

Konstantin Novaković

**GODS OF THE ROAD:
SPIRITUAL DIMENSION OF VEHICULAR ART
IN THE INDIAN SUBCONTINENT**

MA Thesis in Cultural Heritage Studies: Academic Research, Policy, Management.

Central European University

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by

Konstantin Novaković

(Serbia)

Thesis submitted to the Department of Medieval Studies,
Central European University, Budapest, in partial fulfillment of the requirements
of the Master of Arts degree in Cultural Heritage Studies: Academic Research, Policy,
Management.

Accepted in conformance with the standards of the CEU.

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Abstract

Vehicle decoration is a widespread phenomenon that exists in many Asian countries, and as well in other parts of the world such as the Middle East, Africa and the Americas. Although it represents an authentic form of vernacular art which is reflecting local traditions and beliefs, vehicular art is not officially recognized neither valorized as cultural heritage, nor thoroughly and systematically academically researched. The phenomenon of decorated vehicles is present in different regions of the world, but it is particularly widespread and elaborate in the countries of Indian Subcontinent, where it is truly representing a living vernacular folk art. This study aims to observe vehicular decoration in Pakistan, India and Bangladesh as a whole due to the fact that it belongs to the same socio-cultural space and share the same origins from the period of British Raj, motifs derived from traditional art and crafting techniques in all three aforementioned countries. However, within the main focus of his study are spiritual motifs in vehicular decoration as they are reflecting religious and cultural beliefs of their owners, serving both as protectors of vehicles and as well as social identifiers.

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Hereby, I am expressing my gratitude to everyone who gave me the support and provided invaluable help on the ground: to all my hosts and numerous truck drivers, vehicle owners, mechanics, painters and other craftsmen around the countries of the Indian Subcontinent who were happy to talk about their jobs and let me take the photos of vehicles. Also, I would also like to thank to the people from Cultural Heritage Studies Program who recognized the potential of this topic and provided various kinds of support during all stages of studying at the CEU and writing of this study. Finally, I am grateful to Professor Gerhard Jaritz for being my supervisor, for all his assistance, advice and patience throughout the writing process of this thesis.

Table of contents

Introduction.....	1
Chapter 1	5
Vehicular Art: The State of Scholarship.....	5
1.1 Vehicular art in South Asia.....	5
1.2 Vehicular art in general.....	14
Chapter 2.....	17
Spiritual Dimension of Vehicular Art.....	17
2.1 Americas	22
2.2 Africa	24
2.3 Asia	27
Chapter 3.....	30
Spiritual Motifs in Vehicular Art in the Countries of the Indian Subcontinent.....	30
3.1 Pakistan.....	30
3.1.1 Typology of decorative elements.....	31
3.1.2 The origin of motifs	33
3.1.3 Religious composition of Pakistan.....	35
3.1.4 Regional styles.....	36

3.1.5 Spatial distribution of decorative elements.....	39
3.2 India	43
3.2.1 Typology of decorative elements.....	44
3.2.2 The origin of motifs	46
3.2.3 Religious composition of India.....	47
3.2.4 Regional styles	50
3.2.5 Spatial distribution of decorative elements.....	51
3.3 Bangladesh.....	56
3.3.1 Typology of decorative elements.....	58
3.3.2 The origin of motifs	59
3.3.3 Religious composition of Bangladesh	59
3.3.4 Regional styles	61
3.3.5 Spatial distribution of decorative elements.....	62
Conclusion	68
Bibliography	72
Catalogue Section	76

List of Figures

<i>Figure 1: Tap tap with religious motifs from Port-au-Prince, Haiti.....</i>	<i>76</i>
<i>Figure 2: Tap tap with apotropaic pair of eyes on the front bumper spotted in the street of Port-au-Prince, Haiti.....</i>	<i>76</i>
<i>Figure 3: Chiva bus with the statuette of the Virgin with the Child mounted above the windshield, Medellin, Colombia.....</i>	<i>77</i>
<i>Figure 4: Chiva bus with a large decorative panel of the rear side, Villa de Leyva, Colombia.....</i>	<i>77</i>
<i>Figure 5: Back of a lorry with the depiction of Kaaba, Lagos, Nigeria.....</i>	<i>78</i>
<i>Figure 6: Truck featuring a large depiction of St. Michael on its back spotted in Nigeria.....</i>	<i>78</i>
<i>Figure 7: Christian imagery of the back of a truck from eastern Nigeria.....</i>	<i>79</i>
<i>Figure 8: Mammy wagon featuring Muslim identity of its owner from Accra, Ghana.....</i>	<i>79</i>
<i>Figure 9: Mammy wagon with Christian inscription on its upper front side spotted in Ghana.....</i>	<i>80</i>
<i>Figure 10: Tro tro van with typical religious inscription made of cut-out adhesive tape on the rear window, Accra, Ghana.....</i>	<i>80</i>
<i>Figure 11: Front of a jeepney from Manila, the Philippines, featuring Christian inscriptions.....</i>	<i>81</i>
<i>Figure 12: Virgin Mary depicted on driver's door of a jeepney from Manila, the Philippines.....</i>	<i>81</i>
<i>Figure 13: Bedford truck decorated in Rawalpindi style spotted in Raja Bazaar area, Rawalpindi, Punjab, Pakistan.....</i>	<i>82</i>
<i>Figure 14: Bedford 'rocket' truck decorated in Swati style spotted on N45 road in the Upper Dir district, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, Pakistan.</i>	<i>82</i>

<i>Figure 15: Lavishly decorated city bus from Peshawar, Pakistan.....</i>	<i>83</i>
<i>Figure 16: Hino truck from Quetta, Pakistan, decorated in Baluchi style. Maripur, Karachi, Pakistan.....</i>	<i>84</i>
<i>Figure 17: Water cistern with wooden panel above the windshield that characterizes Karachi style of decoration. Karachi, Pakistan.....</i>	<i>85</i>
<i>Figure 18: Flamboyantly decorated minibuses operate on famous W11 city bus route in Karachi, Pakistan.....</i>	<i>86</i>
<i>Figure 19: Detail of the upper front section of a truck that is mainly reserved for religious symbols. Maripur, Karachi, Pakistan.....</i>	<i>86</i>
<i>Figure 20: Front of a Bedford truck characterized by abundance of reflective elements features multiple religious decorative elements in the upper zone and apotropaic symbols around the bumper. Thatta, Sindh, Pakistan.....</i>	<i>87</i>
<i>Figure 21: Detail of the front bumper with hanging chains, beads and jingles and apotropaic shoe. Maripur, Karachi, Pakistan.....</i>	<i>88</i>
<i>Figure 22: Detail of the front section of a Bedford truck featuring a pair of female eyes and series of chains hanging from the bumper. Carriage factory area, Rawalpindi, Punjab, Pakistan.....</i>	<i>88</i>
<i>Figure 23: Ornate front side of the city minibus in central Karachi, Pakistan.....</i>	<i>89</i>
<i>Figure 24: Buraq, mythical flying horse made in technique of hammered tin and adhesive tape collage in the workshop in old Rawalpindi, Punjab, Pakistan.....</i>	<i>90</i>
<i>Figure 25: Depiction of the chukar partridge and a pair of cypress trees on the upper back of a truck. Maripur, Karachi, Pakistan.....</i>	<i>90</i>
<i>Figure 26: Rear of a minibus with apotropaic mannat clothes. Peshawar, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, Pakistan.....</i>	<i>91</i>
<i>Figure 27: Front of a truck displaying Muslim and apotropaic symbols. Kargil, Jammu and Kashmir, India.....</i>	<i>92</i>
<i>Figure 28: Front of a truck with decorative elements inherent to Shia branch of Islam. Kargil, Jammu and Kashmir, India.....</i>	<i>93</i>

<i>Figure 29: Front of a Hindu truck with religious and apotropaic elements of decoration. Sanjay Gandhi Transport Nagar, Delhi, India.....</i>	<i>94</i>
<i>Figure 30: Front of a Hindu truck with the depiction of Kali in the top section. Kolkata, West Bengal, India.....</i>	<i>95</i>
<i>Figure 31: Detail of the top section of a truck with two Om inscriptions and a depiction of Hanuman painted on glass. Sanjay Gandhi Transport Nagar, Delhi, India.....</i>	<i>96</i>
<i>Figure 32: Front of a light truck with the depiction of Shiva. Kolkata, West Bengal, India.</i>	<i>96</i>
<i>Figure 33: Front of a Muslim truck which also includes Hindu decorative elements. Mandvi, Gujarat, India.....</i>	<i>97</i>
<i>Figure 34: Front of a Sikh truck whose decorative elements are showing the affiliation of its driver with Guru Gobind Singh Ji and the Gurudwara Poanta Sahib. Sanjay Gandhi Transport Nagar, Delhi, India.....</i>	<i>98</i>
<i>Figure 35: Detail of the front section of a Sikh truck displaying various talismanic objects and symbols. Sanjay Gandhi Transport Nagar, Delhi, India.....</i>	<i>99</i>
<i>Figure 36: Detail of the truck grill with hanging amulets in form of string with chili peppers and lime. Sanjay Gandhi Transport Nagar, Delhi, India.....</i>	<i>99</i>
<i>Figure 37: Side view of a 12-wheeler truck whose decoration includes khanda sword, a symbol of Sikh faith. Sanjay Gandhi Transport Nagar, Delhi, India.....</i>	<i>100</i>
<i>Figure 38: Detail of a demonic face hanging from the rear of a truck. Sanjay Gandhi Transport Nagar, Delhi, India.....</i>	<i>100</i>
<i>Figure 39: Front of a Bedford truck featuring Muslim symbols and floral ornamentation. Greater Dhaka Area, Dhaka District, Bangladesh.....</i>	<i>101</i>
<i>Figure 40: Front of a Bedford truck decorated with floral ornaments and symbols of Islam. Greater Dhaka Area, Dhaka District, Bangladesh.....</i>	<i>102</i>
<i>Figure 41: Front of a Bedford truck featuring floral ornamentation and religious symbols. Chittagong Port, Chittagong, Bangladesh.....</i>	<i>103</i>
<i>Figure 42: Detail of the side cabin surface featuring floral decoration and depiction of Muslim holy places nestled in a clam shell and inscriptions 'Bismillah' and 'Tasfiya' in Bengali. Greater Dhaka Area, Dhaka District, Bangladesh.....</i>	<i>104</i>

- Figure 43: Detail of richly decorated wooden superstructure on the front side of a Bedford truck featuring geometric and floral patterns and symbols of Islam. Greater Dhaka Area, Dhaka District, Bangladesh.....105*
- Figure 44: Detail of a decorated superstructure on the front of a truck featuring the depiction of the Prophet's mosque and the Kaaba within the central medallion, surrounded with two white doves and Bengali inscription 'Fi Amanillah' which means 'Have a Safe Journey' below it, surrounded with names of the Prophet and God. Greater Dhaka Area, Dhaka District, Bangladesh.....105*
- Figure 45: Detail of the upper part of a truck featuring the large depiction of a mosque, names of the Prophet and God and an Islamic prayer verse which means, 'In the name of Allah, keep me safe when I am travelling'. Barisal, Bangladesh.....106*
- Figure 46: Detail from the back of a rickshaw with the large depiction of a Mosque in the lower zone and two peacocks on the seatback plate above it. Upper inscription 'Badshah Bhai', is probably driver's name with the phone number below it, while the inscription 'Ma er Duwa' at the bottom means 'Mother's blessings' in Bengali. Dhaka, Bangladesh.....106*
- Figure 47: Back of an electrified rickshaw featuring the large depiction of a Mughal-style mosque on the seatback plate. Sylhet, Bangladesh.....107*
- Figure 48: Back of a rickshaw with depictions of two women in praying position on upholstered hood and Dhallywood-inspired plate in the lower zone. Dhaka, Bangladesh.....108*
- Figure 49: Depiction of a praying woman and a mosque on the seatback plate of a rickshaw. Below is the inscription 'Soleman Bhandari' in Bengali, which is probably the name of its owner. Dhaka, Bangladesh.109*
- Figure 50: Seatback plate of a rickshaw decorated with a popular depiction of a child and woman praying. Srimangal, Bangladesh.....109*

Introduction

Decorated vehicles that can be found in many countries around the world are ubiquitous in South Asia, and in particular the countries of the Indian Subcontinent where they became an integral part of the landscape, not only in urban areas but practically everywhere as they can be seen along the vast network of roads stretching from Baluchistan to Bengal and from the Indian Ocean to the Himalayas. In all countries from this region and notably in Pakistan, but as well India and Bangladesh decoration of vehicles is a serious business, involving thousands of craftsmen, so that it has significant contribution to the national budgets. However, it mostly involves people from the lower social classes, poorly educated and often illiterate and therefore this form of vernacular folk art is generally looked down by educated bourgeoisie and even treated with scorn as an expression of vulgar, kitschy art. Probably also as the result of such perceptions, there is a huge disproportion between the omnipresence of this phenomenon and the current state of scholarship. Namely, while the decorated vehicles are ubiquitous all around the Subcontinent, this phenomenon has drawn a little attention of scholars while most of available sources are found in form of popular articles.

Although my first memories of decorated vehicles can be traced back to my childhood and scenes of colorful Turkish buses which transported various kinds of goods from Turkey to Western Europe and vice-versa along motorways of Yugoslavia, I got seriously interested into the topic in the mid-2000s, during my first trip towards the ‘Orient’ where I had a chance to see the flamboyantly decorated trucks and buses in Syria and other countries of the region. During the coming years I visited numerous countries in the Middle East, Africa, Central and South Asia as a traveler, often hitch-hiking trucks and regularly using cramped, decorated local buses which since then I am trying to document. However, I was mostly fascinated with decorated vehicles in the countries of the Indian Subcontinent, from iconic Pakistani trucks to

the rickshaws in Bangladesh and therefore this thesis is an effort to contribute to this rarely studied topic. In this regard, despite all disadvantages of dealing with another culture reflected in the language barrier, lack of familiarity with the local culture and habits, I strongly believe that being the unbiased non-native researcher with adequate expertise could actually be an asset. Moreover, after having the insight into the available literature and other sources related to this topic, it became obvious that the majority of studies and articles were actually written by foreigners. Still, despite obvious similarities between the style and general approach to decoration of vehicles in the countries of the Indian Subcontinent it is evident that no one has yet tried to observe this phenomenon comprehensively enough, while all existing studies are limited to particular countries or types of vehicles. This is however understandable for various reasons, from the vast area where vehicular decoration is present, enormous number of decorated vehicles, numerous regional styles, different types of vehicles and practical reasons such as administrative limitations of traveling to neighboring countries which especially applies to local researchers.

Having all this in mind, I came to the idea to write a study that will synthesize all available materials related to the vehicular decoration in South Asia, in the first place Pakistan, India and Bangladesh. Furthermore, due to the enormous complexity of this topic which transcends the scope of an MA thesis, I decided to focus on one particular aspect of this phenomenon, spiritual motifs in vehicular decoration, as through them various local religions, traditions, and beliefs inherent to this part of the world are being reflected. Therefore, the thesis aims to present different traditions of vehicular decoration in the countries of the Indian Subcontinent with special focus on spiritual motifs that are present in all aforementioned countries in a very similar form and positioned according to the same spatial logic. In this way, its main objective is to provide a comprehensive image of the vehicular art in the Indian Subcontinent, showing similarities and mutual characteristics of its different aspects, essentially regarding

this phenomenon in this part of the world that once used to be a part of British India, as a whole. In this way, the thesis also aims to provide another, comprehensive view to this vernacular folk art, pointing at the specificities and differences inherent to different regions but as well numerous mutual characteristics that exist between them, which is not covered through existing studies on this subject. As a result of such approach and bearing in mind the limitations implied by the expected scope of the MA thesis, this study does not aim to provide deeper analyses of any of particular aspects related to vehicular art such as epigraphy, iconography, semiotics, religious and apotropaic meanings, social classes, artisanal organization, and others, and therefore is mostly limited to fact presentation and comparisons, accompanied with adequate descriptions.

Therefore, the core of the thesis is comprised from case studies that are covering different countries of South Asia where the phenomenon of vehicular art is present. The main three subchapters cover different aspects of vehicular art in Pakistan, India and Bangladesh. Those case studies are keeping the same structure through which the general characteristics, motifs with religious and apotropaic function, development, religious composition, regional styles and spatial distribution of spiritual motifs are presented. Those elements are compared systematically with their mutual elements pointed out. Also, all sorts of available published materials were used for this study, this analysis is primarily based on visual materials, in the first place photos of different types of vehicles that I made during the field trip and all previous travels throughout the region.

While the country subchapters that are basically functioning as case studies make the central part of the thesis, the rest of chapters are covering other important aspects related to the vehicular decoration and spiritual motifs. The study begins with a chapter that is providing the chronological insight into the existing scholarship about the vehicular art, based primarily

on academic literature. Although it is primarily focused on South Asia, the studies and main researchers that dealt with this phenomenon in other parts of the world are mentioned as well. It is followed with a chapter where the basic aspects of vehicular decoration are presented and explained, not only limited to the Indian Subcontinent but in general, where different examples of best known schools of vehicular decoration are provided. The actual introduction to the topic is contained within the following chapter which summarizes the examples of pious art in vehicular decoration from different parts of the world. The central part consists of chapters covering the spiritual dimension of vehicular decoration in Pakistan, India and Bangladesh.

Chapter 1

Vehicular Art: The State of Scholarship

This chapter aims to chronologically present available academic sources related to vehicular art, primarily in the countries of Southern Asia but as well in general, including the development from its earliest stages to the current state of the literature.¹ Printed articles and publications that explore the subject academically are scarce, while there is an abundance of popular articles related to truck art, especially from Pakistan. In general, the phenomenon of Pakistani trucks appears to be by far the most systematically explored, while only a few articles are dedicated to vehicle decoration in other countries of South Asia.²

1.1 Vehicular art in South Asia

The first publications dealing with this topic which appeared in the mid-1970s were primarily focused on truck decoration in Afghanistan. That corresponds with the interest in this phenomenon in the West. Truck art became known thanks to the circulation of young travelers along Europe to India land route that also crossed Afghanistan known as the “Hippie trail”.³ In the period that preceded the Soviet invasion of 1979, vehicular art flourished in Afghanistan, especially in the Southwest of the country with predominantly Pashtun populations. Probably the best-known publication from that pioneering period is *Afghan Trucks* by Jean-Charles Blanc, which is essentially a picture book containing a short,

¹ Although the countries of the Indian Subcontinent are primarily within the focus of this thesis, the term South or Southern Asia will also be used intentionally. Namely, the later term encompasses a wider area including Afghanistan which is an important region for studying vehicular art with significant scholarly research on this subject.

² According to the literature listed within bibliographies of major academic articles that deal with this topic, there is a certain number of articles on vehicular art that are published in local languages such as Urdu, Hindi and Bengali. Bearing in mind the language barrier and as well the difficulty of searching for such articles with specific, non-alphabetic scripts, research for this thesis was limited only to the material published in English, French and German.

³ The hippie trail is the name given to the overland journey taken by members of the hippie subculture and others from the mid-1950s to the late 1970s between Europe and South Asia, mainly to Pakistan, India and Nepal.

descriptive introduction to the topic.⁴ However, the volume provides a valuable insight into the vehicular art of Afghanistan of that period and represents a pioneering attempt to capture and systematize this phenomenon. The 1970s also marked the beginning of scholarly interest in the subject, again with Afghan truck art in the focus of research. Several studies are available in print from that period.⁵ Another important paper from the 1970s is the thesis of Marie-Bénédicte Dutreux entitled *La Peinture des Camions en Afghanistan*, defended at the Sorbonne in 1978.⁶ The focus on Afghanistan in this period is also generally due to the traditional presence of ethnographers in Afghanistan, with little or no mention of vehicular art in countries of the Indian Subcontinent.

The 1980s marked a shift in academic interest into Pakistani truck art, which coincides with the shift in the main centers of vehicular decoration from Afghanistan to neighboring Pakistan as a consequence of the Soviet intervention. At the very beginning of the decade, an article written by two American ethnographers was published. Based on fieldwork conducted in the workshops of Rawalpindi, which today remains one of the main centers of Pakistani vehicular art, the article provides a unique glimpse into the artisanal organization of this sector, based on the ubiquitous Bedford trucks.⁷

Another paper from the same decade is particularly important as it marks the first attempt to explore the semiotic meanings of the decorative programs found on Pakistani trucks.⁸ Several articles about rickshaw art in Bangladesh were written in the early 1980s by the American cultural anthropologist Johanna Kirkpatrick, a pioneering scholar on this topic. Kirkpatrick, who worked on Bengali vehicular art made an invaluable contribution on the study of

⁴ Jean-Charles Blanc, *Afghan Trucks* (London: Mathews Miller Dunbar, 1976).

⁵ See, for instance: Micheline Centlivres-Demont and Robin R. Charleston, *Popular Art in Afghanistan. Paintings on Trucks, Mosques and Tea-Houses* (Graz: Akademische Druck- und Verlagsanstalt, 1976).

⁶ Marie-Bénédicte Dutreux, "Peinture des camions en Afghanistan," Diss., Paris 1, Sorbonne, Section des Arts Plastiques, 1978. The dissertation is not available online but is mentioned in several articles dealing with this topic as the earliest thesis exploring vehicular art.

⁷ George W. Rich and Shahid Khan, "Bedford Painting in Pakistan: The Aesthetics and Organization of an Artisan Trade," *The Journal of American Folklore* 93 (1980): 257-275.

⁸ Alain Lefebvre, "The decorative truck as a communicative device," *Semiotica* 75 (2009): 215-227.

rickshaw art in Bangladesh in her paper “The Painted Ricksha as Culture Theater” where this phenomenon is comprehensively presented, from the artisanal organization to depicted motifs and their meanings.⁹

The following two decades brought numerous articles focused primarily on truck art in Pakistan and rickshaw art in Bangladesh, while articles on vehicular art from the rest of the Subcontinent where this phenomenon is also present are noticeably lacking. In this respect, Anna Schmid wrote a comprehensive study on Pakistani truck art published by the Museum of Folk Art in Hamburg in 1995 accompanying an exhibition that took place in same year. The monograph reflects on different aspects of truck art, from the world of truck drivers to iconography and the symbolism of its decorative motifs.¹⁰

The early 2000s are especially important for scholarship related to Pakistani truck art. Several analyses on this topic were published in that period. In this respect, Jamal J. Elias, a leading scholar of Pakistani truck art, wrote several important articles on this topic, as a result of extensive field work that he conducted around the country.¹¹ His article “On Wings of Diesel: Spiritual Space and Religious Imagination in Pakistani Truck Decoration” from 2003 presents the tradition of Pakistani vehicular decoration as a popular form of art in a systematic and thoroughly manner, with special focus on religious imagery, its meanings and signification.¹² Another article by the same author entitled “Truck Decoration and Religious Identity: Material Culture and Social Function in Pakistan” published two years later also focused on religious aspects of the imagery applied to Pakistani trucks, in particular the

⁹ Joanna Kirkpatrick, “The Painted Ricksha as Culture Theater,” *Studies in Visual Communication* 10 (1984): 73-85.

¹⁰ Anna Schmid, *Pakistan Express: Die fliegenden Pferde vom Indus* (Hamburg: Hamburgisches Museum für Völkerkunde, 1995).

¹¹ Jamal J. Elias is a scholar and professor of Religious Studies and South Asia Studies at the Department for Religious Studies of the University of Pennsylvania. He is an expert on Islam and Muslim society with a focus on Sufism, Islam and modernity, as well as visual and material culture in the Middle East and South Asia; University of Pennsylvania, Department of Religious Studies, "Jamal J. Elias," accessed December 15, 2017, https://www.sas.upenn.edu/religious_studies/faculty/elias.

¹² Jamal J. Elias, “On Wings of Diesel: Spiritual Space and Religious Imagination in Pakistani Truck Decoration,” *RES: Anthropology and Aesthetics* 43, Islamic Arts (2003): 187-202.

religious identities of the individuals associated with the culture of vehicular decoration.¹³

These articles of Elias mark an important qualitative step forward in scholarship connected to truck art in Pakistan and vehicular art in general, primarily due to an approach that includes analysis of the visual language of applied motifs, systematizes the painting schemes and regional styles and situates the phenomenon within the context of the wider society.

In this context, the contribution of Martin Sökefeld, a German scholar whose interest in Pakistani truck art started in the early 1990s, should be mentioned as well.¹⁴ His short paper entitled “Moving Images: Truck Art in Pakistan” summarizes the findings of his field trip to the workshops in Rawalpindi, providing valuable insight into the organization of artisanal production related to truck decoration as well as the evolution of styles and changes that occurred in applied motifs, ornaments and truck types between the early 1990s and 2007.¹⁵

Another important representative involved in the study of this field is the Pakistani scholar Durriya Kazi, head of the Department of Visual Studies at the University of Karachi who studied truck art for decades.¹⁶ As a professional artist herself, she focused primarily on artistic projects related to the Pakistani vehicular art and its aesthetic aspects, presentations on this topic and documentary films, rather than academic writing. Being renowned as one of the most knowledgeable experts in the field, Kazi is regularly interviewed and therefore her point of view is mostly revealed indirectly, through articles where she appears as the interviewee.¹⁷

A rare example is her essay “The Spirited Art of Truck Decoration” where she explains how

¹³ Jamal J. Elias, “Truck Decoration and Religious Identity: Material Culture and Social Function in Pakistan,” *Material Religion* 1 (2005): 48-71.

¹⁴ Martin Sökefeld is professor at the Ludwig-Maximilian University in Munich. He works mainly on diaspora, transnational politics and politics of identity; Ludwig-Maximilian University, Chair of Social and Cultural Anthropology, “Prof. Dr. Martin Sökefeld,” accessed December 15, 2017, <http://www.en.ethnologie.uni-muenchen.de/staff/professors/sokefeld/index.html>.

¹⁵ Martin Sökefeld, “Moving images: Truck art in Pakistan,” *Tsantsa - Revue de la Société Suisse d’Éthnologie* 13 (2008): 175-190.

¹⁶ Durriya Kazi, a professional artist (sculptor) who established the Department of Visual Studies at the University of Karachi in 1998 is currently acting as the Head of Department; Canvas Gallery, “Durriya Kazi,” accessed December 15, 2017, http://www.canvasartgallery.net/artists_pages/durriya_kazi/cv.pdf.

¹⁷ Probably the most extensive appearance of Durriya Kazi where she mentions the influence of Mughal art on this phenomenon is contained in the following article: Richard Covington, “Masterpieces to Go: The Trucks of Pakistan,” *Saudi Aramco World* 56 (2005): 8-17.

truck art in Pakistan evolved from traditional crafting techniques during the second half of the twentieth century.¹⁸

The 2000s also brought valuable new contributions related to rickshaw art in Bangladesh. The first, *Rickshaw Art in Bangladesh* by France Lasnier was published in 2002 in cooperation with the Alliance Française in Dhaka and shows this phenomenon within the wider socio-political context of Bangladesh, from the perspective of a cultural historian.¹⁹ The publication contains valuable insight into the late 1990s rickshaw and baby-taxi workshops of Dhaka, with systematized photo material showing typical motifs and scenes from that period. Another publication on this topic from the end of the same decade, entitled *Moving Picture: The Rickshaw Art of Bangladesh*, is a comprehensive study that covers many aspects of rickshaw art, including its history, artisanal perspective, its reception within the country and abroad, and differences between regional style.²⁰ Despite the comprehensive approach, this publication is more popular than academic in nature and lacks deeper analysis of any aspects related to rickshaw production and decoration mentioned above.

Paradoxically, vehicular art in India seems to be the least documented and explored, despite its omnipresence within the country and the similarities in character and origins with other countries that used to be part of the British Raj, where vehicular art is much better known and researched.²¹ However, there is an abundance of journalistic articles that deal with the Indian truck art in particular albeit these tend to be predominantly superficial in character with even

¹⁸ Durriya Kazi, "The Spirited Art of Truck Decoration," *City: A Quarterly on Urban Society* 1 (2002): 64–74.

¹⁹ France Lasnier, *Rickshaw Art in Bangladesh* (Dhaka: Dhaka University Press, 2002).

²⁰ Kuntala Lahiri-Dutt and David J. Williams, *Moving Picture: The Rickshaw Art of Bangladesh* (Ahmedabad: Mapin Publishing, 2008).

²¹ The British Raj, literally, "rule" in Hindi, refers to the rule by the British Crown in the Indian Subcontinent between 1858 and 1947. The system of governance was instituted in 1858 when the rule of the East India Company, an agent of the Mughal Empire, was transferred to the Crown in the person of Queen Victoria, who was later proclaimed as Empress of India. In 1947 it became partitioned into two sovereign dominion states: the Dominion of India and the Dominion of Pakistan. They later became the Republic of India and the Islamic Republic of Pakistan, while the province of Burma, a separate colony of the Indian Empire, gained independence in 1948. As already mentioned, among the limitations of this thesis is the language barrier regarding the languages of Southern Asia which I don't understand. Therefore, some of the literature which potentially exists on this topic in Hindu India is not taken into consideration. However, there are no traces of such literature even within the bibliographies of articles related to the vehicular decoration in Southern Asia that are written by the authors coming from that region.

a somewhat sensationalist approach based on flamboyant design and often amusing messages displayed on the vehicles. A rare example of academic approach is an article by Swati Chattopadhyay, an Indian-American scholar with a focus on the cultural landscape of British colonialism, entitled “The Art of Auto-Mobility: Vehicular Art and the Space of Resistance in Calcutta”.²² Her article, however, focuses only on one very specific genre, namely privately-operated public buses in Kolkata and the semiotics of images and texts depicted on them. Through observing the phenomenon within the larger socio-political context of Kolkata, Chattopadhyay analyzes how those decorated buses serve as a means of communication and a tool for sending messages or resistance by lower social classes.²³ Moreover, the author provides a very interesting approach to the analysis of spatial logic concerning the way the marginalized populations affiliated with bus transportation and local production have created their own space in the city, within its bourgeois framework. The article provides a unique insight into a world that is associated with Kolkata bus culture including elaborate social aspects, spatial relations, popular culture and epigraphic and the semiotic meanings of applied messages and imagery. However, despite its undoubted value as being a rare example of academic approach to vehicular art in India, the article is focused on local art traditions and subcultures that are all related to one particular city which is just a small fragment of the elaborate and as yet mostly unexplored mosaic of Indian vehicular art. The last decade saw important contributions onto Pakistani truck art and the rise of academic interest for vehicular art in general. Apart from the academic sphere, vehicular art became

²² Swati Chattopadhyay is an architect and architectural historian specializing in modern architecture and urbanism and the cultural landscape of British colonialism. Chattopadhyay has been a professor of History of Art and Architecture at the University of California in Santa Barbara since 2012; University of California, History of Art and Architecture, "Swati Chattopadhyay," accessed December 15, 2017, http://www.arthistory.ucsb.edu/sites/secure.lsit.ucsb.edu.arth.d7/files/people/cv/chattopadhyay_cv_2017_0.pdf; Swati Chattopadhyay, “The Art of Auto-Mobility: Vehicular Art and the Space of Resistance in Calcutta,” *Journal of Material Culture* 14 (2009): 107-139.

²³ Kolkata, formerly known as Calcutta, was officially renamed in 2001. However, the old name remained widely used and Chattopadhyay, a Kolkatan herself, regularly uses the old name Calcutta in the article.

also increasingly present on the internet including online portals, magazines, and the pages of social networks.

A chapter of the book by Pakistani scholar Tariq Rahman, entitled *Language on Wheels: Inscriptions on Pakistani Trucks as a Window into Popular Worldview* released in 2010 includes a comprehensive epigraphic analysis of inscriptions from Pakistani trucks.²⁴ It is the first study that focuses particularly on truck inscriptions based on comprehensive field research that includes numerous interviews and an impressive sample of 627 trucks from different provinces all over the country. It systematically presents themes of inscriptions that appear on trucks along with a quantitative analysis of them.

Evidence for increased academic interest in this topic, especially among local students and scholars of South Asian descent, are recent BA and MA theses related to certain aspects of vehicular art, which can be accessed online. One such example is a BA thesis defended at the Indus Valley School of Art and Architecture in Karachi in 2010 focused on symbols used in the truck art of Pakistan.²⁵ The thesis contains analyses on the content of the imagery used in truck decoration and its symbolic meanings, both from the perspective of the artists and craftsmen involved in the production side and as well designers and art critics.

The milestone in scholarship related to Pakistani vehicular art is a book entitled *On Wings of Diesel: Trucks, Identity and Culture in Pakistan* that was published in 2011.²⁶ This, the most comprehensive analysis of truck art in Pakistan to date is the result of the decade-and-a-half long interest in this phenomenon and the occasional field research of its author, Jamal J. Elias, already mentioned in this chapter. Through employing a specific methodology that combines several disciplinary fields and methods, the decorated truck is placed within its

²⁴ Tariq Rahman, "Language on Wheels: Inscriptions on Pakistani Trucks as a Window into Popular Worldview," in *Language Policy, Identity and Religion: Aspects of the Civilization of the Muslims of Pakistan and North India* (Islamabad: Quaid-i-Azam University, 2010), 187-223.

²⁵ Hira Arshad Zubairi, "Symbology in Pakistani Truck Art: Artist Intention vs. Viewer Perception," BA thesis (Karachi: Indus Valley School of Art and Architecture, Department of Communication Design, 2010).

²⁶ Jamal J. Elias, *On Wings of Diesel: Trucks, Identity and Culture in Pakistan*, (Oxford: Oneworld, 2011).

specific setting defined by religious, political, social, and economic perspectives. The study criticizes the formalism of existing scholarship which was focused only on the decorative aspects of this phenomenon without considering the wider context or the cross-over between the elements of the painted truck itself. The book includes chapters on economics and socioeconomics of Pakistan's trucking industry, organization of the artisanal trade, visual program of decorated trucks, and how these aspects are connected with the identities of individuals involved in the work and the larger society surrounding them.

The documentary film *Horn Please* that was released in 2013 is a pioneering effort to document and popularize the Indian truck art that remains largely unexplored and unknown outside the country.²⁷ Although not a formal academic study, the documentary with its accompanying website represents a valuable source for studying present-day Indian truck art. Moreover, along with the field trip that included visits to numerous workshops in seven Indian states, the author of this project, Shantanu Suman, conducted a bibliographical research to find published scholarly papers on the subject. The author states that, "when I realized that nothing much had been documented about Indian Truck Art, I decided to travel to India for detailed research," stands as a proof that this phenomenon, largely present all over India, is still not researched or adequately documented.²⁸ The documentary primarily focuses on the origin and evolution of truck art in India and explores the ways it influences the lives of its artists and the truckers. It contains useful information about various aspects of Indian truck art including interviews with artisans and other people related to the industry, while the accompanying website includes a collection of systematized visual material, a valuable source for research on this topic.

²⁷ Project Horn Please, "About," accessed December 15, 2017, <http://www.projecthornplease.com/about/>.

²⁸ Citation from the Press Kit for the documentary "Horn Please: The Journey of Indian Truck Art"; Project Horn Please, "Digital Press Kit," accessed December 15, 2017, <http://www.projecthornplease.com/press/digital-press-kit/>; Shantanu Suman, assistant professor of Visual Communications at Ball State University (Indiana) and author of the Horn Please project told me in a message on Facebook Messenger how he visited several university libraries in Delhi hoping to find literature about Indian vehicular art during his field trip to India in 2012 but had no success.

The most recent academic contribution to the topic is an MA thesis entitled “A Study on Material Culture in Dhaka: Rickshaw, A Motion Craft” which was defended at McGill University in Montreal in 2015.²⁹ It observes the rickshaws of Dhaka as a form of material culture and documents the traditional methods of rickshaw production, workshops and the activities of artisans involved in their production. Its author touches on some important aspects of vehicular art that most other articles miss. He writes about the intangible significance of rickshaws in the cultural landscape of Dhaka and the risk of disappearance of traditional rickshaw production caused by the increased use of prefabricated materials and the availability of other affordable modes of city transportation. The thesis also contains sketches and drawings related to the phases of rickshaw production, workshops and their positioning within the city.

Despite the considerable number of scholarly papers related to vehicular art in South Asia which this chapter aims to present in an organized way, this form of popular art still remains relatively unexplored and only fragmentary researched and documented. In this respect, the attention of scholars who dealt with this topic was focused only on certain aspects of this phenomenon, especially truck art in Pakistan and rickshaw art in Bangladesh, while there is little or no mention of other types of vehicular art such as truck art in India and Bangladesh or decorated buses which are present everywhere in the region. Moreover, there is no evidence that any scholar has yet observed the topic of vehicular art in the Indian Subcontinent as a unique phenomenon pervasive throughout the whole region despite numerous mutual characteristics such as artistic methods and styles, depicted motifs and their symbolism, artisanal organization, social context, historical background etc. This lack of geographic overview is understandable for many reasons ranging from complexity and comprehensiveness of the potential research to practical limitations of conducting it in

²⁹ Nazmul Islam, “A Study on Material Culture in Dhaka: Rickshaw, a Motion Craft,” MA thesis (Montreal: McGill University, 2015).

multiple countries comprising such a vast area where numerous local languages, reflecting on vehicular art, are present. Although the existing research only provides a partial image of vehicular art in the Indian Subcontinent, what exists still offers a solid base to observe it as a unique, over-arching phenomenon, one aspect my study aims at.

1.2 Vehicular art in general

Decorated vehicles can be found in countries all over the world. Among the best known examples of this phenomenon are Jeepneys from the Philippines, Matatus in Kenya, Japanese Decotora trucks, Tap taps from Haiti, Wild buses from Suriname, etc. In terms of existing scholarship, vehicular art is generally, therefore not only in the Indian Subcontinent, just partially researched and documented despite the abundance of photo material showing vividly decorated vehicles on the internet. Therefore, the list of publications, especially academic ones that deal with this topic is limited and often focused on a particular country, region, city, or, in some cases, certain aspects of this form of vernacular art.

Vehicular art which is present in a number of countries across the African continent captured the attention of ethnographers and other social scientists and several papers that are presenting this phenomenon appeared in the 1970s. Probably the best known example is the article “Nigerian Truck Art” which summarizes the main features of truck decoration in Nigeria, depicted motifs and their meanings, inscriptions, and the general context in which this form of popular art, as the author describes it, developed.³⁰ The article also mentions the importance of religious imagery, one of the central motifs of vehicular decoration anywhere which also was in the focus of other papers on Ghanaian transportation culture.³¹

³⁰ Jack Pritchett, “Nigerian Truck Art,” *African Arts* 12 (1979): 27-31.

³¹ Eugenia Date-Bah, “The Inscriptions on the Vehicles of Ghanaian Commercial Drivers: A Sociological Analysis,” *The Journal of Modern African Studies* 18 (1980): 525-53; Gabriel Klaeger, “Religion on the Road: The spiritual experience of road travel in Ghana,” in *The Speed of Change: Motor Vehicles and People in Africa, 1890-2000*, ed. Jan-Bart Gewald and Sabine Luning (Leiden: Brill, 2009), 212-231.

Among the best known examples of vehicular art that have drawn most scholarly attention are the Jeepneys from the Philippines about which it is possible to find several academic papers. While early articles aimed to systematically present this form of contemporary, urban Filipino folklore, more recent studies are analyzing not only their semiotics but as well the wider social context in which they exist, including the habitus of the people involved in their production and operation. Based on this literature numerous parallels can be drawn with vehicle decoration in South Asia, such as similar categories of imagery and messages depicted on them, and the fact that in both places the vehicles function as mobile billboards taking personal messages into the public sphere.³² Moreover, articles that are specifically dealing with religious imagery in Jeepney decoration are revealing similarities with this type of motifs that are present in the vehicular art of the Indian Subcontinent, which is in the focus of this study.³³

There are also a number of published papers about vehicle decoration in the West, primarily the United States where this phenomenon exists within trucking and Chicano low-rider cultures, although there is a substantial difference between vehicular art in the West and the developing world.³⁴ Namely, the socio-economic and expressive concerns in the West, where vehicle decoration is primarily an artistic expression, is often related to a certain subculture in contrast to developing countries like Nigeria, the Philippines, Haiti, India, Bangladesh or Pakistan where the vehicle primarily has an utilitarian value in the first place but whose decorations are also carriers of visual expressions of material culture traditions. Although lacking direct comparison or analyses, most of the cited papers include mention of parallels

³² Dominik C. Güss and Teresa G. Tuason, "Jeepneys: Values in the Streets," *Culture & Psychology* 14 (2008): 211-236; Herminia Q. Meñez, "Jeeprox: The Art and Language of Manila's Jeepney Drivers," *Western Folklore* 47 (1988): 38-47.

³³ Anderson Blanton, "The Sacred Diesel: Infrastructures of Transportation and Religious Art in Manila," *New Diversities* 17 (2015): 73-86; Darren L Gustafson, "Jeepney Spirituality," *Thesis Eleven* 112 (2012): 87-97.

³⁴ Brenda Jo Bright, *Mexican-American LowRiders: An Anthropological Approach to Popular Culture* (Houston: Rice University, 1994).

between vehicular decoration in South Asia and other parts of the world. Despite all the differences between the vehicular art of South Asia and similar forms on other continents, the existing scholarly literature surrounding this phenomenon in countries from other parts of the world is valuable from the viewpoint of methodological approaches.

Chapter 2

Spiritual Dimension of Vehicular Art

Among the different types of motifs that appear in vehicular art in general, those carrying religious and sacred symbolism are among the most common ones that are present on different continents, in countries with different social and religious background and tradition of vehicle decoration. Sacred imagery can be seen on different types of working vehicles ranging from trucks to buses and shared taxis in the countries of Latin America, notably Central America and the Caribbean, Western Africa, South and Southeast Asia. Apart from the obvious religious images and textual messages depicted on the exterior of vehicles, a wide repertoire of intercessory religious, talismanic objects addressing to the supernatural is adorning vehicles, not only in developing countries with tradition of vehicle decorating, but as well in more developed regions of the world. Both explicitly religious imagery and apotropaic objects and symbolism are regularly present on the vehicles in the countries of South Asia which is in the focus of this study, despite the wide variety of artistic and regional styles and different types of vehicles that are subject of decoration.

Despite the fragmented and inconsistent scholarship on this particular aspect of vehicular decoration that is covering only several Asian and African countries, the existing sources including the available visual material are providing enough information to notice general patterns, draw certain parallels between different traditions from a number of countries and make assumptions related to religious motifs that are present in this form of vernacular folk art worldwide. In that respect, motifs for displaying pious imagery on the exterior of the vehicle, adorning it with talismanic objects and decorating the interior spaces with various devotional paraphernalia are generally similar, no matter of different religious, social and artistic traditions that are present in the countries where this phenomenon is present.

Moreover, as it will be shown later, the presence of such kind of ornamentation transcends the developing countries with tradition of such vernacular art that are mentioned in this study and the social classes that are usually associated with vehicle and trucking culture due to the fact that it can be found practically everywhere around the world, both in working and private vehicles.

No matter of the semiotically diverse expressions, determined by different religious, cultural and artistic traditions, among the most common reasons for displaying religious imagery is self-expression, the need for displaying a personal religious worldview into the public sphere and determine one's identity within the local culture and community. The latter plays an especially important role as a social identifier of the driver or vehicle owner within the larger group in communities and a society where multiple religious denominations are present, as it is the case in the countries of the Indian Subcontinent. Another important aspect that is also being observed here as part of the same phenomenon, is the presence of apotropaic objects and imagery with prophylactic function whose main function is to protect the driver and passengers and ward off the evil in general. Apart from the abovementioned, dominant functions, religious motifs can also be applied to a vehicle with the aim of achieving missionary impact, as a communicative device spreading information and inviting the spectators to join the given religious sect or movement.

Examples of expression of religious beliefs and affiliations can be found on the surface of decorated vehicles in a number of countries where the practice of vehicular decoration is present. Despite all the obvious differences including cultural traditions, social environment, religious affiliation and artistic traditions, certain similarities can be noticed such as the basic reasons for applying such type of decoration, the repertoire of decorative motifs and their special distribution, the function of the vehicles carrying such type of imagery, and their role within the local societies.

When observing the religious and other imagery carrying spiritual meanings in different countries around the world, motifs related to the two globally most widespread religions, Islam and Christianity appear to be by far the most represented. In this respect, variations of the same religious images, inscriptions, calligraphy, and religious paraphernalia can be found on the vehicles on different continents, from Latin America, Africa and the Middle East to the Indian Subcontinent and Southeast Asia. As it was already mentioned, vehicular decoration in general is an amalgamation of different cultural influences and visual references ranging from traditional art to popular culture. Religious themes are just one among several common categories of images that regularly appear on the painted vehicles, like patriotic imagery, masculinity, adverts, popular portraiture, idealized elements of life, depictions of celebrities, and others. Painters working in vehicle paint shops are regularly using templates such as picture books, magazines and posters in order to create the artwork, with a touch of their own originality. In order to depict religious motifs, they are often using popular religious posters that are widespread around the Muslim world, but also in Christian countries in Africa and Latin America, and in the Indian Subcontinent. The same applies for calligraphic and other inscriptions with religious content which are in most cases chosen from the standard repertoire of religious posters and stickers that are available for sale in every bazaar and which are adorning the walls of private homes, shops, restaurants, hotel rooms, and various surfaces in urban public space. Such posters with religious content aimed for the masses and characterized by their naïve realism and vivid colors became widespread by the advance of technology. Talking about the Muslim world, they firstly appeared in the Ottoman Empire at the end of the nineteenth century in the technique of chromolithography, but became really widespread in the 1950s which generally coincides with the beginnings of vehicular decoration.³⁵ Thanks to the advance of printing technology such materials that

³⁵ Pierre Centlivres and Micheline Centlivres-Demont, *Imageries populaires en Islam* (Geneva: Georg Editeur,

became widely available and very popular not exclusively in the Muslim world but as well in other developing countries must have inspired the artists who transferred them onto the vehicles.

Various ready-made elements with spiritual symbolism addressing divine and supernatural protection are also found on the vehicles, adorning both their exteriors and interior space. From figurines representing deities, small icons and portable shrines to rosaries, pendants with apotropaic symbols and ubiquitous stickers with all sorts of religiously charged messages, cheap ready-made objects are regularly present on the vehicles around the world. Moreover, they are found not only on colorful working vehicles in the developing countries, but as well in the rest of the world where the phenomenon of vehicular art is not in existence, with the same aims of protecting the passengers and public expression of religious beliefs. In that respect, object like small icons, crosses, tassels, prayer beads, talismanic objects like nazar or hamsa found in the cabins of trucks, buses, taxis, private vehicles and other means of transportation are present not only in Latin America, Africa, Middle East and Asia, but as well in Europe, countries of the former USSR and North America.³⁶ The same also applies for the stickers, the cheapest and probably most widespread means for applying the religious symbols and messages onto all surfaces of the vehicles. And although the motifs of these stickers are very diverse, and therefore not only of pious character, those with religious motifs regularly appear on the vehicles around the world, both on working and private vehicles.

Unlike pious decoration painted on the exterior of vehicles which is primarily oriented towards the spectators outside and functioning as the moving billboard, informing the others

1997), 16.

³⁶ Nazar and hamsa are mentioned here as the most common type of talismanic objects which can be often found in vehicles around the Muslim world, from Northern Africa through the Middle East and Central Asia to the Indian Subcontinent and Southeast Asia; Nazar is an eye-shaped amulet believed to possess the power to ward off the evil eye; Hamsa is a palm-shaped amulet believed to protect against the evil eye that is present in many countries throughout North Africa and the Middle East.

about the beliefs and identity of the driver or vehicle owner, decorative elements in interiors serve as the extension of their private space. Namely, the mentioned ready-made objects which are often found in the driver's cabin are functioning as the mobile version of their private devotional shrines and are primarily directed towards themselves and in case of shared taxis and buses to a certain extent to the other passengers as well.

Another important aspect related to the religious imagery and symbolism is its spatial distribution across the vehicle which is showing a certain degree of uniformity in most of the places where such tradition of vehicular art exists. Talking about the interior space, motifs charged with this kind of symbolism, like small icons, miniature shrines, statuettes of the saints, stickers showing deities and various apotropaic objects are always located within the driver's cabin. Such locations are mostly on the surface above the windshield or in front of it, somewhere around the instrument panel while the pendants are usually hanging from the rear view mirror located in front of the windshield, within the central axis of the vehicle. In some buses and more elaborately decorated truck cabins, such talismanic objects addressing the supernatural powers aiming to protect the passengers can be seen also hanging from the roof. Talking about the exterior, in most types of vehicles the front side is the main carrier of such type of decorative program. This is understandable bearing in mind not only the construction of vehicles but as well their function and the way they interact with people. The front side, that is, the 'face' of any type of vehicle is the one which is mostly exposed to the view of the public and other drivers, not only on the road but as well when parked inside truck stops, bus stations, fuel stations, etc. Among the common features of trucks and some other types of vehicles as well, not only from South Asia, but also from other regions is the presence of a custom built upper front element, placed on the top of the cabin which in most cases functions as the main carrier of large, religiously charged inscriptions and images. Depending on the type of the vehicle and its function, back surfaces can also serve for placement of

sacred motifs. But they are rarely, and in case of the Indian Subcontinent almost never located on the back of the truck as this part is considered not to be suitable for this type of imagery. However, in the case of rickshaws from Bangladesh, religious images are normally found on the back as in this case it is the most exposed and compact surface suitable for decoration. Side surfaces can also serve as carriers of such imagery, especially in the front area such as the driver's door, and also elongated side panels of passenger vehicles are used to carry religious inscriptions.

Although this study does not aim to analyze the religious aspects of vehicular decoration in all the regions where this phenomenon is present, there are several examples that are worth to be mentioned here, aiming to point out some of the mutual characteristics of geographically distant and culturally very different traditions.

2.1 Americas

Vehicular decoration is present, and in some cases very popular in most of the countries of South and Central America and as well in the Caribbean. Many local variants of this vernacular folk art developed independently, with their own characteristics and peculiarities. Among the most famous examples of such traditions are the colorful *colectivos* from Argentina, Chile, Paraguay, and Uruguay, decorated trucks from Brazil, *jeepaos* and *chiva buses* from Colombia and Ecuador, *wild buses* from Suriname, *chicken buses* from Honduras, Guatemala, El Salvador, Nicaragua and Panama and *tap taps* from Haiti.³⁷ Although not the rule, the common thing for all these different types of vehicles is the presence of Christian

³⁷ Colectivo is the common name for public transportation vehicles such as the shared taxis, minibuses or buses in Argentina, Chile, Paraguay, and Uruguay; Chiva buses are the usual mean of transportation in rural Colombia and Ecuador. Jeepao is a vehicle similar to chiva bus, but made out of a converted Willys Jeep; Wild buses (wilde bussen) is the common name for minibuses used as the mean of transportation in Suriname, in the first place in its capital city Paramaribo; Chicken bus (camioneta de pollos) is a colloquial name for buses that operate in Latin American countries like Honduras, Guatemala, El Salvador, Nicaragua and Panama; Tap taps are minibuses or converted pick-up trucks that serve as share taxis in Haiti.

religious motifs as they are all coming from the region with predominance of the Catholic Church.

Probably the most known example of painted vehicles from Latin America are Tap taps, shared taxis in form of converted pick-ups, buses or trucks from Port-au-Prince, capital of Haiti. Among their main characteristics are a pervasiveness of geometrical decoration, vibrant colors, wooden-carved window covers and panels attached on the upper side, and the presence of spiritual motifs and slogans, combined with those from the popular culture. Although not predominant, religious inscriptions are found on most of the vehicles, mostly on their front upper (Figure 1) or lower side (Figure 2) although they can also appear on side surfaces. Slogans which appear in both French like *L'Objectif du Dieu Vivant* (Objective of the Living God) in Figure 2 and in English like inscription *Thank you Lord Every Body* shown in Figure 1 are usually simple in form, praising God. While the large inscriptions are to be found on the upper section, expressing personal preferences of the driver or fleet owner as well as aiming to protect the passengers, within the lower section there are explicit symbols for warding off the evil forces such as the pair of cherubs in Figure 1 and eyes in Figure 2.

Iconic chiva buses from rural regions of Columbia and Ecuador are another example of an authentic form of vehicular art from Latin America where religious motifs are found. Characterized by their modified bodies that are often made of wood, bright colors and decoration in form of various geometric patterns, they are also carriers of religious symbols and motifs. The standard position for the placement of pious themes aiming to protect the vehicle is the upper front section of the bus as shown in Figure 3. In this case, a ready-made statuette of the Virgin with the Child, typical for the Catholic culture, is attached on the upper section of the bus, right above the driver's cabin. Along with such ready-made objects that are even more common in interior space and ubiquitous religious slogans, more elaborate

painted scenes also adorn these buses like in Figure 4. Here, the Virgin and Child standing on a cloud with two angels aside are depicted on the backside of the bus, in a realistic manner, possibly using airbrush technique, following the typical, popular patterns of Catholic art.

2.2 Africa

Several distinctive traditions of vehicular decoration where the presence of religious motifs is evident exist in different regions of the African continent. Among the best known examples are Sudanese *sifinjas*, *matatus* from Kenya, *fula fulas* in DR Congo, *mammy wagons* and *tro tros* in Ghana, *poda podas* in Sierra Leone, *danfo* buses and painted trucks from Nigeria, and so on.³⁸ Although the mentioned types of vehicles and their style of decoration are very different, pious imagery is always there to some degree. In most cases, and especially in the countries of Sub-Saharan Africa, both motifs associated with the two most widespread religions in Africa, Christianity and Islam, are equally present on the vehicles.

Nigeria is probably the best known example of vehicular art from Africa. Moreover, in this country where the tradition of sign-painting became a specialized vernacular art not limited on vehicles only, a similar style of folk art has wide application in places of business such as beauty parlors, barbershops, bars, various painted banners, adverts and murals that are omnipresent across the country. According to Jack Pritchett who conducted a research on Nigerian truck art in the late 1970s, “Truck art can be used as a window through which we can view a particularly Nigerian view of life and death, a view expressed by a set of images borrowed from various sources: the movies, growing Nigerian nationalism and traditional

³⁸ Sifinja is the name given to modified Bedford trucks that carry people and goods; Matatus are privately owned minibuses serving as share taxis in Kenyan cities; Fula fulas is the name for vans and minibuses that are operating as shared taxis in Kinshasa, capital city of DR Congo; Mammy wagon is a small open-sided bus or light truck used to transport passengers or goods in Ghana and other West African countries; Tro tros are privately owned vans serving as the principal mean of public transportation in Ghana; Poda podas are privately owned mini vans and minibuses which serves as one of the main form of transportation in Sierra Leone; Danfos are privately owned vans and minibuses serving as shared taxis in Nigerian cities.

folklore”.³⁹ It is important to mention that vehicular art in Nigeria, which is not limited only to trucks but also applies to other types of vehicles has evolved since then both in terms of technique and motifs, but it managed to keep its authentic character. Another important aspect of Nigerian vehicular art is the presence of religious motifs, both Islamic in northern regions and Christian in the south of the country. Such imagery is often put on the upper front side of the vehicle but as well on its back where the most elaborate paintings are usually located. In Muslim dominated areas such paintings most often include monumental mosques and themes related with the pilgrimage to Mecca, like the Kaaba in Figure 5, with accompanying inscriptions written in Hausa language such as proverbs and messages asking for divine protection.⁴⁰ Similarly, on the vehicles in Southern Nigeria large compositions with Christian motifs and inscriptions are to be found, like in Figure 6 where an elaborated depiction of St. Michael with an inscription above, *Get out of my life Satan*, appears on the back of the truck. Similarly, a depiction of Christ followed by the inscription *Jesus I love you* appears on the truck in Figure 7.

There are more examples of vehicle decoration from the countries of West Africa with pronounced use of religious themes such as in Ghana, where the same two dominant religions are present. However, in most of these countries the decoration of vehicles is not so elaborated as in Nigeria and is mostly limited on inscriptions, among which popular mottos, humorous messages, and those with religious content are predominant. The example of two mammy wagons from the 1990s is showing the dominance of religious inscriptions, not only through their dominant spatial position but the fact that they can be the only decorative content like in the case of the latter one: the large inscription *Alahu Waidu* praising Allah on the mammy wagon painted in green in Figure 8 is clearly defining the religious identity of its

³⁹ Jack Pritchett, “Nigerian Truck Art,” *African Arts* 12 (1979): 27-31.

⁴⁰ In his article, Pritchett is mentioning several popular inscriptions addressing for divine protection of trucks: *Allah ya kiyaye or Allah ya tsare mu* (Allah protect us), *Ba mai yi, sai Allah* (There is no doer, except Allah) and *Komai na Allah* (Everything belongs to Allah). According to the author, all inscriptions appear in Hausa language; Ibid.

owner or driver, while on the one shown in Figure 9 the only existing inscription is *The Lord is my Shepherd* on its front side, right above the windshield⁴¹. Instead of such hand-painted messages, today most of vehicles have ready-made stickers with the same type of messages or they are composed from letters cut from self-adhesive foil. In his article focused on everyday religious and spiritual practices in the means of public transportation in Ghana, Gabriel Klaeger describes vehicles as tangible places for the expression of religious convictions through such inscriptions, and how travel by road creates social communities available for worship and evangelization.⁴² The latter is however a typically African phenomenon where passengers assemble ‘mobile congregations’ during the road travels across Ghana, which also applies to some other countries from that part of Africa with Christian communities.⁴³ A typical example of a modern, modestly decorated tro tro with the large inscription *Thank God* on its rear window is shown in Figure 10. Today such inscriptions, which are largely religious in nature, are found on most of tro tros and other vehicles in Ghana and surrounding countries, both on their windows, exterior surfaces and inside the cabins. In an article analyzing the semiotics and symbolism of lorry inscriptions in Ghana, Sjaak Van Der Geest notes the increased tendency towards Christian themes, coming from Bible texts, hymns and prayers.⁴⁴ He identifies several typical Christian inscriptions like, typically,: *Blood of Jesus, Christ is the answer, Clap for Jesus, Deo Gratias, Guy Jesus, Holy Spirit, Lamb of God, Psalm 35:1-7, Rock of Ages, Thy will be done, and Jesus is the first.*, In Muslim regions of northern Ghana the following are the most common ones: *Akwei*

⁴¹ Obviously, the inscription *Allahu Waidu* written in Hausa or some of other local languages that are practiced among Muslim communities in Ghana has a meaning of praising Allah.

⁴² Gabriel Klaeger, “Religion on the Road: The spiritual experience of road travel in Ghana,” in *The Speed of Change: Motor Vehicles and People in Africa, 1890-2000*, ed. Jan-Bart Gewald and Sabine Luning (Leiden: Brill, 2009), 212-231.

⁴³ Ibid., 214.

⁴⁴ Sjaak Van Der Geest, “Anyway! Lorry Inscriptions In Ghana,” in *The Speed of Change: Motor Vehicles and People in Africa, 1890-2000*, ed. Jan-Bart Gewald and Sabine Luning (Leiden: Brill, 2009), 267.

Allah (Allah is there), *Allah Sarakyi* (Allah is the King) and *Baa meyi shei Allah* (Nothing except Allah).⁴⁵

2.3 Asia

Apart from the countries of South Asia there are other examples of vehicular decoration in Asia where spiritual motifs are pronouncedly used. Although it cannot be said that such tradition exists in the majority of the countries of the Middle East, vehicles adorned with Islamic motifs in form of stickers with various inscriptions related to Islam, famous mosques and pilgrimage sites, various proverbs, mottos and citations from Koran or a pair of female eyes can be seen practically everywhere across the region. In addition, there is a plethora of other objects, from religious to talismanic that are found inside the cabins of private vehicles, shared taxis, trucks and buses all over the Muslim world.

⁴⁵ Ibid.; the article includes a list of inscriptions from lorries in Ghana based on the material that was collected during three field researches which the author conducted in various regions of Ghana. The list includes a vast number of inscriptions from which the selection of those with religious is made. The list of religious, mostly Christian inscriptions which Sjaak Van Der Geest spotted on lorries in Ghana in the period from 1990 to 1994 include: *All power belongs to Jesus, Truly, God is good, And his blessing, Enemies are not God, God's grace, Lord, speak, Believe in God, Nothing is too difficult for God, Ask God, God is great, Blessed Assurance, Blood of Jesus, Christ is the answer, Clap for Jesus, Clap for Jesus nicely, Come Jesus, Come to Jesus, Cry for Jesus, Whatever God will say, Thanks be to God, Divine peace, Divine victory, Driver Christ is with me, Enemies are not God, It is not difficult for God, Even Jesus, Everything by God, Except the Lord, Exodus 14: 14, It is the Lord, It belongs to the Lord, Be God's companion, Give to God, Give yourself to Jesus, Faith, Father forgive them, Fear God, For Christ we live, Glory be to God, Glory be to God in the highest, God Almighty, God dey, God did it, God first, God has written, God is able, God is always right, God is great, God is love, God is not for one man, God is the source, God is wonderful, God knows all, God loves you, God my defender, God never sleeps, God's case no appeal, Gods plan, God's power, God's time, God's time is the best, God's will, Great is thy God, Guy Jesus, Except God, Have faith in God, Help me oh God, Holy Spirit, Hope in the Lord, Look what the Lord has done, Look at God's words, In God we trust, Isaiah 48: 18, It's the Lord, Jah love, Jah Power, God is my shepherd, Jesus alone, Jesus is coming soon, Jesus is the bread of life, Jesus is the way, Praise God, Show the one you will worship, Lamb of God, Let us pray, Let's give thanks to God, Lord, pray to God, Mighty is Jehova, Mighty God, Help comes from God, My Lord, Blessed be the Father, Blessed be God, Blessed be the helpers, No Jesus no hope, No king as God, Not too big for God to do, God's time is a good time, God is wonderful, God's power is great, The fear of God is the O.B., Obey the will of God, Oh Christ, Jesus is King, God who provides for all, Only Jesus, Brother, listen to God's word, Ways of God, God's grace, God will provide, God knows someone's trouble, God does not want evil, God's ways are many, God is wonderful, God does not sleep, By the power of God, God is great, God wants us to be close to Him, God is powerful, Our Father, Our God is great, great, Our God reigns, Over to God, Praise your maker, Praise the Lord, Pray for life, Pray without ceasing, Prayer is the answer, Psalm 23, Psalm 35: 1-7, Psalm 86, Psalm 90: 17, Psalm 115, Rely on God alone, If Jesus was living now, God the healer, Save me oh Lord, Saviour, Say Mohammed, Sons of God, Still Know that I am your God, Thank u Jesus, The living Christ, The Lord is my shepherd, The second coming of Jesus is near, Listen to Father's word, Trust in God, We are going the bible way, Why not Jesus, With whom? Jesus, Wonderful God, Wonderful Jesus, God is my helper, Jesus's property, Jesus's blood, Jesus has triumphed, Jesus master of power, Because of Jesus, Jesus is good, Well done Jesus, and Jesus is the first.*

An example of another tradition can be mentioned coming from the dominantly Catholic Philippines where this kind of symbolism plays an important role: the *jeepneys*. As in most cases, sacred motifs adorn these vehicles along with secular scenes of power, family relations, sports figures, and images from American popular culture.⁴⁶ Although the tradition of decoration of this most popular means of public transportation in the Philippines can be traced back to the mid-twentieth century, when left over U.S. military jeeps started to be converted to such vehicles, the increased presence of pious motifs is a more recent phenomenon. Namely, the expansion of religious themes occurred in the 1980's, alongside with the increased use of advertising billboards in the streets of Manila and other big cities. During the last three decades, jeepney art has been influenced by new Christian and evangelical religious movements and consequently inscriptions such as *Praise the Lord!*, *Prayer Warrior*, *Power of Prayer*, *Good is Good*, *Praise God* or *Jesus is Lord* as shown in Figure 11 started to appear since then.⁴⁷ Alongside with such inscriptions, on the exterior surfaces are often themes present related to the Virgin Mary, such in the Figure 12, biblical characters and prayer, bringing a new dimension into the urban landscape of Manila. Through such proliferation of sacred imagery into public space, the jeepney became a vehicle of religious representation, and moreover a device for pious mobilization.⁴⁸

Religious symbols play an important role in vehicular decoration of the countries of South Asia, and especially in the countries of the Indian Subcontinent. Various types of symbols with spiritual meaning are regularly found on exterior surfaces of all types of working vehicles across this region. The previous examples have shown that the main drives including pious symbols in the repertoire of vehicular decoration are very similar all around the world, in countries with different cultural and religious identities and as well different traditions of

⁴⁶ Anderson Blanton, "The Sacred Diesel: Infrastructures of Transportation and Religious Art in Manila," *New Diversities* 17 (2015): 76.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 75.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 76.

vehicle decoration. In addition, pious imagery and inscriptions are usually variations taken from the same repertoire of popular religious images, mottos or citations characteristic for the given religion. Also, the spatial distribution of such decoration tends to follow the same rules in all abovementioned regions, which can be explained in the first place by their intended function in public space and as well the structure of the vehicle itself.

However, the decoration of vehicles in the countries of South Asia and in particular of the Indian Subcontinent possesses some mutual and peculiar characteristics, among which the sacred dimension plays an important role.

Chapter 3

Spiritual Motifs in Vehicular Art in the Countries of the Indian Subcontinent

3.1 Pakistan

Decorated vehicles are present in everyday life of the people in Pakistan to a degree unparalleled anywhere, not only in South Asia but globally. Ubiquitous decorated trucks, buses and other vehicles became an integral part of the landscape, not only in cities, but virtually in each corner of this vast country stretching from the Indian Ocean to the Himalayas. Consequently, the whole industry associated with vehicle decoration that became no less than a symbol of national identity is nowadays considered to be the largest artistic industry in the country.⁴⁹

The spiritual dimension, an inherent part of vehicle decoration in Pakistan is among the main features of this vernacular form of art. Although motifs related to spirituality are present in decorative elements found on various types of working vehicles from buses to *chingchis* and *tongas*, they are primarily linked to the trucking industry and famous Pakistani ‘truck art’.⁵⁰ Thus, the decorative program of trucks is the most coherent and therefore most suitable to be observed. Truck art in Pakistan, a phenomenon that is nowadays globally recognized as an authentic form of folk expression, has also been studied by scholars for at last four decades

⁴⁹ Due to the volume of people that are involved in the industry of vehicular art decoration and in particular truck decoration and as well the economic impact on the national level, Jamal J. Elias named truck art as the “largest artistic industry in the country”; Jamal J. Elias, “The Politics of Pashtun and Punjabi Truck Decoration,” in *Under the Drones: Modern Lives in the Afghanistan-Pakistan Borderlands*, ed. Shahzad Bashir and Robert D. Crews (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2012), 193.

⁵⁰ Tonga is the light carriage drawn by one horse used for transportation in India, Pakistan, and Bangladesh. They usually have a canopy and a single pair of large wheels and are traditionally made of wood. Although tongas can still be found around the Subcontinent, especially in rural areas and sometimes as well in old parts of cities and towns, they are increasingly becoming a less popular form of transportation due to the availability of more practical, motorized vehicles; Chingchi is a variant of auto ricksha, a popular means of public transportation in Pakistan. It is the cheapest and most rudimentary type of motorized vehicle in the country, constructed on the basis of a Chinese motorcycle attached to the locally constructed carriage. They are named after the Chinese company Jinan Qingqi Motorcycle Co. Ltd., whose motorbikes were first used to power the chingchis.

and is therefore most thoroughly researched in comparison to other branches of vehicular decoration.⁵¹

3.1.1 Typology of decorative elements

Both religious and apotropaic themes, which have an important place in Pakistani truck decoration, are naturally related to Islam. Among the elaborate visual repertoire in recent truck art, such symbols can be shown explicitly through depictions of holy places and verses from Quran or, in indirect way, through objects whose function is linked with spirituality as well as supernatural powers. In his pioneering effort to systematize the decorative program of truck art in Pakistan, Alain Lefebvre suggests two main genres of decoration: while the first one aims to catch people's attention, the second one is meant to protect the truck from the jinns and other evil forces which are also attracted by its beauty.⁵² According to him, the first genre would include idealized landscapes, depictions of animals and modern machines, while the other one contains pictures of the Muslim holy places in order to show the driver's devotion and aiming to ward off the evil eye and avert misfortune. Another categorization is offered by Jamal J. Elias who identifies seven different categories of motifs that appear on Pakistani trucks, based primarily on their signification:

- explicit religious symbols and images,
- talismanic and fetish objects,
- talismanically or religiously loaded symbols,
- idealized elements of life,
- elements from modern life,
- a non-religious calligraphic program,

⁵¹ See the chapter titled "Vehicular Art: The State of Scholarship."

⁵² Alain Lefebvre, "The decorative truck as a communicative device," *Semiotica* 75 (2009): 216-217; Jinns are supernatural creatures in Islamic mythology and theology. The Quran says that jinns were created from a "smokeless and scorching fire," separately from humans or angels. They are considered to be of lower rank than the angels, able to appear in human and animal forms and to have ability possess humans.

- design as ornamental device.⁵³

According to this categorization, which can also be applied for other countries from the Subcontinent, the first category would include both pictorial and inscription symbols whose meaning has explicit religious signification, such as depictions of the Kaaba in Mecca, the Prophet's Mosque in Medina, various Sufi saints, Ali's horse Zuljanah or Buraq, accompanied with medallions containing calligraphic inscriptions of the names of God and the Prophet, verses from the Quran, and other inscription with religious meaning.⁵⁴ Elements belonging to the second group are probably the most numerous, not just in terms of various forms but as well appearing not only on trucks but also on other types of vehicles. Talismanic objects including various amulets and other objects aiming to protect the vehicle and its driver from evil forces are adorning virtually every working vehicle in Pakistan to a higher or less degree, which is not always the case with decorations from the previous group. Therefore, objects like tassels, yak tails, ribbons from the Sufi shrines, animal horns and boomerang shaped antennas that are regularly seen on the trucks and other vehicles have apotropaic and prophylactic function. Within the third category according to Elias' categorization are representations of objects which possess talismanic power. They include images, stickers and ornamental pieces attached to the vehicle that are shaped as objects of whom it is believed that they are carriers of such kind of powers. The most common of such objects regularly to be found on Pakistani vehicles is the fish, which is considered to be a symbol of good fortune, female eyes that are representing the protection against the evil eye, and the chakor partridge, for which it is believed that it can deflect the spell aimed to the truck or driver.⁵⁵ However, such depictions can often be chosen by the drivers solely because

⁵³ Elias, *On Wings of Diesel*, 114-119.

⁵⁴ Zuljanah, an important element of Shia iconography was the horse that Husayn ibn Ali rode during the Battle of Karbala; Buraq, a celestial creature from Islamic mythology on which the Prophet Muhammad made his journey from Mecca to Jerusalem and up to heaven during the Isra and Mi'raj which is known as a Night Journey.

⁵⁵ Elias, *On Wings of Diesel*, 159.

of their aesthetic appeal, while their talismanic dimension can be a subject of different interpretations.⁵⁶

3.1.2 The origin of motifs

Another aspect of Pakistani truck art which should be mentioned is its possible link with Mughal art and, in particular, miniature painting from that period. There are opinions that parallels between certain aspects of truck decoration and court decoration of Mughal emperors from the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries could be drawn. Namely, the ornate truck cabins decorated with brocade and mirror-work can be compared with Sheesh Mahals, sumptuous imperial pavilions of Mughal rulers decorated with elaborate mirror halls which can be found within the forts of Lahore, Jaipur and Agra.⁵⁷ Another argument in favor of claims that truck art is directly influenced by Mughal art is the presence of exotic landscapes, hunting scenes, wild animals, and people that resemble the ones from Mughal miniature painting, especially those from the period of Emperor Jahangir from early seventeenth century which are characterized by naturalistic representations of wildlife and people. By knowing that the tradition of miniature painting was maintained during the colonial period, when it was even studied at the Mayo School of Art in Lahore and represented the creative force of traditional art, the suggested influence of Mughal miniature painting to contemporary truck art seems plausible.⁵⁸ Despite the fact that the Qoran forbids the public display of any

⁵⁶ Based on several conversations both with truck painters and drivers in the *addas* near Karachi, Rawalpindi and Peshawar I got the impression that persons associated with the trucking industry are not always aware of the mentioned talismanic symbolism of certain depictions. For instance, in Karachi, I was told that the chakor partridge represents something “most beautiful” to them, meaning that drivers appreciate this motif primarily due to its aesthetic appeal. The same may apply for representation of the fish, lions, eagles and other depicted animals which also possess protective functions. However, this does not mean that the apotropaic function of such depictions is a construct of researchers who dealt with them, but that sometimes these motifs can be placed on the vehicle without an explicit intention of the driver or even the painter, just because they are within the standard repertoire of motifs in truck art.

⁵⁷ Richard Covington, “Masterpieces to Go: The Trucks of Pakistan,” *Saudi Aramco World* 56 (2005): 14.

⁵⁸ Imran Kureshi and Naazish Ataullah, “The Semiotics of the Nation’s Icons: The Art of Truck and Miniature Painting,” in *Mazaar, Bazaar: Design and Visual Culture in Pakistan*, ed. Saima Zaidi (Karachi: Oxford University Press, 2009), 23; the Mayo School of Industrial Arts that was founded in Lahore in 1875 as one of

figurative paintings or drawings which caused the flourishing of calligraphy and geometric art, there are many examples of naturalistic imagery throughout the history of Islamic art, since its earliest days. Figuration which was strictly banned in the holy and public places was somehow tolerated within private space and on utilitarian objects for domestic use, while in the Middle East and Indian Subcontinent figurative miniature painting flourished as court art reserved for the elite. Therefore, the tradition of Mughal miniature painting containing figurative depictions was tolerated due to its elitist character, while thanks to the fact that Islamic orthodoxy wields little real influence over the popular and folk arts, the elements of truck art with naturalistic imagery are nowadays omnipresent in the public space despite its formal discordance with religious canons.

One very important aspect of religious symbols in vehicular decoration, not only in Pakistan but in the whole Indian Subcontinent, is its function as a social identifier. In this respect, another categorization should be considered related to the elements of decoration with spiritual meaning, belonging to all three of the previously mentioned groups: semiotic meaning and functionality. Namely, while the purpose of decorative elements that possess talismanic powers or their visual representations are primarily functional, meaning that they are placed onto the vehicle aiming to protect it by bringing good fortune or repelling the evil powers, symbols with explicit religious content have twofold function: beside their functional, prophylactic role through appealing directly to God, Sufi saints and Ali, they are also carriers of semiotic meanings in the way that based on them one can easily recognize the religious as well as social affiliation of the driver. In this way, spiritual symbols that are an inherent part of vehicular decoration are contributing to the communicative role of the vehicle, through which various aspects of Pakistani society are reflected.

two art colleges created by the British Crown in British India in reaction to the Arts & Crafts Movement was renamed to National College of Arts (NCA) in 1958.

3.1.3 Religious composition of Pakistan

Despite the fact that Islam is the dominant religion in Pakistan with around 96% of the population counting more than 210 million citizens professing some form of the religion, which is moreover integral part of the country's official name, there are lines of religious differentiation on several levels within it.⁵⁹ The most obvious is the sectarian division between adherence to Sunnism and Shiism, the latter adhered by around 20% of Pakistani Muslims. While the majority of Sunnis are following the Hanafi school of jurisprudence and ulama of Barlevi tradition, around 20% adhere to the Deobandi movement, and a smaller percentage to Ahl-i Hadith and Tablighi Jamaat.⁶⁰ Shias, widely dispersed all over the country from Sindh in the south to the Northern Areas are predominantly following the Imami or Twelver doctrine, while a minority among them are Ismailis. However, at the practical level the major division in Muslim practice and identity in Pakistan, and in the first place among Sunni population is between those who believe in intercessory models of religious life and salvation and the others who deny any intercessory power except that of Muhammad. Vernacular religious beliefs and practices throughout the Muslim world allow the participation of saintly figures that function as the loci of devotional practices and aspirations. In Pakistan, Sufi saints serve this function mostly among Sunnis, while the major element of their importance lies in possession of *barkat*, talismanic religious power that can be transmitted to their devotees.⁶¹ Symbols reflecting adherence to the abovementioned denominations, movements and forms of vernacular Islam can be identified within the elaborate program of decoration of Pakistani vehicles.

⁵⁹ According to the last census which was conducted in the period between 15th March 2017 and 25th May 2017, the population of Pakistan excluding the autonomous regions Azad Kashmir and Gilgit-Baltistan was 207,774,520. (<http://www.pbscensus.gov.pk/content/provisional-summary-results-6th-population-and-housing-census-2017-0>)

⁶⁰ Elias, *On Wings of Diesel*, 25.

⁶¹ Ibid.

3.1.4 Regional styles

Another aspect of vehicular decoration, which is mostly visible in the decoration of Pakistani trucks is the presence of regional styles of which each is bearing some unique features. Despite the obvious differences between the vehicles from different provinces of the country, the hybrid nature of vehicle decoration itself, mobility of craftsmen and finally mobility of vehicles are among the main reasons why it is very hard to precisely define different ‘schools’ of vehicular decoration. On the other hand, some decorative elements, depictions, inscriptions, techniques, materials and artistic styles through which local customs can be recognized, traditions and beliefs are inherent to certain corners of the country and therefore can be easily identified. According to Jamal J. Elias, there are five regional styles in Pakistani truck art: Punjabi, Swati style, Peshawari, Baluchi and Karachi style.⁶² Punjabi style is the most widespread, due to the fact that several important centers of truck art are located within this most populous province of Pakistan. Workshops for vehicle decoration are located in the major cities across the province, among which the major centers are Rawalpindi, Sargodha, Dera Ghazi Khan and Sialkot. Due to its favorable position at the crossroad of major roads in Pakistan, Rawalpindi became the largest center of truck art and moreover developed its unique style. Apart from workshops which are nowadays mostly concentrated around Carriage Factory areas and other locations in the outskirts of the city, workshops specialized in production of particular decorative elements, from hammered tin, adhesive tape, various kinds of tassels and so on, can still be found in the old part of Rawalpindi. Trucks decorated in Punjabi style are, in general, the most elaborately ornamented and characterized by

⁶² Elias, “On Wings of Diesel,” 189. Although this categorization applies for truck art only, which was in the focus of research of Elias, to a certain degree it also applies to other vehicles, in the first place buses. Although customization of other types of vehicles is much less consistent and therefore more difficult for research, there are obvious differences between the buses decorated in Karachi, Punjab and Peshawar. Therefore, at least three of the mentioned five regional styles can also be applied to bus decoration. This is going in line with three regional styles which Durriya Kazi mentions in her article: Peshawari, Rawalpindi and Karachi; Durriya Kazi, “The Spirited Art of Truck Decoration,” *City: A Quarterly on Urban Society* 1 (2002): 69.

extensive use of hammered metal elements and plastic appliqué.⁶³ Among the most typical features of this style are *taj*, metal decorative shade above the windshield, elements of hammered tin placed around the front section, a metal plated cabin door and elaborately painted side panels with biomorphic and zoomorphic motifs which are especially characteristic for Rawalpindi workshops, as it can be seen on the Bedford truck in Figure 13. Another style of truck decoration characteristic for Northwestern Pakistan is the Swati style, named after the Swat valley in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa province. Trucks decorated in this style feature wood carved doors that are usually left unpainted, while plastic and metal elements are scarce. An example of a Bedford Rocket truck spotted in Upper Dir district and decorated in Swati style with wood carved cabin doors, giant *misbaha* and hanging yak tails is shown in Figure 14.⁶⁴ Peshawar, another important center of vehicle decoration is renowned not just of its trucks but as well elaborately ornate buses. Trucks decorated in this style are usually a bit less decorated than those from Rawalpindi and they, as well, have wooden doors, which are sometimes painted. Also, the decorative elements tend to be less figurative than in Punjabi tradition which is probably the consequence of increasing Islamization and the growing influence of Wahhabism in this Pashtun-dominated area close to the Afghan border.⁶⁵ Overall, Peshawari style could be best described as the hybrid mixture of Swati and Punjabi traditions of vehicle design, rather than an authentic style.⁶⁶ Figure 15 is showing a flamboyantly decorated city bus made on the basis of Bedford truck chassis, with abundance of talismanic symbols and centrally positioned medallion with the calligraphic inscription Mashallah (As God willing). Unlike other schools of decoration whose design is based on iconic Bedford Rocket trucks, Baluchi style has developed during the last three decades aiming to apply decorative elements of Pakistani truck art to new types of vehicles that are

⁶³ Ibid.

⁶⁴ Misbaha is a Muslim prayer bead.

⁶⁵ Martin Sökefeld, "Moving images: Truck art in Pakistan," *Tsantsa - Revue de la Société Suisse d'Éthnologie* 13 (2008): 190.

⁶⁶ Elias, "On Wings of Diesel," 189.

increasingly present on the country's roads, replacing aging Bedfords. Due to the proximity of two major ports, Karachi and Gwadar, through which the majority of new, mostly Japanese trucks such as Nissan and Hino are coming, the workshops for truck design started to appear across the province, from Lasbela to Quetta and Zhob. This style is characterized by prevalence of simple, geometric motifs, use of plastic appliqué and characteristic, extended front bumpers. The Hino truck in Figure 16 is showing some of the characteristic elements of Baluchi style, like extended bumper with a grill guard and typical side 'antennas', geometric decoration and reflective elements, while the religious inscriptions are positioned within the windshield area. Finally Karachi, the biggest port and major transit point in the country, is the home of yet another distinctive style of vehicular decoration. As a major transport hub with dozens of workshops for vehicle decoration and artisans coming from all over the country, Karachi style has evolved as a hybrid style combining influences from different provinces of Pakistan. Therefore, defining Karachi style can be difficult due to the fact that it combines elements of Baluchi, Punjabi and even styles coming from the Northwestern part of the country. It is characterized by the use of vivid colors, reflective elements and wooden panels mounted above the windshield which are mostly found on water cisterns, like in Figure 17. Another notable example are minibuses that operate on W11 route, renowned for their flamboyant decorative style mostly consisting of geometric patterns in bright colors and talismanic objects, like Figure 18 is showing.⁶⁷

Bearing in mind the hybrid nature of vehicle decoration in Pakistan, the mobility of craftsmen and vehicles themselves, and the distribution of the abovementioned religious groups and denominations throughout the country, it would be hard to tell that there are any firm rules regarding the types of religious motifs and messages, their number and spatial distribution

⁶⁷ Renowned for their lavish decoration, local minibuses from Karachi that are often referred only as 'W11' are serving the following route: *New Karachi, Sindhi hotel, Godhra camp, Sorhab Goth, F.B Area, Karimabad, Liaquatabad, Teen Hatti Numaish, Jinnah Road, Light House, Taj Hotel, Bolton Market, Tower, Nagina cinema, Chundrigar Road, Frere Road, Burns Road.*

related to these five regional styles of decoration. Religious elements of vehicle decoration are found on vehicles decorated in all mentioned regional styles of decoration; the final choice of repertoire depends on the person of the driver or, in some cases, vehicle owner. If the driver is affiliated with some Sufi order or of a Saint, it will most probably be reflected through the visual elements of his vehicle; if he is a Shia, it is very likely that Shia imagery like Zulfiqar sword and verses mentioning Ali will appear somewhere on his truck no matter of its decorative style, and so on.⁶⁸ Finally, the religious motifs reflecting the driver's affiliation to certain movements and denominations within Islam can appear on trucks and other vehicles decorated in any of the listed decorative styles.

3.1.5 Spatial distribution of decorative elements

One important feature of vehicle decoration in Pakistan which particularly applies to trucks is a systematic spatial distribution of decorative motifs and elements, where these with religious and talismanic symbolic have an important place. In that sense and almost as a rule, most of religiously charged decoration is found on the front side of vehicles, no matter of their regional style and even the type of vehicle. However, the decorative program of trucks is the most consistent, with elaborated visual language and 'rules' of spatial distribution of religiously charged symbols. First of all, the front side of the truck, unlike the back is considered to be its most prominent side through which messages are easily transmitted. The front of the truck is therefore visible from any approaching vehicle on the road, and even more important, when the truck is parked in front of any truck stop, gas station, roadside restaurant or tea house. The upper side of the front section usually carries explicit religious signs which are, almost as a rule, depictions of the Kaaba and the Prophet's Mosque and

⁶⁸ In his book *On Wings of Diesel*, 69, Elias also mentions the case of a Christian driver whose truck is decorated with images of Kaaba.

invocations of Allah and Muhammad.⁶⁹ Figure 19 is showing the upper panel of a truck decorated in Karachi style containing a medallion with the writing *Ya Muhammad* on the left and *Ya Allah* on the right side, while in the center there is an unusual depiction of a large mosque resembling the great Mughal mausoleums and in its left corner is a simplified depiction of the Prophet's Mosque, while the Kaaba occupies its right corner. In classic, Bedford trucks the front side contains several zones, each reserved for certain types of motives. The truck which appears to be decorated in Karachi style in Figure 20. does not contain religious symbols in the upper zone, which are instead centered within the middle zone: The Kaaba appears twice, in stylized form within a flower-like vegetative form on the left and right side, while within the central medallion is written *Mashallah* in Urdu. Below, within the same middle zone, are two more representations of Muslim holy places: the Prophet's Mosque on the left and the Kaaba on the right side. Below them, in the central zone, one finds the large, simplified inscription *Ya Allah* made of reflective elements, being the dominant religious symbol on this truck. Talismanic symbols are found on sides of this inscription in form of a pair of fish and two chukar partridges sitting on the metal *taj* above the windshield.⁷⁰ Several talismanic objects are found within the lower front zone of this truck, below the bumper in form of numerous hanging jingles suspended on chains, a pair of mannat on the sides, and a small shoe in the center.⁷¹ A series of chains hanging from the front bumper are one of the most remarkable features of Pakistani trucks which even became

⁶⁹ According to the findings of Tariq Rahman's study based on the sample of 627 trucks from all over the country, the top section can carry more than one inscription of religious nature, while the most common such inscriptions that appear in this zone are the following ones: *Mashallah* (As God willing), *Wallaha khaerur razeqin* (God is the best provider of sustenance), *Subhan Allah* (All praises are for God), *Ya Allah ya Muhammad* (O God! O Muhammad-Peace be Upon Him), *Ya Allah Madad* (O God Help me!), *Alhamd o lillah* (Thank God), *Haza min fazl-e-rabbi* (Here is God's grace): Tariq Rahman, "Language on Wheels: Inscriptions on Pakistani Trucks as a Window into Popular Worldview," in *Language Policy, Identity and Religion: Aspects of the Civilization of the Muslims of Pakistan and North India* (Islamabad: Quaid-i-Azam University, 2010), 193.

⁷⁰ Chukar partridge is a popular depiction in Pakistani truck art to whom are attributed the supernatural powers. Namely, in case that someone cast the evil eye on someone's property, the spell is deflected onto the bird that then dies: Elias, *On Wings of Diesel*, 159.

⁷¹ Mannat is the black cloth hung from the vehicle in order to ward off the evil eye.

widely renowned as the 'jingle trucks'. Their number, size, shape and color can vary, and Figure 21 is showing the zone of a front bumper with jingles suspended on a network of beads from another Bedford truck spotted in Peshawar. An interesting detail here is a child shoe, an actual, utilitarian object which is in this context representing a talismanic object aiming to ward off the evil eye. The motif of a shoe frequently appears on the bumpers and mudguards across the Subcontinent and is especially popular in India, as it will be shown in the next chapter. Another typical motif that can be frequently seen in this zone are pairs of female eyes which have twofold function of protecting the vehicle and as well its feminization like in the Figure 22 where eyes paired with hanging chains resemble of woman wearing a niqab veil. As it was already said, the ways drivers see their trucks as feminine objects and ways they are treating their trucks can be compared with those they treat their wives and brides, bedecking them with beautiful ornaments and inscriptions with romantic verses. The front side is also the visually most charged part of other vehicles such as the local buses from private fleets which can be found in large Pakistani cities. Karachi is well known for its decorated buses, and Figure 23 is showing the ornate front side of a city bus containing floral and geometric decorative elements, but as well the Prophet's Mosque and Kaaba on the windshield, and an abundance of talismanic symbols in form of mannat clothes, boomerang shaped antennas, and hanging jingles in the bottom. Side surfaces which occupy the largest surface on vehicles are normally less visually charged than the front and back side and they rarely contain religious and neither talismanic symbols. Instead, the sides usually contain geometric and floral patterns as well as figurative images with landscapes, animals and floral elements, which is especially obvious in Rawalpindi style with a multitude of smaller segments decorated with elaborate, naturalistic depictions. The sides also contain inscriptions with information about the trucking company and the route where the truck operates, in Urdu, English or both languages. However, decorative elements representing talismanic objects can

appear on the sides of the vehicle, such as the fish, symbol of good fortune on a Bedford truck from Rawalpindi shown in Figure 13. Another popular religiously charged theme which sometimes appears on the sides of trucks and buses is *Buraq*, the winged horse that supposedly carried the prophet Muhammad from Mecca to Jerusalem and up to heaven. Still, the theme of *Buraq* has ambivalent signification in such terms that it is not always perceived by drivers and truck owners as a sacred symbol, but rather due to its aesthetic appeal. In that sense, the market of vehicular art does not make difference in the treatment of elements with purely decorative function and those with religious or apotropaic meanings which are being sold side by side, like in a tinsmith workshop in Rawalpindi, shown in Figure 24. Due to its function, as the place that sees most of wear, the rear side of the truck is not seen as appropriate for religious symbols and explicit religious symbols on the front side are almost never seen on the back. Usually, the upper zone is reserved for large compositions depicting scenes from popular culture, celebrities, family members, patriotic symbols, technological achievements or animals, while humorous verses and jokes are usually found within the lower zone. However, the themes with multivalent signification, which essentially have religious meaning but are primarily appreciated for their decorative function such as *Buraq*, *chukar* partridge or *Zuljanah* horse often adorn the rear side of Pakistani trucks. Figure 25 is showing a large depiction of *chukar* partridge, a popular theme especially among Pashtun drivers, which possesses a prophylactic purpose. Nevertheless, a *chukar* partridge surrounded with two cypress trees, a popular theme from Mughal art is suggesting that it is rather representing a heavenly bird from Jannah, the Muslim Garden of Eden. In some cases, the rear side of the vehicle can have an equally important function for talismanic symbols as the front, like in the case of a city bus from Peshawar with a multitude of *mannat* clothes, shown in Figure 26.

3.2 India

Like in Pakistan, although on a smaller scale, various types of decorated vehicles can be seen everywhere in India, from big cities to the most remote, rural areas. The most striking example of vehicle decoration are however decorated trucks which can be seen on roads and highways across the country, from Gujarat to Kolkata and from Karnataka to Kashmir. Thus, just like in Pakistan and the rest of the Indian Subcontinent, the ubiquitous, lavishly decorated trucks became an integral part of the country's landscape. Overall, the character of Indian truck decoration is prevailingly national, with a more or less standardized repertoire of depictions and inscriptions where patriotic symbolism plays an important role and with slight regional variations.

Motifs with spiritual meanings are equally present in Indian vehicle decoration and in particular in decoration of trucks, aiming to protect the vehicle and functioning as well as a social marker. Having that said, similar as in the previous case the truck decoration in India is more coherent than it is the case with other vehicles and therefore most suitable for observation. However, despite the scale that this phenomenon has in India and the fact that it represents a dynamic folk art, studies covering this area are scarce and mostly limited to news and popular articles only. Among the most distinctive features of Indian truck art is the presence of spiritual themes, reflecting a multitude of religions, denominations and movements that are inherent to different regions of the country. In this regard, religious imagery related to Hinduism, Islam, Sikhism, Jainism, Buddhism, Christianity, and other religious groups can be found on a majority of trucks and sometimes as well on other types of working vehicles around the country. In most cases these depictions of deities, holy places and symbols related to aforementioned religions are taken from the standard repertoire of popular religious art and whose variations can be seen everywhere, from shrines and temples, private homes and shops, to banners and other surfaces in the public space. This is especially

pronounced in Hinduism and as well in Sikhism where the visual aspect is very pronounced due to the concept of *darshan*, the auspicious sight of a deity or a holy person, a concept of ‘seeing and being seen’ by a deity, including a whole range of ideas related to insight, knowledge and philosophy within these religions.⁷² Unlike explicit religious imagery where a typical set of images and symbols represent each of these religions, it seems that the large portion of talismanic symbols that are found on vehicles is the same, no matter of the religion.

3.2.1 Typology of decorative elements

Bearing in mind that there is no substantial difference in function and signification of motifs that are found on Indian trucks, the same categorization introduced by Elias described in the previous chapter can be applied here as well. In this regard, the following three categories that include motifs with spiritual meanings are of primary interest here: explicit religious symbols and images, talismanic and fetish objects, and talismanically or religiously loaded symbols. According to this categorization, the first category includes pictorial depictions representing the aforementioned religions, such as deities from the Hindu pantheon, Guru Nanak, Jesus Christ and religious monuments like Kaaba and the Prophet's Mosque, the Golden temple in Amritsar, and so on. Also, it would include the symbols representing each religion, such as Om, Trishula, Khanda, Swastika, Star and crescent or Cross and all inscriptions with religious meanings and messages.⁷³ Within the second group are the elements that address the supernatural, aiming to protect the vehicle either as the talisman that is bringing good luck to the vehicle and its driver or more often amulet, repelling the evil and bad luck. Such elements with prophylactic properties are found on most of the vehicles,

⁷² Darshan, also spelled darshana, is in Indian philosophy and religion the act of beholding a deity, divine person, sacred object or natural spectacle, especially in a pictorial form.

⁷³ Om is a sacred sound and a spiritual icon in Hindu religion which is also a mantra in Hinduism, Buddhism, Jainism, and Sikhism; Trishula is a trident that is commonly used as the principal symbol in Hinduism and Buddhism; Khanda is the symbol of the Sikh faith.

no matter of the type of religious imagery that is displayed on their bodies. It means that with exceptions of talismanic objects that are specifically related to certain religious, most of such objects are variations of paraphernalia that are representing widely accepted superstitions and folk-beliefs, transcending the boundaries of particular religious identities. In that sense, the concept of Chashme Baddoor, popular phrase aimed to ward off the evil eye is equally present in Muslim and Hindu communities and therefore can often be seen in form of an inscription on the vehicles, on trucks in the first place.⁷⁴ The phrase is usually associated with two icons that can be displayed either in pair or separately: the first one is a depiction of *jutti*, a traditional Indo-Pakistani shoe, while another is a demonic mask. Such icons are also called *nazar battu*, as well as other physical objects which are believed to have the power to ward off the evil eye, such as bracelets, pendants, ribbons, or even fruits such as chili peppers which are extensively used for this purpose in India. Therefore, objects like tassels, pom-poms, ribbons, shoes and chili peppers belonging to the second category can frequently be seen on the trucks and other vehicles. Also the omnipresent ‘moustache’ in form of two symmetrically positioned, sloping pieces of hammered tin placed on the grill around the vehicle manufacturer logo belongs to this category. Within the third group are representations of objects with spiritual and supernatural powers.⁷⁵ They come in form of paintings, cut-out adhesive tape or ordinary stickers and can be found on different sides of the vehicle. Among the most typical depictions of this kind that are often seen on Muslim trucks are pairs of female eyes, which are believed to have the power to ward off the evil eye but which also play a role in feminization of the truck in the same way as in Pakistan. Another interesting example is the number 786 that is inherent to the Muslims in South Asia but seems to be

⁷⁴ Chashme Baddoor or Chashm-e-Baddoor is a slogan extensively used in Iran, North India and Pakistan to ward-off the evil eye.

⁷⁵ There is no mention about this motif in available literature and I neither managed to ask someone about its possible symbolic meanings. However, the most logical assumption would be that it has apotropaic function and that two aslope elements whose shape can vary are actually representing the teeth or moustache of the demonic face that is often depicted on the vehicles for this purpose. Due to the striking resemblance of this motif when applied on older Tata models, it will be called ‘moustache’ in the further text.

particularly popular among the members of Muslim communities in India as it regularly appears on the front side of the trucks in form of a coded religious message praising Allah.⁷⁶ However, among the most common motifs to which apotropaic functions are attributed are objects related to Hinduism such as the Sacred Lotus, the symbol of purity and prosperity, and the Cow with calf whose meaning can be interpreted as being a protector. Similar as in Pakistan, such depictions are primarily applied on trucks because of their aesthetics and due to the fact that they are included into the standard repertoire of motifs which seems to be much more uniform in case of Indian truck decoration, while their symbolic meanings can vary and can be interpreted in a number of ways.

3.2.2 The origin of motifs

While in Pakistani truck art the distant echoes of Mughal miniature painting could be identified, it would be difficult to make such kind of comparison with any form of historic artistic styles inherent to the Indian Subcontinent.⁷⁷ Still, many elements of decoration among which those with pious motifs are based on traditional iconographic forms, and more precisely on representations that are found in popular religious art. In that sense, depictions of deities that are found on vehicles around India are rather a variation of figural devotional art that is seen on omnipresent posters depicting various deities, religious figures and mythological scenes of Indian religions significantly influenced by European Realism, than

⁷⁶ The meaning of the number 786 comes out from the numerical value of Arabic letters of the opening phrase of the Quran "In the name of Allah, the most Merciful, the most Beneficent" (Bismillah ir-Rahman ir-Rahim). The use of this number is popular among the Muslims in South and Southeast Asia and used instead of the phrase in cases when it is considered inappropriate to write down verses from the Quran; Although the meaning of the number 786 is obviously religious, it is here included within the third category due to the following reasons: it is a coded message and therefore a hidden representation of pious content; Despite the fact that the number is widespread among the Muslims in India, it doesn't necessarily mean that its signification is always known by the members of other religious groups. Finally, number 786 can also be seen on Pakistani vehicles but it seems to be less popular in comparison with India where it acts as one of major social identifiers of Muslim truck drivers.

⁷⁷ Influences of the Mughal miniature painting on Pakistani truck art are however disputable, as it was mentioned in the previous chapter.

copies of representations found on ancient temples.⁷⁸ However, the most striking characteristic of Indian vehicular art is its relatively uniform nature, especially in comparison with Pakistani truck art, with a seemingly limited repertoire of motifs which can be seen on most of vehicles around the country while its style essentially does not differ from traditional sign-painting which is ever-present in the public space across the country.

Along with the obvious, protective function of religious elements of Indian vehicular art, they are playing an important role as social identifiers in a way that is probably even more pronounced than in the previously described Pakistani case. Unlike in Pakistan where the vehicular decoration is generally much more elaborated, with distinctive characteristics of different regional styles and complex visual language of its religiously charged symbols, vehicles in India are characterized by a relatively simple and more or less standardized painting scheme, where sacred imagery is one of the main elements of differentiation revealing the religious and social position of its owners. Once again, this is most obvious in truck art where sacred depictions representing the major religions of Indian realm seem to be the mandatory element of decoration. In that sense, religious symbols are among major elements of vehicular decoration in India, reflecting the complex socio-religious composition of this country where religion is an important factor that is determining the socio-cultural and political pulse of the people.

3.2.3 Religious composition of India

Like no other country in the world, India is characterized by religious diversity and tolerance which makes an important part of its identity and culture. The emergence of four major religions, Hinduism, Sikhism, Jainism and Buddhism, numerous invasions, trade and its colonial past have altogether shaped its religious diversity which is nowadays protected by

⁷⁸ The evolution of mass-produced images in India since the introduction of the printing press and chromolitography is minutely covered in an excellent study: Christopher Pinney, *'Photos of the Gods': The Printed Image and Political Struggle in India* (New Delhi; New York: Oxford University Press, 2004).

law through the Constitution of India which declares the right to freedom of religion as a fundamental right. Over the centuries of coexistence, the cultures of its major religious groups have significantly merged among each other, creating the unique cultural and religious blend that is also reflected in its vehicular art. Constituting about four-fifths of country's total population, Hinduism is by far the largest religious group in the country. According to census 2011, the Hindus constitute 79.8% of total population, covering virtually all states from Gujarat to West Bengal and from Jammu and Kashmir to Tamil Nadu.⁷⁹ The Hindus constitute the vast majority with more than 95% of total population mainly concentrated in Orissa, Chhattisgarh, northern Madhya Pradesh, Uttarakhand, Himachal Pradesh and Haryana, while the lowest percentage is Jammu and Kashmir, Punjab, Kerala, Lakshadweep, and states in northeast India.⁸⁰ Naturally such proportion is reflected in the religious motifs applied onto the vehicles around the country where those related to Hinduism are by far the most frequent. With 14.2% of the total population Islam is the second largest religion in the country, making Indian Muslims the third largest Muslim community in the world, after Indonesia and Pakistan.⁸¹ The large majority of about three-fourths of India's total Muslim population is concentrated in the Uttar Pradesh, West Bengal, Bihar, Maharashtra, Kerala, Andhra Pradesh, Jammu and Kashmir, and Karnataka, while in the remaining 27 states and union territories Muslims represent a relatively small percentage of the total population.⁸² There are various denominations among Indian Muslims among which the majority adhere to the Sunni branch of Islam, while the largest minority group are Shias

⁷⁹ According to the 2011 census, 79.8% of the population of India are Hindus, 14.2% adhere to Islam, 2.3% are Christians, 1.7% are Sikh, 0.7% are Buddhists, 0.4% are Jains, 0.7% make other religions and persuasions, while 0.2% did not state any religion; (<https://www.census2011.co.in/religion.php>).

⁸⁰ Mehar Singh Gill and P. D. Bhardwaj, "The Religious Composition of India's Population", *Sarjana* Vol. 25 (2010): 62-63.

⁸¹ According to the results of 2011 census, the total number of Indian citizens adhering to Islam is 172.245.158; (<http://www.indiaonlinepages.com/population/muslim-population-in-india.html>).

⁸² Gill and P. D. Bhardwaj, "The Religious Composition of India's Population", 64.

who constitute around 15% of the Muslim population.⁸³ This division within the Indian Muslims is also visible in the elements of decoration of trucks, whose driver's identity is easily identifiable due to the presence of imagery and inscriptions inherent to Shia Islam.⁸⁴ Also, it should be mentioned that various schools of Sufism are present among Indian Muslims, as well as various Islamic movements and sects.⁸⁵ The third largest religious group in India are Christians who are making 2.3% of the population of India. Christians are the majority in northeastern states of Nagaland, Mizoram and Meghalaya, while a notable share of Christian population is present in West Bengal, and half of all Indian Christians reside in the southern states of Kerala, Tamil Nadu, Andhra Pradesh and Karnataka.⁸⁶ Vehicles with Christian symbols such as depictions of Christ and the Virgin Mary or messages praising Jesus embedded into the usual decorative program can be seen in different parts of the country along with those bearing the insignia of other religious groups. Sikhism is the fourth major religious group in the country, counting 1.7% of the total population where the vast majority is concentrated in Punjab, while other states that include notable Sikh population include Haryana, Rajasthan, Uttar Pradesh, Delhi, Maharashtra, and Jammu and Kashmir.⁸⁷ Motifs inherent to Sikhism are as well present in decoration of trucks and other vehicles in India and especially visible in the mentioned states where around 95% of this population lives. Despite the fact that Buddhism originated in India, Buddhists that inhabit the Himalayan belt and northeast India make only 0.7% of the total population, while another significant religious group counting 0.4% of the total population are Jains who are mainly

⁸³ India 2012 International Religious Freedom Report; (<https://www.state.gov/documents/organization/208640.pdf>)

⁸⁴ This will be shown later on the example of a truck from Jammu and Kashmir. Presumably, the trucks from other parts of India with the presence of Shia Muslims are also decorated in a similar way.

⁸⁵ Due to the limitations of research and available materials and moreover the language and cultural barriers, I was unable to identify the presence of such groups in decoration of trucks and other vehicles. It is however very likely that drivers are adorning their vehicles with devotional images and messages inherent to Sufism, the Ahmadiyya movement and other denominations within Islam popular among Indian Muslims. However, due to the nature of Indian truck decoration which is not that lavish as in Pakistan it is very likely that visual signifiers related to those subgroups are limited to minor decorative elements and details.

⁸⁶ Gill and Bhardwaj, "Religious Composition," 66.

⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, 68.

concentrated in Western India.⁸⁸ Finally, it would be important to mention that the concept of *barkat*, the religious power that is transmitted to devotees, that was already mentioned related to adherence to Sufi shrines in Pakistan, is also widespread in India, among the different religious groups. In Hinduism, the presence of devotional images is in close connection with *barkat* as it is believed that maintaining visual intimacy with gods through their visual representation enables the divine blessing and protection.⁸⁹ However, this concept altogether with *darshan* can be rather described as a cultural phenomenon inherent to the Subcontinent; since it transcends Hinduism it also applies to adherents of other religions. In that sense, the religious images in Indian vehicular decoration have primarily protective function, while those among them that are adorning exterior surfaces of trucks and other vehicles function as well as social identifiers.

3.2.4 Regional styles

Despite the size of the country and significant cultural differences that are present in its different corners, vehicular decoration in India appears to be surprisingly coherent, at least if decorated trucks are observed as the most visible manifestation of this phenomenon. Therefore, it would be very hard to define distinctive regional styles as it was the case with Pakistan, despite the fact that certain differences between the vehicles coming from different states are present. Hereby it should be mentioned that such assumptions are based primarily on the limited scope of field research and visual material available online due to the fact that previous scholarship dealing with this subject is non-existent. However, despite the fact that the trucks originating from different parts of India tend to be decorated in a similar manner, with more or less standardized repertoires of motifs, spatial distribution, artistic style and even same types of domestically produced trucks, some regional variations can be identified.

⁸⁸ Ibid., 68-70.

⁸⁹ Pinney, *'Photos of the Gods'*, 191.

The most apparent differences are actually reflected through different religious imagery that can be seen on the trucks from different parts of India. In that sense, the truck with Sikh motifs is most likely coming from the northwestern part of the country, while one with representation of Guru Jambheshwar is obviously assembled in a workshop located in Rajasthan.⁹⁰ Among the most striking features of India's trucks is the fact that all of them are produced by one of three automotive industries in the country: Tata, Ashok Leyland and Eicher. While Tata trucks are equally represented in all parts of the country, Eicher trucks tend to be more popular in northwest India while there is a bit higher chance that a painted Ashok Leyland truck is coming from southern part of the country. It would be even harder to define local styles of decoration among other types of vehicles such as buses as their decoration tends to be less systematic than in the case of trucks. Actually, most of the state-owned bus fleets nowadays have 'modern', uniform painting schemes that exclude hand-painted motifs. However, there are still some exceptions like public buses from Kolkata that are operated by private contractors, which contain similar elements as seen in truck decoration, including religious imagery and apotropaic symbols.⁹¹ Therefore, decorated buses from Kolkata can be regarded as a rare example of a distinctive decorative style of vehicular decoration in India.

3.2.5 Spatial distribution of decorative elements

Spatial distribution of decorative elements plays an important role in Indian vehicular decoration which is generally characterized by a systematic approach regarding the

⁹⁰ Guru Jambheshwar, also known as Guru Jambhoji, was the founder of the Bishnoi sect. Adherents of this Hindu religious sect who are mostly living in Rajasthan state follow a set of 29 principles given by Guru Jambheshwar.

⁹¹ In her article, Swati Chattopadhyay is mentioning the presence of devotional images in the interior of these buses like chromolithographs and three-dimensional representations of various deities from the Hindu pantheon and religious monuments such as the Golden Temple in Amritsar, Kali Temple in Tarakeswar, and so on. Apotropaic images aiming to ward off the evil eye are as well depicted on their front and rear sides, such as demonic faces and shoes, often accompanied with the warnings against the jealous gaze written in a humorous manner: Swati Chattopadhyay, "The Art of Auto-Mobility: Vehicular Art and the Space of Resistance in Calcutta," *Journal of Material Culture* 14 (2009): 125.

positioning of depicted motifs and the spatial hierarchy amongst them. Positioning of religious content and talismanic symbols on Indian trucks is almost identical and follows the same spatial logic as the Pakistani case. Thus, most of religiously charged decoration is concentrated on their front side, the ‘face’ of the truck that regularly contains most of the information about the company, transportation permit, religious affiliation, humorous and romantic verses, and therefore the worldview of its driver.⁹² However, due to the specific nature of religious composition in India, the frontal side of the vehicle that contains religious insignia in form depictions, inscriptions and symbols is playing an even more important role as a social signifier than in case of Pakistani trucks. In this way, the front side of the truck is defining the overall identity of the vehicle, while its crucial visual role is only amplified by a relatively modest general decorative program in comparison with Pakistani trucks. And just as in the previous case, the upper front section is reserved for explicit religious content like depictions of deities or holy places and accompanying inscriptions. Figure 27 is showing a Tata truck of older generation from Jammu and Kashmir with a large, custom-made section above the windshield whose most dominant feature are the inscriptions *Goods Carrier* and *National Permit* followed with the list of states where it can operate. However, the front side of this truck also contains religious signifiers which are unequivocally revealing its Muslim character: the number 786 inscribed on the upper right part above the windshield is a coded religious message praising Allah. The number appears once more in form of the sticker applied in the central part of the windshield, while the name of God appears for the third time on the front of its bonnet. Moreover, an empty frame in the central upper section indicates the place normally reserved on Muslim trucks for the depiction of the Prophet's Mosque and the Kaaba. Apotropaic symbols are also present on this truck in form of small black flags,

⁹² All India Permit (AIP) is a transportation permit issued to taxis, buses, trucks and other good carriers by the State Transport Authority of India. National Permit is a sub category of All India Permit valid for particular states. Both permits are valid for five years and renewable. What is more important here is that All India Permit became the iconic motif which is always depicted on Indian trucks, normally on their upper front side but as well on side surfaces.

circular objects resembling the eyes and typical ‘moustache’ on the front side of the bonnet. While the driver of this truck is apparently a Sunni Muslim, Figure 28 is displaying a Shia truck featuring decorative elements inherent to Shia Islam. Its windshield contains inscriptions *Hussain Zindabad* and *Ya Mohamad Ya Ali* that are both praising imam Husayn, a figure of Shia Islam.⁹³ Apart from the prevailing green color which undoubtedly linked with its Muslim character, other explicitly religious elements are visible in its upper part in form of the name of Allah inscribed in Urdu within the upper red triangle, Moons and crescents which appear four times, and the centrally positioned picture of the Kaaba and the Prophet's Mosque on the top of the truck. Talismanic objects are present in form of the usual ‘moustache’ attached to the Tata logo on the grill and chains hanging from the bumper. An example of a Hindu truck shown in the Figure 29 is featuring religious depictions in the upper section where the dominant position is reserved for the image of Lord Shiva, while Ganesha appears within the triangle mounted onto the windshield. Two black clothes attached on the grill have the function of Nazar Battu, just as the small demonic face in form of a sticker applied on its right side. The truck from West Bengal shown in Figure 30 is featuring no substantial differences regarding its decorative style in comparison to the trucks from the western part of the country. Apparently, it is as well a Hindu truck with several religious signifiers in form of the centrally positioned depiction of Kali in the upper section, trishulas atop of the bars mounted to its sides and two Om inscriptions in form of stickers applied aside the grill. A typical feature of Indian trucks that sometimes also appears on the buses are religious images painted on a glass such as the goddess Kali in this case, which can be also observed as the element of regional variation bearing in mind the popularity of cult of this

⁹³ Al-Husayn ibn Ali ibn Abi Talib was a grandson of the Islamic Nabi Muhammad, and son of Ali ibn Abi Talib and Muhammad's daughter, Fatimah. He is an important figure in Islam and the third Shia Imam revered among Shia Muslims around the world. The story of martyrdom of Husayn served as a source of inspiration for Shia revolutionary movements; Zindabad is a suffix in Urdu, Hindi and Bengali of Persian origin which is used as a shout of encouragement or as a cheer, and literally means "Long live". It is often used as a political slogan, to praise a country or leader and is usually not used in religious context.

deity in Kolkata. There are no talismanic motifs within the decorative elements of this truck, except the small shoe that is hanging from its bumper serving to ward off the evil eye, just as in Pakistan. A detail of the central upper section of the truck with two Om inscriptions and a depiction of Hanuman painted on the glass within its central zone is shown in Figure 31. Images of gods painted in this technique which includes reverse painting method are relatively common occurrence in Indian truck art and they always appear in the centrally positioned frame on the top of the truck.⁹⁴ Just like in Pakistan, smaller working vehicle are as well often decorated, although their decorative program is not that systematic as it is the case with decorated trucks. However, it seems that the same spatial logic is applied in decoration of these vehicles where the religious motifs usually appear on their front side, like in case of a light truck with depiction of Shiva accompanied with double Om inscriptions on the side shown in Figure 32. An interesting example of a truck with seemingly ambiguous religious identity reflected in presence of religious elements inherent to both Islam and Hinduism is shown in Figure 33. Despite its overall neutral identity reflected in the absence of explicit religious signifiers, certain details are revealing the Muslim nature of this truck spotted in Mandvi, Gujarat. Namely, while its upper part that is normally reserved for religious content contains neutral depiction of the stylized red flower and inscriptions *Hardwork mine, Vision will be strong, and Blessing yours* in Hindi, the inscription on the windshield *God is one* accompanied with motifs of Crescent and moon is indicating its Muslim character. However, its decoration as well includes the motif of a cow, an obvious Hindu symbol that appears twice in the zone of the windshield and above the grill.⁹⁵ Another notable feature of this truck is a pair of apotropaic female eyes in the lower grill zone which

⁹⁴ The process of reverse painting on the glass is explained in the documentary film 'Horn Please' (10:13-10:32):

Project Horn Please, "Horn Please," accessed April 15, 2018, <http://www.projecthornplease.com/portfolio-post/horn-please-documentary/>.

⁹⁵ A possible reason for such occurrence of a symbol inherent to Hinduism could be due to its aesthetic appeal, and the omnipresence of Hindu motifs in the realm of Indian popular imagery.

combined with a series of chains hanging from the bumper appear as a face of veiled Muslim women emphasizing its female nature, just as Pakistani trucks. Apart from the most widespread Hindu and Muslim trucks that can be seen in most of the country, those displaying the religious symbols of other religious groups are present as well and even dominant in some states like, for instance, in Punjab where Sikhism the prevailing religion. Sikh religious motifs are evident on the truck shown in Figure 34. and distributed according to the usual practice: most of the religious imagery and inscriptions are located in the upper zone while the talismanic symbols are depicted in the lower part. Within the central zone of the upper section is a depiction of Guru Nanak and Guru Gobind Singh Ji with two khandas aside.⁹⁶ The windshield zone contains more symbols of khanda accompanied with inscriptions related to Sikhism and Poanta Sahib, emphasizing the affiliation of its driver to the Gurudwara Poanta Sahib, a temple dedicated to Guru Gobind Singh Ji.⁹⁷ Within the bumper zone are two small depictions of demonic faces aiming to ward off the evil eye, showing how the usual apotropaic imagery is present on trucks of different religious identities. Figure 35 is displaying the lower part of a Sikh truck adorned with various talismanic objects: within the central zone are two aslope metal objects attached to the grill forming the 'moustache' motif, while between them is the nazar battu amulet in form of a string with chili peppers hanging from the Tata logo. The lower zone contains even more talismanic objects in form of two black pendants and a shoe that are hanging from the bumper and depictions of a jutti shoe and a demonic face on mudguards. A detail of the grill of yet another Sikh truck containing both religious and talismanic decorative elements is shown in Figure 36: again, strings with chili peppers and lime are hanging next to the manufacturer's logo, while above the upper logo is the inscription *Gurukirpa*, with two simplified depictions

⁹⁶ Guru Nanak (1469-1539) was the founder of Sikhism and the first of the ten Sikh Gurus; Guru Gobind Singh (1666-1708) was the tenth Sikh Guru, a spiritual master, warrior, poet and philosopher.

⁹⁷ Gurudwara is a Sikh place of worship; Paonta Sahib is an industrial town in Himachal Pradesh (Northern India); Gurudwara Paonta Sahib is an important Gurudwara in Paonta Sahib built in the memory of Guru Gobind Singh Ji.

of Guru Nanak positioned aside it.⁹⁸ Side surfaces of Indian trucks are decorated according to the standard painting scheme that includes usual elements such as the name of the trucking company, its location and contacts, AIP logo, the flag of India, and patriotically charged imagery such as the depiction of a lion or an eagle. The decorative program of side surfaces often includes religiously charged imagery such as depictions of religious stories and symbols like swastika, trishula or khanda sword as in case of a 12-wheeler truck shown in Figure 37. Along with the ubiquitous inscription *Horn OK Please* and other inscriptions of non-religious nature that regularly appear on Indian vehicles, similar religious motifs like those on side surfaces appear on the rear side of trucks. Just as on the front side usual apotropaic symbols like a demonic face shown in Figure 38 are often found within the lower zone of the back of trucks and other working vehicles.

3.3 Bangladesh

Just like in Pakistan and India, decorated vehicles are an omnipresent occurrence on the roads of Bangladesh and its densely populated cities. While colorful trucks can be seen on the roads across the country transporting all kinds of goods, the most known aspect of vehicular decoration in Bangladesh are lavishly decorated rickshaws that are still the predominant means of urban transportation. Thus, in the same way as in other countries of the Subcontinent, decorated vehicles have become an integral part of the public visual space in Bangladesh. While religious motifs that appear in the vehicular decoration of Bangladesh are mostly reflecting its Sunni Muslim society, this vernacular popular art is mostly characterized by patriotic depictions and imagery inspired by local popular culture.

Religious motifs are as well present in vehicular decoration in Bangladesh, while the use of apotropaic objects seems not to be that much pronounced as in the other observed countries.

⁹⁸ For Sikhs Gurukirpa is meaning God's will, therefore the function of this inscription is closest to Mashallah in Muslim vehicles.

Among various types of vehicles that are subject of decoration rickshaws are by far the most numerous in urban areas, while painted trucks are regularly encountered along the national road network. However, the existing scholarship related to vehicular decoration in Bangladesh is mostly limited to the rickshaw art which is more or less recognized as an authentic form of vernacular folk art, while there is no mention about any other type of decorated vehicles in the available literature. Spiritual motifs that often appear on the vehicles in Bangladesh have an important place in the decoration of both trucks and rickshaws. Still, while their function is mostly protective on the trucks where depictions of holy places and religious symbols are often accompanied with inscriptions aiming to protect the vehicle and its driver against accidents, depictions with religious meanings applied on rickshaws have primarily decorative purpose. This can be explained with the different nature of both observed types of vehicles where different logic of spatial distribution of decorative elements is applied, the fact that they operate in different environments and probably most important using different speed. Another feature of vehicular art in Bangladesh which applies to both observed types of vehicles is the role of pious motifs as a social identifier which is not that much pronounced as in Pakistan and India. Despite the presence of a Hindu community whose religious symbols are represented as well in vehicle decoration, the religious motifs characteristic for Sunni Islam are predominant. Finally, vehicles in Bangladesh are characterized by the noticeable absence of apotropaic objects both in case of trucks and rickshaws, which becomes especially apparent when compared with the vehicle from the previously observed countries.⁹⁹

⁹⁹ Such claim is primarily based on the sample of photos taken during the visit to Bangladesh in March 2015, covering most of its Divisions and major city centers, of which a selected number is included as Figures. Being aware of the limited sample of observed vehicles, I also conducted a desktop research of vehicles from Bangladesh that are available on the internet and based on that came to the conclusion that apotropaic objects, even in case that they may appear, would be the a rare occurrence, especially in comparison with vehicles from other countries in the region.

3.3.1 Typology of decorative elements

Due to the fact that there is no substantial difference regarding the function and signification of motifs found on the vehicles in Bangladesh and those in Pakistan and India, the same classification introduced by Elias can be as well used in this case. However, bearing in mind the mentioned absence of talismanic objects, only the following two categories related to the spiritual motifs can be applied for the vehicles in Bangladesh: explicit religious symbols and images, and talismanically or religiously loaded symbols.¹⁰⁰ The first category includes depictions of the religious monuments such as the Kaaba and the Prophet's Mosque, Hindu deities, depictions with obvious pious meanings such as a praying woman or child, as well as religious symbols such as Star and crescent, Om or Swastika, and inscriptions with religious meaning such as verses from the Quran.¹⁰¹ One particularly popular depiction which as well falls under this category and that is often found on rickshaws is a motif of a praying woman or a boy. This theme symbolizing values of domestic purity and reminding on duties in Islam is popular in vernacular imagery around the Muslim world but especially in the Indian Subcontinent where it comes in many different forms.¹⁰² Another very popular motif within the same group are mosques which apart from their aesthetic appeal possess undoubtedly religious character, whose depictions can be often found both on trucks and rickshaws. Within the second group there are representations of objects with religious signification and supernatural powers. Numerous depictions that fall under this category and are found on the vehicles in Bangladesh come in form of paintings, stickers or appliques. This especially

¹⁰⁰ In his study on rickshaw art in Dhaka, Nazmul Islam identified the following types of motifs that appear in decoration of rickshaws: cinema posters, religious figures, important national and international events, landscapes of Bangladeshi village, animals, fables, renowned monuments and architecture, vehicles, renowned persons, tales, and different composition of these motifs. Despite providing an accurate classification of motifs appearing in rickshaw art, the list is rather based on a formalistic description of motifs instead of their function. However, several motifs of religious nature listed here fit within the classification presented in the main text: Nazmul Islam, "A Study on Material Culture in Dhaka: Rickshaw, a Motion Craft," MA thesis (Montreal: McGill University, 2015), 132.

¹⁰¹ Some popular religious messages found on rickshaws are: *Namaz Kayem Koro* (Do your pray), and *Allah Vorosha* (God is helpful): Islam, "A Study on Material Culture in Dhaka," 69.

¹⁰² Centlivres and Centlivres-Demont, *Imageries populaires en Islam*, 81-82.

applies on rickshaw art where the use of motifs that seemingly have only aesthetic purpose but in fact are carrying political, religious, apotropaic and many other meanings is widespread in rickshaw art. Among such depictions are various animals that can appear alone or within the Hindu religious fables such as the Bengal tiger, a symbol of national pride, the peacock which symbolizes beauty, or a cow, a symbol of welfare and prosperity of the family.¹⁰³

3.3.2 The origin of motifs

Vehicular decoration in Bangladesh and notably rickshaw art is mainly influenced by popular culture and local devotional art just like in neighboring India, rather than by any particular style of traditional art. In that sense, artists involved in decoration of vehicles have mostly drawn their inspiration from printed media such as various posters, calendars, advertisements and as well children's books whose scenes are often used as patterns, just as in Pakistan.¹⁰⁴ In that sense, religious themes that are found on the vehicles in Bangladesh are mostly influenced by popular devotional art, both in case of predominant motifs related to Islam and the depictions of Hindu deities and religious fables. What characterizes depictions that are found on Bangladeshi vehicles is the extensive use of vivid colors and its peculiar style that can be described as 'poetic', especially in comparison with Pakistan and India.

3.3.3 Religious composition of Bangladesh

Similar as in Pakistan, Islam is the predominant religion in Bangladesh where Muslims constitute around 90% of the country's population.¹⁰⁵ With over 146 million people

¹⁰³ Islam, "A Study on Material Culture in Dhaka," 125.

¹⁰⁴ In the article published in *Saudi AramcoWorld* magazine, Joanna Kirkpatrick and Kevin Bubriski mentioned how rickshaw painters are copying images from printed sources such as posters, books and calendars. Particularly popular was the calendar 'Birds of North America' from which motifs of birds non-native to Bangladesh were often copied: Joanna and Kirkpatrick and Kevin Bubriski, "Transports of Delight: Rickshaw Art of Bangladesh," *Saudi Aramco World*, Vol. 45 (1994): 35.

¹⁰⁵ U.S. Department of State, "Bangladesh 2015 International Religious Freedom Report", accessed April 15, 2018, <https://www.state.gov/documents/organization/256513.pdf>.

professing Islam, which is the official state religion, Bangladesh is the fourth largest Muslim country in the world. The vast majority of Muslims adhere to the Sunni branch of Islam, while the largest minority group are Shias who make around 2% of the Muslim population.¹⁰⁶ The large majority of Muslims in Bangladesh are following the Hanafi school of jurisprudence among which most adhere to the Barlevi movement, while there is also a considerable percentage of followers of the Deobandi movement. Among Sunnis that are not following the Hanafi school, a significant number adhere to the Ahl-i Hadith and Jamaat-e-Islami movements. Unlike Pakistan and India where Shia Muslims constitute a substantial percentage of the Muslim population, Shias in Bangladesh among which many belong to the Dawoodi Bohra sect concentrated in Chittagong are much less widespread.¹⁰⁷ This is also reflected in motifs of vehicular decoration with predominance of ‘mainstream’ Sunni motifs which appear to be the most represented type of religiously charged decorative elements seen on vehicles in the country. Hereby it should be also mentioned that around a quarter of all Muslims in Bangladesh are affiliated with some Sufi order, among which almost a half adhere to the Chishti order.¹⁰⁸ However, such widespread affiliation to Sufism does not seem to be visible in the decoration of vehicles, at least not in the way as for instance in Pakistan where Sufi trucks could be easily distinguished.¹⁰⁹ With almost 9% of the total population, Hindus are making the largest religious group in the country after Muslims.¹¹⁰ Motifs related to Hinduism like various deities from the Hindu pantheon and depictions of religious stories

¹⁰⁶ Ibid.

¹⁰⁷ Decorated vehicles in Bangladesh are mostly featuring usual Muslim motifs reflecting the identity of the Sunni majority. However, it would be logical to assume that the vehicles with Shia motifs are present as well but they were not noticed within the materials available for this research and are possibly concentrated in particular areas of the country.

¹⁰⁸ Pew Research Center, “World’s Muslims: Unity and Diversity, Chapter 1: Religious Affiliation”, accessed April 15, 2018, <http://www.pewforum.org/2012/08/09/the-worlds-muslims-unity-and-diversity-1-religious-affiliation/>.

¹⁰⁹ This should be as well taken with reserve due to the research limitations and a limited sample of decorated vehicles used for this study. Therefore, the assumption is based on sources available for my research, both visual and textual which does not necessarily reflect the situation on the ground, especially bearing in mind the pervasiveness of Sufism in Bangladesh.

¹¹⁰ The Hindu, “Bangladesh’s Hindus number 1.7 crore, up by 1 p.c. in a year: report”, accessed April 15, 2018, <http://www.thehindu.com/news/international/Bangladesh%E2%80%99s-Hindus-number-1.7-crore-up-by-1-p.c.-in-a-year-report/article14397035.ece#>.

are present in the decoration of vehicles in Bangladesh, and in particular in rickshaw art where a considerable number of artisans are Hindus. Bearing in mind the intertwined nature of folkloric art traditions in Bengal and its pictorial realm influenced by different religious groups, it would not be difficult to guess that the previously mentioned concepts of *barkat* and *darshan* representing the culturally induced connection with the spiritual world through visual representations related to it, are present in Bangladesh on the same level as in neighboring India. In that respect, the religious images seen on trucks and rickshaws in Bangladesh have mainly the function of enabling divine protection, while their function of social identifiers is considerably less pronounced than in India and Pakistan.

3.3.4 Regional styles

Like in other countries in the Subcontinent, regional variations related to styles of decorated vehicles can also be identified in Bangladesh. In case of trucks which seemingly have very similar design and disposition of decorative elements, with unified yellow-painted cabins that can be seen all over the country, it would be very difficult to identify any particular regional style according to the existing sources. The situation is however different with rickshaws where the differences between those operating in urban and rural areas and different styles reflecting the local cultural traditions of the large cities are more apparent. While the basic design of those simple, manually-powered vehicles is basically the same everywhere, differences are noticeable in design of the carriage and applied elements of decoration, their style and colors. For instance, rickshaws in rural areas and smaller towns tend to be less brightly painted and the prevailing motifs are the Islamic ones, depictions of the Taj Mahal and bucolic scenes, while those from big cities like Dhaka are characterized by use of vibrant

colors and scenes inspired by Dhallywood.¹¹¹ Along with depictions of movie stars, other motifs that characterize rickshaws from Dhaka are various scenes with animals, and idealized landscapes. On the other hand, rickshaws in Comilla and Chittagong and the whole southeastern part of the country tend to be more simply decorated, with fewer depictions of human faces and prevailing motifs of flowers, birds and animals. Also, it would be important to mention that back in the 1980s the rickshaws in Comilla were characterized by pious elements of decoration, such as depictions of mosques with minarets, crescents and religious inscriptions on their hoods and seatbacks.¹¹² Finally, rickshaws in the Sylhet area and northeastern Bangladesh are rarely decorated which could be possibly explained with the influence of a stricter version of Islam that is practiced in that area.¹¹³

3.3.5 Spatial distribution of decorative elements

As in Pakistan and India, the spatial distribution of decorative elements is an important feature of vehicular decoration in Bangladesh. A systematic approach regarding positioning of motifs is evident both in decoration of trucks and rickshaws, where depictions with spiritual meanings occupy the most visible surfaces. However, having in mind the very different nature, construction and therefore functionality of these two types of vehicles, different spatial logic applies for each of them.

In this regard, there is no real difference in positioning of motifs with spiritual meanings between the trucks in Bangladesh and those in Pakistan and India. Therefore, most of the religiously charged decorative elements such as depictions of Muslim holy places and

¹¹¹ Kuntala Lahiri-Dutt and David J. Williams, *Moving Picture: The Rickshaw Art of Bangladesh* (Ahmedabad: Mapin Publishing, 2008), 77; Dhallywood, made of words Dhaka and Hollywood on the same principles as Bollywood or Lollywood is the popular name for the Bengali language film industry based in Dhaka.

¹¹² In her article from 1997, Joanna Kirkpatrick mentions the presence of religious motifs on rickshaws from Comilla as an exemption from usual style where floral and zoomorphic elements are predominant. However, bearing in mind that she last visited Comilla in 1986, this observation might not depict the present state of rickshaw art in that city; Joanna Kirkpatrick, "Bangladeshi Arts of the Ricksha," accessed April 15, 2018, <http://www.asianart.com/articles/ricksha/index.html>.

¹¹³ Lahiri-Dutt and Williams, *Moving Picture: The Rickshaw Art of Bangladesh*, 77.

religious inscriptions are usually found on the front side of trucks. What, however, characterizes Bengali trucks is their simple decorative style devoid of elaborate ornamentation and, as well the notable absence of talismanic symbols, which are mostly not visible neither on the front or on other sides. Also, the role of the front side as a social identifier is less pronounced in comparison to the previous two countries as it mainly contains visual elements inherent to predominant Sunni Islam accompanied geometric and zoomorphic decorations. Figure 39 is showing the front side of an older Bedford truck with typical, yellow painted cabin and wooden superstructure decorated with floral ornaments and usual symbols of Islam: a medallion with the Prophet's Mosque and Kaaba topped with star and crescent. Another example of a truck spotted in Dhaka District, shown in Figure 40 is decorated in a similar manner although with slightly more elaborately decorated superstructure above the driver's cabin featuring carved and painted floral decorations accompanied with symbols of Islam. In this case, around the central medallion which also contains the Prophet's Mosque and Kaaba positioned on the top of this section, are Arabic inscriptions *Muhammad* on the left and *Allah* on the right side. A similar approach to decoration of another 'classic' Bedford truck, with no apparent apotropaic objects and neither symbols on its front side and uniformly painted cabin is visible in Figure 41. However, this truck from Chittagong features larger and more pronounced religious symbols in the upper section of the superstructure, which might be related to the regional variation of vehicular decoration in this part of Bangladesh, that is as well, as it was previously mentioned reflected in rickshaw art. While the lower section of the wooden superstructure of this truck is decorated with usual, floral ornamentation, its upper zone contains large writings *Muhammad* and *Allah* positioned on the left and right side while in the center is a depiction of the two holiest places in Sunni Islam: the Prophet's Mosque in Medina and the Kaaba of Mecca. While the frontal side of Bangladeshi trucks remains the main carrier of religious motifs, just

as it was the case of Pakistan and India with no substantial differences in spatial logic of their positioning, religious depictions and messages are often found on sides of the cabin of trucks in Bangladesh as it can be seen in Figure 42. Here, within the lower zone of the driver's door a large depiction of the Prophet's Mosque and the Kaaba nestled in a giant clam shell is positioned, while above it are two inscriptions in Bengali: *Tasfiya*, probably the name of driver's wife and *Bismillah*, the phrase used by Muslims during prayer meaning *In the name of God*.¹¹⁴ Although much more modest both in terms of decoration and religious symbolism in comparison with the previous two countries, the upper section of the frontal side remains the most important carrier of religious messages and moreover, the most ornate, and visually predominant element in decoration of trucks in Bangladesh. Made in a technique of painted carved wood, the upper frontal element of the truck shown in Figure 43 features abundance of polychrome, geometric and floral ornamentation, topped with symbols of Islam: star, crescent and the name of Allah. In some cases explicit religious content occupies the whole area of this section of the truck, as shown in Figure 44 where along with displaying the driver's worldview, it as well bears a protective function: while the upper part of the superstructure contains the usual medallion with the Prophet's Mosque and Kaaba surrounded with two white doves, within its lower zone is the large inscription *Fi Amanillah* in Bengali meaning *Have a Safe Journey* aimed to protect the vehicle, surrounded with usual writings *Muhammad* and *Allah*.¹¹⁵ Another example of a truck where large religious motifs occupy its top frontal section is shown in Figure 45. Within the center of the upper zone of the superstructure above the driver's cabin of this truck spotted in Barisal is a large depiction of a Mughal-style

¹¹⁴ *Tasfiya*, a popular female name in Bangladesh is probably the name of driver's wife. If this is the case, it could be an argument in favor of female nature of the truck, which characterizes decoration of trucks in both Pakistan and India, and even beyond; *Bismillah*, on the other side clearly bears a religious message, meaning *In the name of God*. It is a derivation of a phrase *Bismillah, ar-Rahman, ar-Rahim* that is recited before each Surah of the Quran which in Arabic means *In the name of God, the Most Gracious, the Most Merciful*.

¹¹⁵ Although doves could be depicted only due to their aesthetic appeal, bearing in mind the religious context of the entire surface their presence is most likely related to Hegira, the journey of Muhammad and his followers from Mecca to Yathrib, later renamed to Medina which occurred in 622.

mosque, while aside are writings *Ya Muhammad* and *Ya Allah* and its lower area is decorated with usual, floral decorations made in a technique of painted carved wood. Right below it, above the windshield is the Islamic verse *In the name of Allah, keep me safe when I am travelling* with obvious, protective function.

As it was already mentioned, the spatial logic of positioning decorative motifs in rickshaw art differs from trucks and other motor vehicles that are subject of decoration in Bangladesh. In that sense, there is a substantial difference between the positioning of religious motifs between the two substantially different types of decorated working vehicles that are observed in this study: trucks and rickshaws. While in case of the trucks most of religiously charged decorative motifs are found on the frontal side, the ‘face’ of the vehicle just as it is the case in Pakistan and India, the main surface of a rickshaw where large depictions, including those of religious character are found is the back as consequence of their different construction and overall. And while in decoration of trucks the frontal side is considered to be most suitable for such motifs due to its visibility in contrast to the back which is considered as ‘impure’, the situation is completely different with rickshaws where the rear side is bearing the most striking decoration. The reason for this comes from the very obvious fact that the largest surface available for decoration on rickshaws is the rear side where among other popular motifs such as scenes inspired by local popular culture, patriotic imagery and landscapes, religiously charged imagery appears frequently.¹¹⁶ However, in some cases religious motifs, mostly in form of symbols and short inscriptions can as well appear on the front side of rickshaws, on the top of the hood which is referred as the crown or *mukut*.¹¹⁷

¹¹⁶ According to Joanna and Kirkpatrick and Kevin Bubriski, around one fourth of rickshaws are decorated with Islamic themes: Joanna and Kirkpatrick and Kevin Bubriski, “Transports of Delight: Rickshaw Art of Bangladesh,” *Saudi Aramco World*, Vol. 45 (1994): 34.; However this estimation should be taken with reserve due to the fact that the article is mainly based on Kirkpatrick’s field trips in the second half of the 1980s, and even more important the huge number of rickshaws that operate in Dhaka and other cities in Bangladesh.

¹¹⁷ Ibid., 33.

A typical example of a decorated back of a rickshaw from Dhaka can be seen in Figure 46. The photo shows the lower rear part of a rickshaw which contains two large metal surfaces that are regularly being decorated with elaborate paintings: the seatback in the upper part and the back plate below it. In this case, the seatback is decorated with depictions of two peacocks which are generally considered to be a symbol of beauty and the inscription *Badshah Bhai* in Bengali which is most probably the driver's name, especially bearing in mind that the phone number is written right below it. The back plate which is referred as *noksha board* in Bengali in the lower zone is decorated with a large depiction of a Mughal style mosque, most probably the Taj Mahal, symbol of Mughal legacy and one of most the popular depictions of religious nature found in rickshaw art.¹¹⁸ Figure 47 is showing the whole rear side of an electrified rickshaw spotted in Sylhet in northeastern Bangladesh. In this case, on the large metal plate which is covering both the seatback and back plate is a large depiction of a Mughal mosque, while aside are two spade-shaped clamp boards decorated with paintings of the Taj Mahal. However, elaborate motifs of religious character can as well appear on the back of the hood as it is shown in Figure 48. While the back plate in the lower zone is featuring a Dhallywood inspired depiction, the upholstered hood is decorated with two symmetrically positioned women in praying position with the inscribed name of Allah above their heads. This popular depiction in rickshaw art which comes in variety of forms has a clearly religious signification reminding on basic duties of Muslim believers. It can be found as well on the seatback as shown in Figure 49 where below the depiction the praying woman with a silhouette of a mosque in the background, is the inscription *Soleman Bhandari* in Bengali which is probably the name of the rickshaw owner. Along with praying women, motif of praying boys symbolizing purity and innocence that are popular in vernacular Islamic imagery around the Subcontinent are as well represented in

¹¹⁸ A detailed map showing all parts of a rickshaw is included in the study of Namzul Islam: Islam, "A Study on Material Culture in Dhaka," 37.

rickshaw art. Figure 50 is showing a detail of the seatback plate from a rickshaw spotted in Srimangal in northeastern Bangladesh featuring the depiction of a praying boy and a woman in praying position with a burning candle in the middle, which is another popular depiction of spiritual character that can be seen on various types of vehicles.

Conclusion

This study has aimed to comprehensively present the phenomenon of vehicular decoration in the countries of the Indian Subcontinent, including the various aspects that are inseparably related to it, and most importantly the decorative elements that are adorning millions of working vehicles in this part of the world. Within the main focus are the motifs and decorative elements with spiritual character that can be found on the large majority of vehicles not only in the countries of South Asia but the rest of the world, reflecting religious beliefs, superstitions, and overall worldviews of their owners and drivers. Within the chapters that are dealing with numerous aspects of vehicular decoration in the Indian Subcontinent, various layers of this phenomenon have been presented in a systematic way, highlighting the specificities and pointing out the mutual characteristics that are present in all countries of this region. Throughout the case studies of the three most populated countries in the Subcontinent, Pakistan, India and Bangladesh, the religious and apotropaic dimension of vehicular decoration is presented using the same pattern, revealing numerous similarities between the applied motifs, their nature, origin and spatial distribution that are adorning the vehicles in these countries.

Despite the limitations determined by the expected scope of a MA thesis that is primarily focused on spiritual motifs in vehicular art, there are many other aspects inherent to the realm of vehicle decoration in the Subcontinent that this study tried to highlight, in support of the argument that this phenomenon should be observed in a broader frame, due to the numerous mutual characteristics related to vehicular decoration in this part of the world.

In this regard, decorated vehicles are normally associated with lower social classes and in certain ways social marginalia throughout this region where customization and decoration of vehicles is done in a very similar way, in series of small workshops dotted around outskirts of major urban centers which are employing tens of thousands of different craftsmen.

Consequently, this phenomenon which is essentially a clash of tradition and modernity is still largely perceived by the educated elites as unworthy and primitive in all aforementioned countries. On the other side, the potential of vehicular art and craftsmen involved into this industry is starting to be increasingly popular during the last few decades and in certain ways appropriated by the elites. Namely, both in Pakistan, India and Bangladesh souvenirs related to truck and rickshaw art are nowadays available in souvenir shops, motifs inspired by decorated vehicles are found on adverts, products of industrial design and fashion industry, while their artists are often being involved in decoration of public spaces and are taking part in different artistic projects.

The thesis as well aimed to highlight numerous similarities regarding the temporal nature of decoration, and relations between the vehicles and their owners that characterizes decorated vehicles in this part of the world. Namely, in all observed countries decoration is applied onto vehicles in certain cycles of time which is usually several years, after which decorated panels are being either refurbished or discarded. Another important feature which is especially pronounced in case of Pakistani trucks but is also present in India is the decorated vehicle as a social symbol where owners are spending huge amounts of money on their customization which is often higher than the cost of the vehicle itself and where applied motifs are an expression of worldview of their drivers and often a social symbol. One important feature regarding the relation between drivers and their vehicles that can be identified in all countries throughout the region is the feminine nature of the vehicle which is reflected primarily through elements of decoration among which some, like pairs of female eyes that as well possess talismanic function, are found on different types of vehicles all over the region.

Despite the fact that spiritual motifs are often found on the vehicles around the Indian Subcontinent, depictions of pious character and apotropaic objects can be found on the vehicles all over the globe, in countries with different cultural traditions and religious

structure. The study also explores the phenomenon in this context, analyzing the mutual characteristics of this type of motifs in general and the specificities which are related to the spiritual motifs in observed countries.

Throughout the case studies presenting the spiritual motifs in vehicle decoration of Pakistan, India and Bangladesh, the study demonstrates numerous mutual characteristics regarding the religious and apotropaic motifs which are evident not only in terms of artistic style and types of decoration but as well in their function. In this regard, the religious symbols have an important role as social identifiers in all aforementioned countries, positioning their drivers among certain religious, confessional and in many cases social groups, while the apotropaic motifs, symbols and objects function in the same way aiming to repel evil and protect the vehicle and its driver. Moreover, the same repertoire of pious images inspired by popular devotional art, religious symbols and inscriptions is found on trucks, buses and as well other types of working vehicles in all three countries. This can be also said for apotropaic objects and symbols like mannat clothes, depictions of eyes, shoes and jingles that adorn the vehicles all over this region. Finally, the study reveals how the same spatial logic in positioning this type of decorative elements applies for the vehicles in the observed countries where the upper front side is always reserved for religious depictions, the lower frontal area for apotropaic symbols and objects while the side surfaces and back side are carrying such motifs only in certain cases.

This study attempted to provide a contribution to the research of this unique, over-arching phenomenon through the comprehensive approach that includes the whole region of the Indian Subcontinent which is absent in the existing scholarship on this sparsely studied topic.

Still, much has to be done. While the main objective of this study was to present findings related to the vehicular art in Pakistan, India and Bangladesh to emphasize its value as important cross-cultural heritage, further comparative analyses are necessary with regard to

- a broader geographical scope that would as well include the neighboring countries of South Asia,
- social, economic and cultural implications,
- historical developments,
- organizational patterns of craftsmanship, and
- the diverse perceptions and exploitations of the phenomenon.

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Catalogue Section



Figure 1: Tap tap with religious motifs from Port-au-Prince, Haiti. Source: Travel adventures, "Tap-taps | Haiti | Americas", accessed April 15, 2018, <http://www.traveladventures.org/continents/americas/tap-tap05.html>.



Figure 2: Tap tap with apotropaic pair of eyes on the front bumper spotted in the street of Port-au-Prince, Haiti. Source: Andy Morgan Writes, "Haiti - Tap tap magic", accessed April 15, 2018, <http://www.andymorganwrites.com/haiti-tap-tap-magic/>.



Figure 3: Chiva bus with the statuette of the Virgin with the Child mounted above the windshield, Medellín, Colombia. Source: Wikimedia Commons, “Bus chiva tradicional 03.jpg”, accessed April 15, 2018, https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Bus_chiva_tradicional_03.jpg.



Figure 4: Chiva bus with a large decorative panel of the rear side, Villa de Leyva, Colombia. Source: Wikimedia Commons, “Chiva jaime.jpg”, accessed April 15, 2018, https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Chiva_jaime.jpg.



Figure 5: Back of a lorry with the depiction of Kaaba, Lagos, Nigeria. Source: Pinterest, “Lorry in Lagos | Nigeria | Photo by Devesh Uba”, accessed April 15, 2018, <https://www.pinterest.com/pin/405675878907748160/?lp=true>.



Figure 6: Truck featuring a large depiction of St. Michael on its back spotted in Nigeria. Source: Travel Wonders of the World, “Colorful truck (Nigeria)”, accessed April 15, 2018, <http://travel-wonders.com/2010/10/26/colourful-truck-nigeria/>.



Figure 7: Christian imagery of the back of a truck from eastern Nigeria. Source: Flickr, “Jesus I Love You Truck Art | Mike Blyth”, accessed April 15, 2018, <https://www.flickr.com/photos/blyth/131813532/in/album-72157594144268846/>.



Figure 8: Mammy wagon featuring Muslim identity of its owner from Accra, Ghana. Source: Wikimedia Commons, “MamaLorry.jpg”, accessed April 15, 2018, <https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:MamaLorry.jpg>.



Figure 9: Mammy wagon with Christian inscription on its upper front side spotted in Ghana. Source: Wikimedia Commons, “Mammy-lorry.jpg”, accessed April 15, 2018, <https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Mammy-lorry.jpg>.



Figure 10: Tro tro van with typical religious inscription made of cut-out adhesive tape on the rear window, Accra, Ghana. Source: OMGVoice, “16 Annoying Things Ghanaian Trotro Drivers and Mates Need to Stop Doing Right Now”, accessed April 15, 2018, <https://omgvoice.com/lifestyle/annoying-things-trotro-drivers/>.



Figure 11: Front of a jeepney from Manila, the Philippines, featuring Christian inscriptions. Source: Stuartxchange, "The Jeepney Collection", accessed April 15, 2018, <http://www.stuartxchange.org/JeepneyCollection128>.



Figure 12: Virgin Mary depicted on driver's door of a jeepney from Manila, the Philippines. Source: Flickr, "Colorful Jeepney | Joseph Ferris III", accessed April 15, 2018, <https://www.flickr.com/photos/josephferris76/5603140152/in/faves-73671569@N02/>.



Figure 13: Bedford truck decorated in Rawalpindi style spotted in Raja Bazaar area, Rawalpindi, Punjab, Pakistan. Photo by the author, 2017.



Figure 14: Bedford 'rocket' truck decorated in Swati style spotted on N45 road in the Upper Dir district, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, Pakistan. Photo by the author, 2017.



Figure 15: Lavishly decorated city bus from Peshawar, Pakistan. Photo by the author, 2017.



Figure 16: Hino truck from Quetta, Pakistan, decorated in Baluchi style. Maripur, Karachi, Pakistan. Photo by the author, 2017.



Figure 17: Water cistern with wooden panel above the windshield that characterizes Karachi style of decoration. Karachi, Pakistan. Photo by the author, 2017.



Figure 18: Flamboyantly decorated minibuses operate on famous W11 city bus route in Karachi, Pakistan. Photo by the author, 2017.



Figure 19: Detail of the upper front section of a truck that is mainly reserved for religious symbols. Maripur, Karachi, Pakistan. Photo by the author, 2017.



Figure 20: Front of a Bedford truck characterized by abundance of reflective elements features multiple religious decorative elements in the upper zone and apotropaic symbols around the bumper. Thatta, Sindh, Pakistan. Photo by the author, 2017.



Figure 21: Detail of the front bumper with hanging chains, beads and jingles and apotropaic shoe. Maripur, Karachi, Pakistan. Photo by the author, 2017.



Figure 22: Detail of the front section of a Bedford truck featuring a pair of female eyes and series of chains hanging from the bumper. Carriage factory area, Rawalpindi, Punjab, Pakistan. Photo by the author, 2017.



Figure 23: Ornate front side of the city minibus in central Karachi, Pakistan. Photo by the author, 2017.



Figure 24: Buraq, mythical flying horse made in technique of hammered tin and adhesive tape collage in the workshop in old Rawalpindi, Punjab, Pakistan. Photo by the author, 2017.



Figure 25: Depiction of the chukar partridge and a pair of cypress trees on the upper back of a truck. Maripur, Karachi, Pakistan. Photo by the author, 2017.



Figure 26: Rear of a minibus with apotropaic mannat clothes. Peshawar, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, Pakistan. Photo by the author, 2017.



Figure 27: Front of a truck displaying Muslim and apotropaic symbols. Kargil, Jammu and Kashmir, India. Photo by the author, 2017.



Figure 28: Front of a truck with decorative elements inherent to Shia branch of Islam. Kargil, Jammu and Kashmir, India. Photo by the author, 2017.



Figure 29: Front of a Hindu truck with religious and apotropaic elements of decoration. Sanjay Gandhi Transport Nagar, Delhi, India. Photo by the author, 2017.

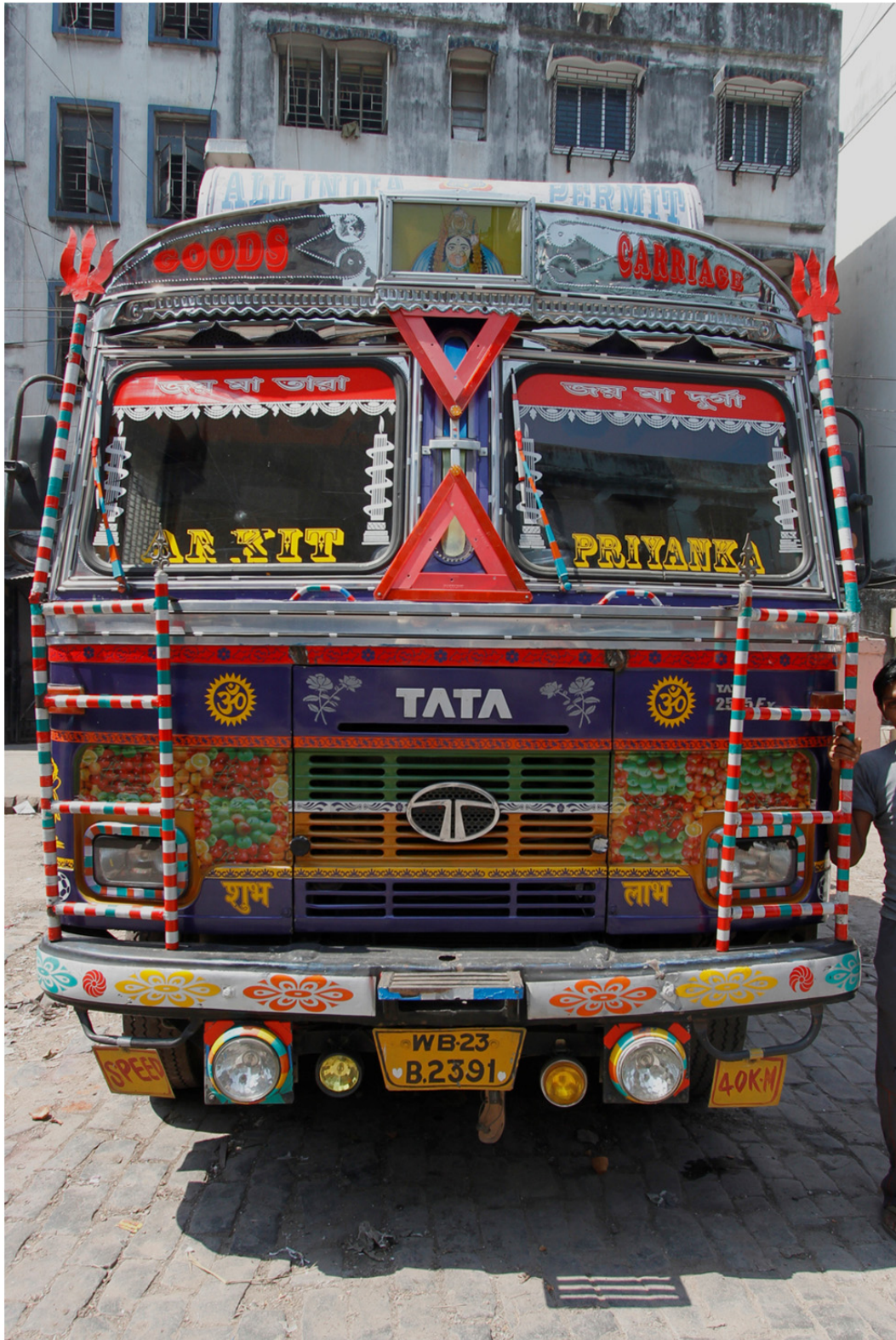


Figure 30: Front of a Hindu truck with the depiction of Kali in the top section. Kolkata, West Bengal, India. Photo by the author, 2017.



Figure 31: Detail of the top section of a truck with two Om inscriptions and a depiction of Hanuman painted on glass. Sanjay Gandhi Transport Nagar, Delhi, India. Photo by the author, 2017.



Figure 32: Front of a light truck with the depiction of Shiva. Kolkata, West Bengal, India. Photo by the author, 2017.



Figure 33: Front of a Muslim truck which also includes Hindu decorative elements. Mandvi, Gujarat, India. Photo by the author, 2017.



Figure 34: Front of a Sikh truck whose decorative elements are showing the affiliation of its driver with Guru Gobind Singh Ji and the Gurudwara Poanta Sahib. Sanjay Gandhi Transport Nagar, Delhi, India. Photo by the author, 2017.



Figure 35: Detail of the front section of a Sikh truck displaying various talismanic objects and symbols. Sanjay Gandhi Transport Nagar, Delhi, India. Photo by the author, 2017.



Figure 36: Detail of the truck grill with hanging amulets in form of string with chili peppers and lime. Sanjay Gandhi Transport Nagar, Delhi, India. Photo by the author, 2017.



Figure 37: Side view of a 12-wheeler truck whose decoration includes khanda sword, a symbol of Sikh faith. Sanjay Gandhi Transport Nagar, Delhi, India. Photo by the author, 2017.



Figure 38: Detail of a demonic face hanging from the rear of a truck. Sanjay Gandhi Transport Nagar, Delhi, India. Photo by the author, 2017.

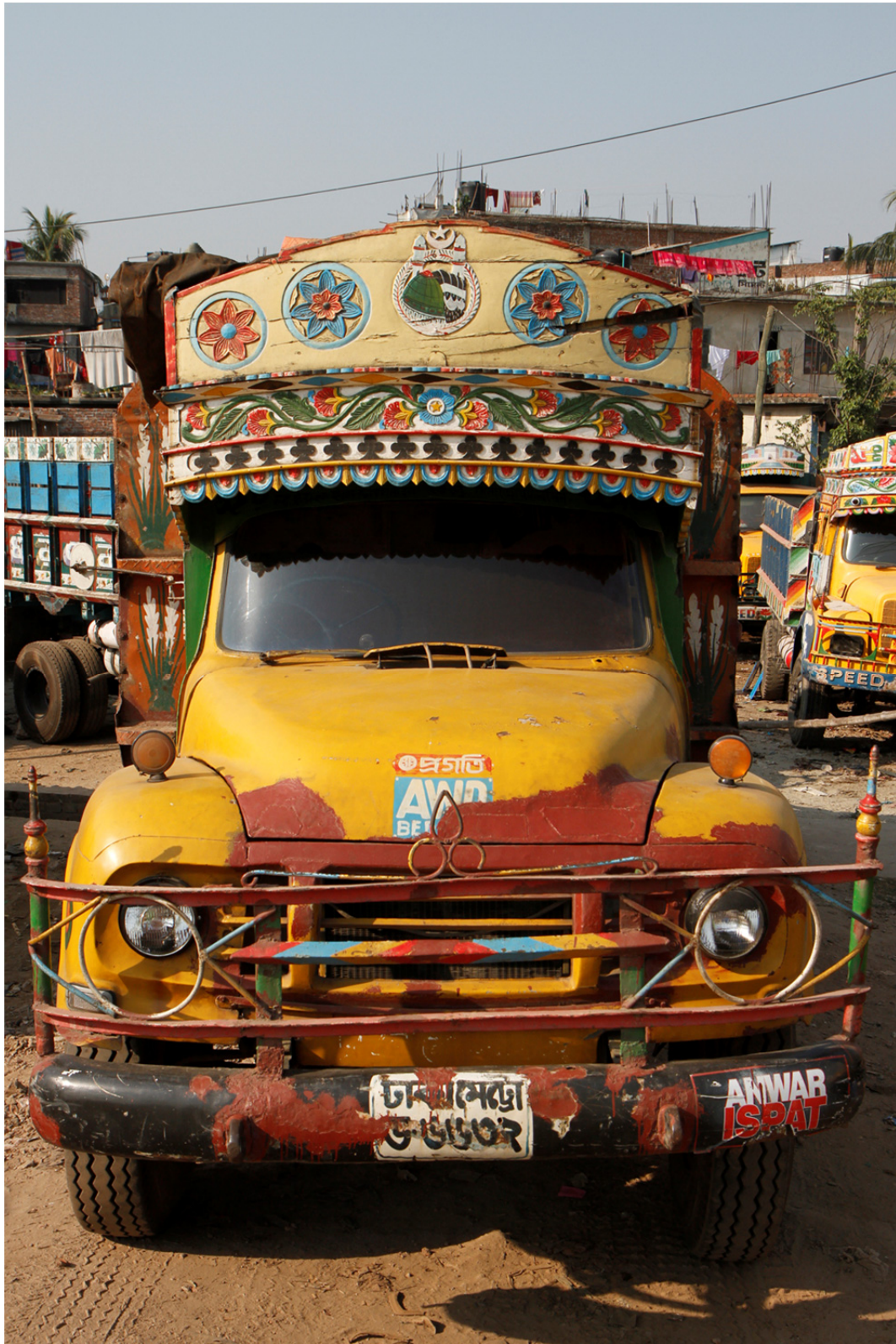


Figure 39: Front of a Bedford truck featuring Muslim symbols and floral ornamentation. Greater Dhaka Area, Dhaka District, Bangladesh. Photo by the author, 2015.



Figure 40: Front of a Bedford truck decorated with floral ornaments and symbols of Islam. Greater Dhaka Area, Dhaka District, Bangladesh. Photo by the author, 2015.



Figure 41: Front of a Bedford truck featuring floral ornamentation and religious symbols. Chittagong Port, Chittagong, Bangladesh. Photo by the author, 2015.



Figure 42: Detail of the side cabin surface featuring floral decoration and depiction of Muslim holy places nestled in a clam shell and inscriptions 'Bismillah' and 'Tasfiya' in Bengali. Greater Dhaka Area, Dhaka District, Bangladesh. Photo by the author, 2015.



Figure 43: Detail of richly decorated wooden superstructure on the front side of a Bedford truck featuring geometric and floral patterns and symbols of Islam. Greater Dhaka Area, Dhaka District, Bangladesh. Photo by the author, 2015.



Figure 44: Detail of a decorated superstructure on the front of a truck featuring the depiction of the Prophet's mosque and the Kaaba within the central medallion, surrounded with two white doves and Bengali inscription 'Fi Amanillah' which means 'Have a Safe Journey' below it, surrounded with names of the Prophet and God. Greater Dhaka Area, Dhaka District, Bangladesh. Photo by the author, 2015.



Figure 45: Detail of the upper part of a truck featuring the large depiction of a mosque, names of the Prophet and God and an Islamic prayer verse which means, 'In the name of Allah, keep me safe when I am travelling'. Barisal, Bangladesh. Photo by the author, 2015.



Figure 46: Detail from the back of a rickshaw with the large depiction of a Mosque in the lower zone and two peacocks on the seatback plate above it. Upper inscription 'Badshah Bhai', is probably driver's name with the phone number below it, while the inscription 'Ma er Duwa' at the bottom means 'Mother's blessings' in Bengali. Dhaka, Bangladesh. Photo by the author, 2015.



Figure 47: Back of an electrified rickshaw featuring the large depiction of a Mughal-style mosque on the seatback plate. Sylhet, Bangladesh. Photo by the author, 2015.



Figure 48: Back of a rickshaw with depictions of two women in praying position on upholstered hood and Dhallywood-inspired plate in the lower zone. Dhaka, Bangladesh. Photo by the author, 2015.



Figure 49: Depiction of a praying woman and a mosque on the seatback plate of a rickshaw. Below is the inscription 'Soleman Bhandari' in Bengali, which is probably the name of its owner. Dhaka, Bangladesh. Photo by the author, 2015.



Figure 50: Seatback plate of a rickshaw decorated with a popular depiction of a child and woman praying. Srimangal, Bangladesh. Photo by the author, 2015.