Truck Calligraphy in Pakistan

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Introduction
Vehicle decoration is a widespread practice across the world and is commonly used as a means of self-expression. The degree of decoration varies tremendously, ranging from relatively simple stickers carrying slogans (as seen in western Europe and the United States) to entirely customized automobiles, trucks and buses that represent a major passion in the lives of their proud owners. Pakistan is a country where elaborate decoration of vehicles is a normal part of everyday life, and includes everything from bicycles and push-carts to large trailer trucks.1 Truck decoration is especially noteworthy since not only is it a visually striking practice but it is pervasive, as trucks transport the great majority of goods inside Pakistan. In spite of all their practical purposes, every truck in Pakistan is ornately decorated, and normal wear and tear necessitates a complete renovation of each truck’s decorative programme every five years. As such, truck decoration represents both a vast informal economy as well as a major arena of public expression.

Truck Decoration
Most Pakistani trucks do not belong to companies with large fleets but rather to individuals (or family groups) who own no more than a handful of trucks. Usually, these owners buy a bare chassis consisting of the cabin, engine, frame and wheels, which is then taken to a workshop where it gets its bodywork, is painted, and then decorated. Truck decoration consists of a combination of calligraphy, painting, metalwork and appliqué of plastic and reflective tape. Decisions regarding the decorative programme are normally made by the owners in consultation with the artists and, to a lesser degree, the driver, although the latter buys small decorative or religious objects which he attaches to the vehicle after the truck has been completed and is already in service. On occasion, drivers also commission smaller pieces of calligraphy to go on the vehicle.

There are a number of distinct styles of truck decoration in Pakistan which correspond closely to geographic and ethnic regions.2 The commonest style is that found across the northern Punjab, Hazara District and Azad Kashmir (Pakistan-administered Kash-
Text, Image and Message

The first example (fig. 130) shows the front of a truck decorated in the Punjabi style common to northern and central Pakistan, and in Pakistani-administered Kashmir (Azad Kashmir). Religious epigraphy is used extensively in this example, frequently intermingled with pictorial representations. The Kaaba in Mecca and the Prophet’s mosque in Medina appear twice in pictorial form, the second and fourth frames on the archal panel at the very top of the truck, and in the circles towards the outside of the rectangular panel directly below it. Accompanying these pictorial representations, the names of Allah and Muhammad are invoked four times in writing as ya Allah, ya Muhammad: (1) on the extreme ends of the top panel (the ya Muhammad is damaged); (2) on the panel below it immediately to the outside of the circular medallions with the Kaaba and Prophet’s mosque in them and again (3) in very small writing on the central medallion; and (4) towards the outside of the curved panel above the windshield.

In every case, the words ya Allah and ya Muhammad are written from right to left as one faces the truck, in accordance with the way the Arabic (as well as Urdu and Persian) scripts are written from right to left. It is noteworthy that the pictorial representation of the Kaaba and the Prophet’s mosque – which signify God and His Prophet, respectively – also appear from right to left on the truck. As such, the images can be seen as pictorial renditions of Allah’s names; in other words, the image and the text are interchangeable in this context.

There are several other pieces of religious epigraphy on the panels above the windshield of this vehicle: across the very top a caption describing Muhammad’s status as the primordial human being:

bismi rabb al-murîb Muhammad Mustafî pehe-
na Adam bî na farashie the na zahir bâ Khudî pehle

In all God’s creation Muhammad was made first, there was no Adam, there were no angels, God was not apparent.

At the bottom of the same panel is the inscription ‘Ajî-khish-e hamîr I nigîhî-karam (“Crown-bearer, he is, vision of grace”), an honorific title given to Muhammad and popularized in modern Pakistan in qawwâl song by the Sabri Brothers.

Contents

Stylistic variation notwithstanding, Pakistani truck design follows certain clear – if unspoken – rules concerning the nature of decorations and writings as well as their placement. The front of the vehicle is the most elaborate and combines religious and (what might best be described as) ‘high culture’ literary and artistic references. The sides of the vehicle have painting chosen for primarily aesthetic reasons (landscapes with or without buildings, beautiful animals and portraits of real and imagined people) as well as writing identifying the company to which the truck belongs. The back of the truck, though less ornate than the front, is often as rich in its decoration, and is the only place where humorous aphorisms and large examples of visual art are found (for a number of reasons, both practical and conventional, the sides of the truck are almost never used for large designs or paintings such as panoramic landscapes).

Although the designs and images represent the more striking aspects of the trucks’ visual decoration, they are not readily understood as providing any explicit or systematic message by the majority of people who look at the truck. In contrast, the textual material that is included as part of the truck’s decorative programme is very clearly selected to be seen as well as read, and to provide explicit messages concerning the identity and concerns of the individuals associated with the truck. This applies to the high-quality calligraphy that forms part of the decorative programme when the truck is first completed in a workshop, as well as other, less formal and frequently less skillful, examples that are added later on. Unsurprisingly, text is used to impart mundane information such as the name of the owner and transportation company, as well as to advertise the services of painters and body-makers involved in the trucks’ completion. But it is also text, rather than image, that is used to actively engage viewers in the most direct manner and to communicate a variety of messages with them, as is apparent from the following examples.

mir), which can be called the Punjabi style. This is closely related to the Peshawar style, which differs from the Punjabi style mostly in its greater use of carved wood, especially above the windshield and on the doors. The Balochi style is the most elaborate, above all in its use of dramatic extensions to the front bumper and extensive and intricate mosaics made of reflective tape.

FIG. 133

RELIGIOUS EPIGRAPHY ON A PAKISTANI TRUCK

The richly embellished front of the truck is decorated with icons and a number of protective formulas in which God and the Prophet Muhammad are invoked. The calligrapher used the naskh and naskh script.
To either side of the medallion at the centre of the second panel from the top is the phrase *ṣuqād-e Khuda* (‘In God’s protection’). Both central medallions invoke the names of saints, the crown-shaped top one that of Shah Bilawal Nuri, “luminescent light, all afflictions stay away” (nunmati nār hor balā dūr), and the lower rectangular one of Lal Shabbaz Qalandar, the most popular Sufi saint in all of Pakistan.

The metal medallions hanging off the bottom of the middle panel have the names of the owners on either end (Anjum Khan and Nadim Khan) and the name of the truck in the middle (Lohhát Khwān – “Divine Caravan”). The word Fauzan (“benefactor”) appears right above the windshield, and is most likely another name for the truck.

The grille on either side of the central medallion on the curved cowling above the windshield has two couples, the first asserting that Muhammad, his daughter Fatima, her husband ‘Ali, and their sons Hasan and Husain are the best of human beings. The lower couplet is very popular on trucks in various parts of the country:

> ki Muhammad se vaqī tū ne to ham tere haal 
> yet jahān chāz hai kyā luh-qa’alam tere haal

If you are faithful to Muhammad, then I am yours. What is this world after all, the pen and the tablet are yours.

The lower half of the truck carries more calligraphy, though it is different in its focus: at the bottom of the radiator under the name Fauzan, there is a non-religious couplet written on a very narrow band:

> jāl jāl khāmash se kari dhāp meh lekin 
> anak se kabīr saya-e dīvān na māngō

Burn away in silence under the blazing sun, but never ask your relatives for the shade of a simple wall.

Below that are the registration number and two small panels on the ends of the bumper advertising the route. Directly underneath the oval registration plate is the name of the truck company (Pak China Goods, Gilgit). At the bottom is another non-religious couplet:

> shubnam kā ānā kā khet dekhi hai dunyā 
> karte haal sab li nazīra rbatāv hai kaal tā

Who ever notices the tears of the morning dew everyone is busy looking at the smiling rosebud.

This truck is an excellent example of the incorporation of calligraphy into a decorative programme as well as for the use of text to impart information about the owners of the truck and their attitudes towards religion. Many of the religious references are to Sufi saints and poetry, suggesting that – like many Pakistanis – the owners’ religiosity expresses itself through Sufism.

The calligraphy is also of consistently high quality, using several different scripts (especially variations of nasta’īq and naskh). There is no discernible reason why a particular calligraphic script is used in a particular place, but the consistent attention to style makes it clear that the owners care deeply about the role of writing in the ornamentation of the truck. This is frequently the case, particularly on the front of the vehicle, which functions as its ‘face’ to the world, but there is often a discrepancy in quality between examples of writing on any one vehicle.

**Figure 134** provides an example of a truck with similar levels of attention to detail in the extensive use of calligraphy deployed in its design. As in the previous example, Allah and Muhammad are invoked both visually and textually – in the outermost circles on the top panel and in the outer circles on the panel below it. The central medallion on this panel contains three names, those of Allah, Muhammad and ‘Ali (evoked as nabi – “prophet” – and wali – “successor” – respectively). ‘Ali was the Prophet Muhammad’s cousin and son-in-law and is deeply revered by many Sufis in Pakistan, in addition to his central role as the first Imam in Shi’ism and as the first successor to Muhammad according to the majority of Sufis. The rest of the medallions contain epithets of God. All the calligraphy in this example is in variations of the same style, one that is commonly used for writing Arabic (as opposed to Urdu and Persian). This is appropriate in this context because both epithets of God and the names of Muhammad and ‘Ali are in Arabic and evoke the Qur’an.

A variant of the similar calligraphic style is used in the large central medallion of the truck in fig. 135, which declares “Allah is the Best of Providers” (Allah Khayr ar-rizqi). However, in this example there is an epigraphic band of substantially lower artistic value: written in white on a red background, it is in two parts. On both outer ends,
Religious Epigraphy on the 'Crown' of a Truck

The central medallion is filled with the names of Sufi saints, framed by peacocks, fish, and eye symbols.

It says: "The Name of God" (nâm-e Khudâ). This surrounds an Urdu couplet with a religious theme:

ter shîn zul-jâlî hai
ter mînâ mîjâd-e hâlî hai
merî ajâbzî kâ zarîbâl
merî zindâgî kâ safâl hai

Your glory is majestic,
your radiant, is the highest honour.
Accept from me my weakness,
it is a question of my life.

It is not uncommon for such verses to be added to the vehicle after the original decorative programme has been completed.6 Owners and drivers will commission the work from calligraphers who are sometimes less skilled, and the difference in quality is quite apparent to the informed viewer.

A similar variance in the calligraphic’s artistic merit is found in the example in Fig. 136, showing the front of a truck, although in this case it appears that the calligrapher was more adept at using the nasta’liq script – commonly used for Urdu – than the naskh used for Arabic. The Arabic phrases yâ Allâh and yâ Muhammad appear in white on the roses, and the formula mîsûr图书/Allâh ("as God wishes") appears at the centre of the metallic piece directly above the inverted red triangle. The epigraphy on either side of the formula gives the name of the bodymaker (M. Iqbal Islam Bodymakers, Khushab). The two metal medallions applied to the outside in the bottom of the image, as well as the central medallion with two eyes, all have the names of Sufi saints of regional significance. Finally, as in the previous example, there is a religious couplet in white on a red background (to the outside of this red band it says wâli! wâli! - "Oli! Oli!") and nâm-e Khudâ ("The Name of God"): yeh sab terâ hâmî hai ùdâ
koh bêtâ ab tak bêtî hî hai

It is by Your grace, O Lord, that things are still going well!

Ambivalence of Signification

The back of the truck contrasts with the front in many ways. The relative informality of the back, plus the frequent wear and tear to which it is subjected, means that there is almost never any overt religious content to the epigraphy on the back. This is exemplified by the case in Fig. 137: the tailgate of the truck (occupying the top half of the image) has the name of the truck company, Bhutto Goods Transport Company, Badin, Badin being a city south of the centre of Sindh province. The black panel directly below the tailgate has two short aphorisms together with the name of the individual - Muluzim Khan, the driver - who commissioned them:

tâ chî hot hoi mast mast
You are an intoxicating thing!

and

jaâhe vîlî (lî) mûhâlî
May the jealous onlooker go back!

To the bottom of the truck in Fig. 137 four moveable panels are fixed with a variety of epigraphic themes. In addition to the registration number written in both English and Urdu, the outer plates display two very popular formulas: "Come safely, leave safely!" (khâyi râlî, khâyi râlî) and "A mother’s prayers are the breeze of heaven!" (mân há dâ’î jâmât há�dá). The two inner middle panels have the names of the owners (Abdul Hamid Naik and Abdul Sattar Naik) and that of the truck (M. Zubair Naik Aeroplane, probably after the father or elder brother of the other two owners). This set of panels also provides a reference to the home town of the owners, using a familiar formula in which the prayer “Long live!” is followed by the name of a place, in this case a village named Sultan Khan Baloch.

The truck in Fig. 137 represents an excellent example of the transformation of Pakistani truck decoration from a regional phenomenon, in which owners and drivers from a particular ethnically defined area get the bodywork as well as the ornamentation completed in their home region, rather than the place where they reside. As evidenced by its registration plate, from a legal standpoint this truck is from Dera Ismail Khan, an ethnically mixed town in the North-West Frontier Province (NWFP) approximately 300 km west of Lahore. The population is primarily Baloch and Pashtun, although

Figure 135

Aphorism on the Front of a Truck

In the central medallion at the upper edge of the picture is written “Allah is the best provider.” Pious Pakistanis use this aphorism frequently in everyday life.
the major language of the district is Siraiki (closely related to Punjabi, the commonest language in Pakistan). However, the company which owns (or leases) the truck is based in Badin, approximately 1000 km from Dera Ismail Khan by road and in an entirely different ethnic area. The writing on the vehicle is either in Urdu (the national language, used commonly on trucks throughout Pakistan) or in Punjabi, with no examples of Sindhi or Balochi in evidence.

In recent times, a significant subgroup of Pakistan’s trucks have started breaking the traditional, albeit informal, rule of restricting religious writing and images to the front of the vehicle. Religious epigraphy has begun to appear on the sides and the back of vehicles, although in almost all cases they consist of exhortations to piety rather than medallions containing the names of God, the Prophet, or Sufi and Shi’a saints which serve as talismans protecting the truck, its operators and its cargo. No. 134 shows the bottom half of the truck in fig. 134 and is an example of such writing on the front bumper, with its two outermost panels declaring: “Prayer is the path to salvation” (námz rāh-e naqṣ hai) and “Prayer is the key to heaven” (námz jamat kī kungi hai). The inner panels bear more traditional messages: the central ones declare “Dear Mother! I need your prayers! I just need the cool breeze of your bosom!” (piyār mān! Māhī tā teri dūt chāhvā! Teri ančhāl kī bas thondi havā chāhvā!), to the outside of which is the truck’s name, Bulbul-e Hazara (The Nightingale of Hazara, Hazara being a district just northwest of Islamabad, home to a disproportionate number of truck and bus drivers).

Religious exhortations of this sort are found on the sides of vehicles, occupying the same locations and written in the same styles used for displaying the name of the transportation company to which the truck belongs or the names of cities where the company has offices. Religious messages are almost never found on the back of the vehicle for several practical reasons, all of which relate directly to questions of piety and propriety: (a) the back of the truck suffers a much higher degree of wear and tear than the rest of the vehicle, and it is considered inappropriate to have religious messages on the section of the vehicle that gets damaged the quickest; (b) trucks frequently carry ‘dirty’ loads such as fertilizer and other ritually unclean commodities; and (c) people routinely climb over the back of the vehicle as it is loaded and unloaded, and it is considered improper by Pakistanis to step on religious names and words. On the back of a truck whimsical sayings or expressions of folk wisdom can be found, such as mahbab sab ko fay, nafrat kisi se nafrat (“Love for all, hate for no one”), also written on an iron decoration piece shaped as an eagle with outstretched wings which belongs to the Oriental collection of the Museum of Ethnology in Munich (fig. 139).

The major exception to the practice of refraining from references to religion on the back of the vehicle is found on dump trucks employed in the quarrying and transportation of gravel and other construction materials. Especially on the Potohar Plateau near Islamabad, such trucks carry a variety of messages advertising the religious affiliation of the owner. The truck in fig. 134 is an excellent example of this style. The top of the vehicle displays the slogan “O Allah! Help us!” (O Allāh! Mānāzā! Madad) in blue, with exhortations of the first four caliphs of the Sunnis on either side. Immediately below it is a couplet in Urdu asking for God’s mercy. “Your servant is a sinner, but You are merciful, Lord! — Showing grace to your servant is Your glory, Lord!” (Bando to gunahgār hai tā rahām hāi Mawād — bando peh karam kāhī teri shād hai Mawād). The central panel has a banner with the message jihād on it, while the medallions on either side celebrate the name of a Sunni Muslim missionary movement (Da’wat-e tafsih zindābād). Below the crossed swords is the name of the owner (Gul Faruq), while the bottom panel has the name and telephone number of the company to which the truck belongs (Ejaz and Co. Building Material Suppliers, Haripur).
FIG. 138 (left above)
DECORATIVE PANEL IN THE SHAPE OF AN EAGLE WITH INSCRIPTION
Pakistan; 1970/1980

The decorative panel on a truck shows the message of peace “Love for all, hate for no one” in Urdu.

FIG. 139 (left below)
DECORATIVE SCRIPT EMPHASIZING THE SIGNIFICANCE OF PRAYER

These inscriptions are located on the bottom half of the truck whose ‘crown’ can be seen in fig. 134.

FIG. 140 (right)
INScriptions WITH SUNNI ISLAMIC CONTENT

The back of a dump truck is inscribed with invocations to God and the four caliphs of Sunni Islam and references to the missionary movement Tablighi Jamaat.