: it presents politics as a staged struggle in which public visibility and proximity to power take precedence over ideological commitment.

The portrayal of Nacionalistas, Progresistas, Terceristas, and Democratas as unstable and competing alliances further indicates that political parties often operated as vehicles for individual leaders and their networks rather than as durable ideological organizations. This finding is immediately evident in images of politicians changing positions, obstructing rivals, or attaching themselves to more powerful figures. Such representations expose the dependence of party competition on personal loyalty, brokerage, access to state resources, and local political machinery. Teehankee and Calimbahin’s (2022) collection of empirical studies on Philippine local elections similarly demonstrates that patronage democracy is sustained through political clans, brokers, clientelist exchanges, incumbency advantages, and access to governmental resources. Read in this context, the cartoons suggest that the institutional appearance of party competition concealed a political system in which affiliations could be reorganized according to personal advantage. Their criticism is therefore directed not simply at individual politicians but at an electoral structure that permitted public institutions and party organizations to be used as instruments of elite competition.

“Political Begging” complicates this representation by temporarily reversing the conventional relationship between politicians and citizens. Candidates appear as supplicants who depend on the voters’ electoral support, suggesting that elections create moments in which ordinary citizens possess bargaining power. However, the cartoon also implies that this dependence may end once votes have been obtained, exposing the transactional character of campaign promises and electoral appeals. This tension remains visible in contemporary Philippine elections. Baquisal and Arugay (2023) describe the 2022 election as a “dance” of political dynasties characterized by coalition-building, inherited political reputations, strategic alliances, and the return of established families. Their analysis supports the interpretation of elections as carefully organized performances through which elites compete for legitimacy while preserving dynastic influence. “Political Begging” should therefore be read as an ambivalent representation: it recognizes the voter’s capacity to authorize political leadership while questioning whether that temporary authority produces sustained accountability after an election.

The cartoons involving the Philippine National Bank extend this criticism from electoral behavior to institutional

control. By positioning Quezon, Osmeña, and competing political interests around a nominally public financial institution, the cartoons associate Filipinization with the possibility of patronage, questionable lending, and elite capture rather than with automatic democratization. This finding demonstrates that replacing American officials with Filipino leaders did not necessarily transform the unequal distribution of institutional power. Taken together, the cartoons construct what this study terms spectacularized elite democracy: a political arrangement in which elections provide highly visible performances of competition, participation, and legitimacy while political and economic authority remains concentrated among interconnected elites. As counter-archives of democratic experience, these caricatures preserve evidence of public suspicion toward personality politics, weak party institutionalization, patronage, and elite control. Their contemporary implication is that democratic quality should be evaluated not merely by the regular conduct of elections but by the strength of political parties, transparency in campaign finance and public lending, accountability after elections, regulation of conflicts of interest, and meaningful citizen participation between electoral cycles.

Theme 4: Religious Authority as Colonial and Political Power

The fourth theme represents the Spanish religious orders as economic, political, and ideological actors whose authority extended beyond spiritual affairs. Corpulent bodies, grotesque expressions, predatory gestures, and contrasts between powerful friars and thin or deferential Filipinos transform bodily appearance into an argument about institutional privilege. In the cartoon concerning the jeweled crowns offered to the Virgin Mary, sacred authority is redirected against ecclesiastical accumulation: the Virgin instructs the devotees to sell the valuables and assist the poor, while the friars' defensive reaction suggests their material dependence on religious offerings. "Voyage to Heaven" similarly converts treasure, religious procession, and salvation into metaphors for the commercialization of faith. In "Evading Their Taxes," ordinary Filipinos move toward the fulfillment of civic obligations while the friars flee from the internal revenue office. Taken together, these visual contrasts portray ecclesiastical wealth and tax exemption not merely as economic advantages but as manifestations of unequal citizenship and institutional immunity (McCoy & Roces, 1985, pp. 111, 229, 231). The cartoons therefore distinguish personal religious devotion from the institutional use of sacred authority to protect property, revenue, and political influence.

The cartoons must nevertheless be interpreted within the contested transition from Spanish religious patronage to American colonial church-state separation. Although the new colonial government formally promoted secular administration, disputes concerning friar lands, ecclesiastical property, clerical influence, and the political position of religious institutions did not disappear immediately. The anti-friar images consequently express nationalist suspicion toward inherited forms of ecclesiastical power rather than demonstrating the complete withdrawal of religion from public life. Contemporary evidence likewise shows that religious institutions may operate as political actors while simultaneously exercising moral or protective roles. Brooke et al. (2023), for example, found that Catholic parishes and clergy could provide protection against violence during the Philippine drug war through documentation, sanctuary, public criticism, and institutional advocacy. This evidence complicates any interpretation of religious authority as inherently oppressive. The historical cartoons should therefore be read as critiques of unaccountable institutional privilege, not as a rejection of religious belief or of every form of religious participation in public affairs.

The electoral cartoon depicting a friar carrying money and a newspaper while calling an elector before he votes extends the criticism from economic privilege to political intervention. The elector's refusal, accompanied by his demand that the friar first pay his taxes, reverses the expected hierarchy between clerical authority and the citizen. This reversal constructs voting as an assertion of civic independence against religious pressure, material inducement, and institutional exemption. The concern represented in the cartoon remains empirically relevant. Using evidence from Iglesia ni Cristo's "vote as one" practice, Ravanilla (2025) found that religious endorsements can substantially influence vote choice, demonstrating how organizational discipline and religious authority may be converted into electoral power. The cartoon thus does more than accuse an individual friar of interference; it raises a broader democratic question concerning whether citizens make political choices independently or under the direction of institutions that possess spiritual, organizational, and material authority.

Fernando Amorsolo's "Long Live Spain Free of Religious Corporations" and "A Duel to the Death" intensify this critique through devils, masks, weapons, fighting cocks, skulls, and blood. These symbols associate religious corporations with colonial violence, electoral manipulation, and efforts to restrict nationalist journalism. However,

their grotesque and accusatory imagery should not be treated as independent proof that every allegation against the friars or Jesuits was historically factual. Rather, the cartoons document how nationalist periodicals represented religious corporations and mobilized public suspicion against them. The continuing political participation of Philippine religious movements supports the relevance of this distinction. Ma (2025) demonstrates that new religious movements in the Philippines have developed political roles through electoral endorsement, leadership networks, social mobilization, and engagement with state actors. Religious participation, therefore, may support civic advocacy or create concentrated political influence, depending on its form and context. This theme advances the concept of contested sacred authority: nationalist cartoonists appropriated Christian personalities, symbols, and moral teachings to separate personal faith from institutional privilege and to imagine sovereignty as requiring equal taxation, electoral independence, freedom of expression, institutional accountability, and protection against coercive religious intervention. Methodologically, these caricatures are most defensible as evidence of nationalist discourse, public suspicion, and struggles over secular authority—not as self-sufficient verification of clerical wrongdoing.

Theme 5: Racialized Boundaries of the Imagined Nation

The fifth theme reveals an exclusionary dimension of colonial-era nationalism: the imagined Filipino community was sometimes consolidated by representing foreign populations as racialized threats. In “The Aliens in Our Midst,” Spanish friars appear as remnants of an earlier colonial regime, while Chinese merchants are associated with commercial domination, bribery, food speculation, gambling, and opium. Physical features, clothing, speech patterns, occupational labels, and personal names identify ethnicity, but their repetition also reduces socially diverse Chinese residents to a seemingly uniform moral and economic category (McCoy & Roces, 1985). The cartoon consequently transforms selected individuals and activities into supposed characteristics of an entire population. Its visual strategy constructs Filipino national identity relationally: the virtuous and threatened Filipino “self” becomes intelligible through opposition to a racialized foreign “other.”

The repeated association of Chinese identity with commerce, acquisitiveness, and economic domination illustrates how economic functions can be transformed into racial characteristics. Ince (2024) describes this process as capitalist racialization, in which colonial categories of labor, value, productivity, and commerce shape racial hierarchies. His analysis shows how Chinese migrants in colonial Southeast Asia were represented simultaneously as economically industrious and useful and as threatening competitors capable of dominating land, labor, and trade. This framework clarifies the cartoons’ treatment of the Chinese merchant: commercial activity is presented not as the behavior of particular individuals operating within colonial market structures but as evidence of an allegedly inherent racial disposition. The resulting stereotype conceals differences in occupation, class, birthplace, citizenship, political loyalty, and length of residence among Chinese and Chinese-Filipino communities.

During food shortages and periods of economic instability, the racialized merchant became a convenient visual explanation for rising prices, market concentration, unemployment, resource scarcity, and administrative failure. This personalization redirected attention from colonial regulation, unequal distribution, weak public administration, and the conduct of particular businesses toward an identifiable ethnic population. Historical evidence confirms that such exclusion intensified as Filipino nationalism became connected with perceptions of Chinese economic competition. Lowrie (2023) found that overt racial discrimination against Chinese communities emerged in interwar Baguio despite the city’s earlier promotion as a place open to different nationalities. Her analysis demonstrates how nationalist claims, economic rivalry, and colonial categories of race and class could combine to restrict Chinese belonging. The cartoons therefore did not merely reflect existing prejudice; they participated in a broader discursive environment in which economic anxiety could be converted into racial suspicion.

These findings also demonstrate how colonial racial classifications could be appropriated by colonized populations and redirected against other minority communities. The cartoons use faces, bodies, clothing, accents, occupations, and labels as outward evidence of supposedly fixed moral and cultural differences. Such visual coding homogenizes a diverse community and produces an affective opposition between a national “us” and an alien “them.” However, these historical representations should not be projected uncritically onto contemporary Chinese-Filipino relations. Masucol et al. (2022) found generally favorable contemporary attitudes toward Chinese Filipinos despite territorial tensions between the Philippines and China. Their survey evidence indicates that government rhetoric can temper ethnic hostility by distinguishing diplomatic conflict with a foreign state from

attitudes toward a domestic diasporic community. This distinction is essential because the activities of particular merchants, organizations, or the Chinese government should not be attributed collectively to Chinese Filipinos.

The theme therefore demonstrates that political caricature is not inherently liberatory. The same visual form that criticized American colonial racism and defended Filipino dignity could reproduce Sinophobia, cultural essentialism, and minority exclusion. From this finding emerges the concept of boundary-making nationalism, defined as the discursive process through which national solidarity is strengthened by identifying racialized outsiders who allegedly threaten the nation's economy, morality, security, or sovereignty. Methodologically, these cartoons should be treated as evidence of how nationalist discourse constructed ethnic difference, not as reliable descriptions of the communities represented. Their critical use requires preserving their historical value while explicitly confronting the discriminatory assumptions through which the imagined Filipino nation was sometimes defined.

Theme 6: From Colonial Subject to Political Nation

The final theme traces how the cartoons transformed Filipinos from objects of colonial administration into members of a political nation capable of speaking, judging authority, organizing collectively, and demanding rights. The recurring personifications of Filipinas and Juan de la Cruz made the abstract nation visually recognizable, but their contrasting roles exposed the gendered structure of nationalist representation. Filipinas generally embodied territory, purity, destiny, and national honor and was consequently courted, protected, or displayed, whereas Juan de la Cruz represented the ordinary citizen who could question officials and participate in political affairs. This contrast indicates that the female body frequently symbolized the nation while active citizenship remained predominantly masculinized. Camacho's (2025) review of scholarship on women in the colonial Philippines underscores the importance of examining women as historical actors with varied social positions and forms of agency rather than reducing them to passive or symbolic figures. Read through this perspective, the cartoons reveal both the symbolic centrality of women to nationalism and their restricted access to the political agency claimed in the nation's name.

The depictions of peasants, taxpayers, workers, patients, and voters further show that political nationhood emerged through ordinary people's encounters with colonial institutions. Although these figures were often drawn physically smaller than officials, capitalists, friars, and American authorities, their vulnerability did not signify moral inferiority. The peasant's labor, the taxpayer's compliance, the worker's organization, the patient's need, and the voter's rejection of bribery created ethical claims against institutions that failed to serve the public. Labor-related cartoons therefore expanded citizenship beyond voting by connecting national freedom with economic dignity, collective organization, access to public services, and control over productive resources. This interpretation is supported by Jani (2022), who demonstrates that interwar anti-imperialist politics linked demands for self-rule with struggles over land, labor, natural resources, and the international economy. The cartoons similarly suggest that political independence would be incomplete if colonial economic hierarchies continued to deny workers and other ordinary citizens meaningful control over the conditions of their lives.

The women's-suffrage cartoons provide the clearest transition from symbolic nationhood to substantive political citizenship. In "May We Vote?" women appear as collective speakers demanding admission to the formal political community, thereby moving from representations of Filipinas to actual claimants of democratic rights (McCoy & Roces, 1985, pp. 316–317). The modest wording of the question intensifies the criticism because it contrasts a restrained request with the magnitude of women's institutionalized exclusion. Alporha (2022) establishes that women's enfranchisement should not be interpreted merely as a benevolent gift from President Manuel L. Quezon, since his support was ambivalent and connected to anticipated political gains and patronage considerations. The cartoon can therefore be interpreted as evidence of women's political agency: enfranchisement resulted from sustained organization and public advocacy rather than the generosity of male political leaders. It also demonstrates that national independence and democratic legitimacy required the inclusion of women as citizens capable of exercising political judgment.

The cartoons' use of José Rizal, revolutionary martyrs, flags, blood, sacrifice, and other historical symbols further constructed political nationhood through collective memory. These signs connected resistance to Spanish colonialism with the continuing campaign for independence from the United States, presenting sovereignty as an unfinished obligation inherited from earlier generations. Their political meaning lies not simply in recalling the

past but in selecting particular events and individuals as foundations of national identity and standards for judging contemporary authority. Dulay et al. (2022), using two nationally representative surveys, demonstrate that Filipino memories of Spanish colonization, martial law, and the People Power Revolution remain varied and sometimes internally contradictory. Their findings confirm that historical memory is not fixed or uniformly shared; rather, it remains a contested political resource through which Filipinos interpret national identity and contemporary politics. The cartoons participated in this process by circulating visual narratives that defined whose sacrifices should be remembered and what political responsibilities those memories imposed on succeeding generations.

Taken together, the findings support the concept of visual nation-making, referring to the use of caricature to create recognizable political subjects, authorize ordinary people to judge those in power, connect citizenship with political and socioeconomic rights, and mobilize historical memory in support of sovereignty. However, the political nation represented in the cartoons remained incomplete because class inequality, elite domination, gender exclusion, clerical intervention, and racial prejudice continued to restrict equal membership. The movement from colonial subjecthood to political nationhood was therefore neither automatic nor linear. It was a contested democratic process in which formal independence had to be accompanied by social dignity, inclusive citizenship, accountable institutions, historical awareness, and meaningful participation by the people represented in the nation's name.

Integrative Discussion

The findings demonstrate that the political caricatures operated simultaneously as historical evidence, colonial discourse, and social criticism. As historical evidence, they preserved contemporary responses to disputes involving landownership, taxation, public health, corporate monopolies, religious privilege, electoral competition, labor, banking, women's suffrage, and national independence. Their historical value lies not only in the events they depicted but also in the attitudes, anxieties, prejudices, and political judgments they circulated among readers—perspectives that may be minimized or absent in official colonial records. Nevertheless, the cartoons cannot be treated as transparent representations of reality because they selectively emphasized particular actors and conflicts according to the ideological positions of cartoonists, editors, publications, and intended audiences. They are therefore most useful as evidence of how colonial society was publicly interpreted, contested, and remembered rather than as independent confirmation that every depicted allegation was factually accurate.

As colonial discourse, the cartoons employed personifications and visual conventions already shaped by unequal relations. Uncle Sam as a father or guardian, Filipinas as a maiden or territory, and Juan de la Cruz as a child or dependent youth reproduced assumptions about American maturity and Filipino political immaturity. Such representations translated colonial hierarchy into familiar familial, gendered, and generational relationships, making foreign supervision appear protective or developmental. Even cartoons that criticized American authority sometimes remained within this visual language of tutelage. The same contradiction appeared in nationalist portrayals: cartoons could defend Filipino dignity while marginalizing women, workers, ethnic minorities, and other groups from full political membership. Consequently, their nationalism was neither uniform nor inherently inclusive; it challenged certain forms of domination while occasionally reproducing others.

As social criticism, caricature disrupted the dignity and legitimacy claimed by powerful actors. Bodily enlargement transformed officials, politicians, friars, landlords, and businessmen into embodiments of greed and privilege; masks signified deception; predatory or irrational animals represented political appetite and factional conflict; physical burdens communicated exploitation; and differences in size, height, and spatial position made unequal power immediately visible. Humor, irony, and exaggeration converted otherwise abstract structures—colonial rule, monopoly, patronage, clerical intervention, elite capture, and racial exclusion—into recognizable characters and relationships. In this manner, the cartoons made institutional inequality understandable to a broader public and created symbolic spaces in which ordinary citizens could judge, ridicule, and challenge those who exercised authority.

The six themes may be synthesized through the following interpretive model:

Historical and colonial conditions → Visual and verbal resources → Ideological framing → Political criticism and boundary-making → Political consciousness and visual nation-making

The model proposes that changing historical conditions provided the issues represented in the cartoons, while symbols, captions, personifications, metaphors, exaggerations, stereotypes, and compositional hierarchies supplied the resources through which those issues were interpreted. These resources were filtered through ideological positions that could either naturalize or contest colonial authority, elite domination, religious privilege, gender inequality, and racial exclusion. The resulting representations performed two interconnected functions: they criticized unequal power and defined the boundaries of political belonging. Through repeated encounters with these images, readers were invited to recognize exploitation, evaluate competing claims to authority, and imagine who could speak, participate, and claim rights in the emerging Filipino nation.

The integrative significance of the findings lies in the tension between emancipation and exclusion. Colonial modernity promised institutional progress but distributed its benefits unevenly; political tutelage allowed limited negotiation while preserving American authority; electoral participation expanded while elite control remained entrenched; religious morality was respected even as institutional privilege was contested; nationalism resisted colonial racial hierarchies while sometimes directing prejudice toward minority communities; and Filipino political agency developed despite persistent restrictions based on class, gender, ethnicity, and social position. The cartoons therefore did not simply record the transition from colonial rule to national consciousness. They actively participated in that transition by constructing political subjects, exposing abuses of power, mobilizing historical memory, and debating the meaning and limits of citizenship.

Overall Answer to the Central Question

Political caricatures from the American colonial period represented Philippine society as a contested political arena in which American authorities, Filipino elites, religious institutions, commercial interests, minority communities, and ordinary citizens struggled over resources, legitimacy, citizenship, and national meaning. Through symbolism, satire, bodily distortion, captions, personification, metaphor, and visual hierarchy, the cartoons exposed colonial domination, economic exploitation, political patronage, religious privilege, and social exclusion while enabling Filipinos to appear as workers, voters, taxpayers, critics, organizers, and claimants of rights. In doing so, caricature contributed to the formation of political consciousness by making unequal power relations publicly visible and open to judgment.

However, the political nation imagined in these cartoons was neither consistently democratic nor fully inclusive. Although the images challenged foreign domination and local corruption, some continued to employ paternalistic, patriarchal, class-based, religious, and racialized representations. Their significance therefore lies in this productive contradiction: they functioned as instruments of resistance while also revealing the exclusions embedded within colonial-era nationalism. Rather than serving merely as illustrations of historical events, the cartoons constituted active sites of visual nation-making where Filipino identity, sovereignty, citizenship, resistance, and belonging were continuously constructed, negotiated, and contested.

Implications and Future Directions

The study concludes that colonial-era Philippine political caricatures were not merely illustrations of historical events but ideologically situated visual discourses that participated in constructing understandings of colonial authority, inequality, citizenship, nationalism, resistance, and Filipino nationhood. Through symbols, captions, metaphors, exaggerations, stereotypes, and visual hierarchies, the cartoons made complex political issues accessible while assigning different forms of agency and legitimacy to American authorities, Filipino elites, ordinary citizens, women, religious figures, workers, and foreign communities. However, their meanings were neither uniform nor inherently emancipatory: cartoons that criticized American domination and elite collaboration could simultaneously reproduce paternalistic, patriarchal, class-based, religious, and racialized exclusions. The study's original contribution lies in its systematic examination of a bounded historical corpus through the integration of pictorial-semiotic analysis, critical visual discourse analysis, and historical contextualization. This approach moves beyond treating cartoons as self-explanatory illustrations by demonstrating how their visual and verbal elements constructed ideological meanings within specific colonial conditions and how resistance to foreign domination could coexist with other forms of hierarchy and exclusion.

These findings have concrete implications for education, historical preservation, and future scholarship. Educators in Philippine history, political science, media and information literacy, and citizenship education may use political

cartoons as primary sources through activities that require learners to examine symbolism, authorship, intended audience, historical context, stereotypes, omissions, and competing representations. Such activities can strengthen historical thinking, critical visual literacy, source evaluation, and democratic awareness, provided that discriminatory representations are critically contextualized rather than presented as legitimate portrayals. Archives, libraries, museums, and publishers should preserve cartoons with accurate information about their dates, creators, source publications, languages, political contexts, and intended audiences. Future studies may analyze the complete collection; compare cartoons across publications, regions, languages, cartoonists, and historical periods; and use archival materials to clarify their production and circulation. Reception studies may also examine how students, historians, educators, artists, and contemporary readers interpret their historical value and discriminatory imagery, while comparative research may investigate continuities between colonial-era caricatures and contemporary editorial cartoons, digital memes, and other forms of visual political commentary. These directions can deepen understanding of visual satire as both an instrument of political criticism and a contested space in which citizenship, identity, and national belonging are continuously constructed.

Contributions of Authors

John Clifford M. Alvero: the sole author, conceptualized the study; developed the proposal; gathered and analyzed the data; and wrote and revised the manuscript.

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