

Mosques, Palm Trees and Swords: Religious Symbolism in Northern Nigerian Lorry Decorations

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*Art is the past coming to us without simplification, without generalization
and it comes to us at a glance.²*

When travelling by road in Nigeria, I always considered the brightly painted lorries we encountered along the way as integral to my visual experience of the journey as the landscapes passing by. With their colourful decorations and witty comments on life on the road and beyond, they provided welcome entertainment on the long journeys between Kano, Maiduguri and Zaria. The comparatively complex motifs decorating the back of the lorries appeared of particular significance within the decorative programme. They appeared designed and positioned to be appreciated by fellow travellers and in particular those travelling behind. The paintings routinely covered the larger part of the tailgate. Dark outlines and bold colours rendered the images as well as any epigraphic elements intelligible even from a considerable distance and in bright day light. Their motifs drew from a variety of local contexts of ideas and practices. Among them my curiosity was in particular aroused by the diverse visual references to Islam and Christianity, which raised questions about their potential relations with contemporary discourses about religion and their intersections with politics. An in-depth discussion of the local trajectories and contemporary practices of lorry decoration in northern Nigeria and their responsiveness to changing contexts of politics and religions is beyond

the scope of this paper. Instead, I use this paper to explore approaches to lorry art as an artefact that inflects varied social positionings and, hence, bears witness to the development of ideas.

Approaches to Lorry Decorations

Historically, motor vehicles including lorries have been important agents of change across Africa.³ Routinely traversing linguistic, cultural and political boundaries, they have played an important role in the circulation of information and ideas. Nevertheless, the role of what Beck termed their 'skin of symbols' in these processes has been underexplored.⁴ My own approach to lorry decorations and their interactions with local contexts of ideas draws from the work of historians of South Asian visual cultures.⁵ In particular, I am interested in Christopher Pinney's concept of visual history.⁶ Pinney proposed that visual culture may provide an alternative to textual sources in the writing of history. He suggested that alongside political and religious writings images may be considered arenas of the thinking out of ideas including about politics, religion and their intersections. While textual sources primarily reflect the positionings of literate elites, visual culture can inflect ideas and practices of wider cross-sections of (local) populations. In particular at the lower end of the market,

economic considerations encourage artists to cultivate diversified audiences. Artists' portfolios tend to reflect this diversity.⁷ On the consumption-side, the circulation of images and the contexts into which they have been incorporated reflect the currency of ideas among different groups. In the case of northern Nigerian lorry decorations, subject matter ranged from politics, religion and business to past and contemporary youth culture. Its canon echoed the diversity of the community that had evolved in relation to the road transport business and made it visible to members of the community and society at large. Pinney's visual history of India paid close attention to historical context and the interplay of discourses about the visual and the development of visual practices. These contexts of ideas and practices provide varying frameworks for thinking about images and affected their ability to elicit responses. A comprehensive discussion of northern Nigerian ideas is beyond the scope of the paper. Suffice here to note that lorry art is the product of a community of practice that evidently values surface decorations including images and epigraphic elements as a means of presenting a public face to the community and society at large. Fieldwork in Kano and Maiduguri⁸ suggests that the choice of motifs and their arrangement were the subject of conversation between executing artists and commissioning vehicle owners. The influence either exerted on the final design varied depending on the individuals involved. Design choices were framed by established practices, which included a canon of motifs and compositional schemes, as well as individual preferences that reflected personal histories and assessments of the trajectories of motifs and compositions. Not all of these choices may have been consciously intended to elicit particular responses as overexposure and familiarity reduced the awareness of the motifs' signifying potential among artists and patrons. Naturalised as part of an established canon, their individual and collective significances were no longer routinely scrutinised and analysed.⁹ Nevertheless, the resulting designs are more supportive of some interpretations than others and a careful analysis may reveal social positionings.

During fieldwork between November 2007 and October 2008, references to Islam and, more rarely, Christianity were among the most frequent motifs

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of tailgate paintings I observed. Islamic motifs included (in order of frequency) the mosque, an image consisting of two swords crossing in front of a palm tree, and al-Buraq, the winged horse that carried the

Prophet Muhammad on his night journey. Notable absences included illustrations of the Qur'an and Muslim history discussed by Kalla¹⁰ and portraits of individual religious personalities noted by Muhammad.¹¹ Christian motifs prominently included illustrations of Biblical scenes, mostly from the New Testament, which centred on the person of Jesus, and unambiguous symbols of Christianity including the cross. In the predominantly Muslim north, I observed references to Christianity primarily (if not exclusively) on vehicles parked around Kano's principal fruit market where they had delivered goods from the south. For this reason, it appears justified to limit the following discussion to selected Islamic motifs.

The Mosque

The mosque was the most common Islamic motif observed. The illustrations on lorry tailgates (and, on one occasion, the top air deflector) broadly varied one prototype. Characteristically, they depicted a building erected around an open courtyard with domed roofs and featuring a varying number of Middle Eastern style minarets. The popularity of a foreign inspired rather than indigenous style of mosque architecture in these illustrations was already noted by Pritchett in the late 1970s.¹² By the 2000s, however, it reflected a contemporary built reality. Contemporary mosque architecture in Nigeria had adapted a variety of foreign influences. This influx of foreign architectural styles coincided with an increased impact of various international currents of religious thought.¹³ As a result, the prevalence of the foreign inspired prototype inflected broader social realities, a move away from local expressions of Islam and an increasing awareness of Nigerian Muslims as part of an international Muslim community.

The prevalence of this prototype rather than illustrations of diverse landmark mosques suggests that the motif served as a generic symbol of Islam rather than a reference to particular places of worship. Features reminiscent of Middle Eastern

architecture established a visual connection with the wider Muslim world. As such, tailgate paintings depicting mosques positioned the owner and his business within the realm of Islam. As Kendhammer argued,¹⁴ recent debates about the legal status of Shari'a have successfully presented religious observance and public piety as a means of ensuring social justice and combatting a variety of social problems. Against the background of these discourses, to publicly identify as a Muslim carried connotations of virtue not only as a private person but also as an entrepreneur. It advertised the business as honest to fellow entrepreneurs seeking trustworthy business partners. Here, the mosque motif provided a generic symbol of Islam. On the one hand, the motif identified the entrepreneur as a Muslim without associating him and his business with any particular Muslim group and their sometimes conflicting ideas and practices. Public affiliation with any one group drew unnecessary attention to potential disagreements between business partners who identified with adversarial religious groups and opinions. On the other hand, visual practices including vehicle decoration were occasionally the subject of pious criticism. In 2008, missionaries of an unidentified group reportedly visited artisans based at Gamboru Market, Maiduguri, condemning the use of images on a variety of objects including lorries and other commercial vehicles.¹⁵ Portraits of religious leaders of the kind Muhammad observed in lorry decoration in the past¹⁶ and their role in primarily Sufi practices of visual piety were particularly controversial. Here, the mosque provided a comparatively uncontroversial and unambiguous alternative.

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Some tailgate paintings, however, displayed a certain resemblance to the Prophet's mosque in Medina. Illustrations of the mosque might have provided a model for illustrations of mosques. However, familiarity with the motif had possibly reduced awareness of the motifs reference to the building in Saudi Arabia. However, if it was recognised, the image of the Prophet's mosque established a visual relation with one of the most significant sites in the early history of Islam, one of the religion's most holy places and a stop on most pilgrims' itinerary. As such, the Prophet's mosque

was a powerful symbol of Islam. In addition, the motif inflected other local ideas and practices related to the Prophet's mosque. These included a visit to the mosque and the tomb of Prophet Muhammad on its grounds but possibly also the conflicting

contexts of ideas and practices associated with the tomb. Because of the incorporation of the graves of Prophet Muhammad and his companions Abu Bakr and 'Umar under the reign of al-Walid ibn Abd al-Malik (668-715) and the dome that was constructed during the reign of al-Mansur Qalawun al-Sahili (1222-90),¹⁷ the Prophet's mosque was a subject in debates about the legality of marking and visiting graves.¹⁸ These debates derive their current significances from the writings of Muhammad ibn 'Abd al-Wahhab (1703-92) and their influence on contemporary Salafi discourses. Ibn 'Abd al-Wahhab condemned the construction of places of worship above graves equating them to the glorification of the dead and, thus, polytheism (*shirk*).¹⁹ Similar views have been expressed more recently by senior Saudi Arabian scholars. The Saudi Ministry of Islamic Affairs called for the demolition of the dome above the Prophet's mosque and the levelling of the graves of Muhammad and his companies.²⁰ Salafi discourses have influenced ideas and practices in northern Nigeria and most prominently among the 'Yan Izala, a group opposed to what they perceive as innovative practices in particular among members of the Qaderiyya and the Tijaniyya.²¹ The extent to which criticism of the incorporation of the graves of the Prophet and his companions into the mosque's ground and the construction of the Green Dome affected ideas and practices among transport entrepreneurs and lorry artists cannot be ascertained without further field research, nor can their significance for readings of the Prophet's mosque as a motif in northern Nigerian lorry decoration.

The Palm Tree and the Sword

Another common motif consisted of a palm tree and two swords that crossed in front of it. Individual artists varied details of the design including the colouring and the shape of the blades. On occasion, they incorporated the word *Islam* into the design in order to unambiguously ascertain the

motif's religious connotations. Curiously, the motif displayed a resemblance to the coat of arms of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia from which it was primarily distinguished by the way the swords were positioned. In the Saudi Arabian coat of arms, the swords crossed below rather than in front of the palm tree.

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However, this modification can be easily explained as an adaptation of the symbol to the format of the tailgate. The resemblance, then, raises questions about the relation between the motif's significances in local contexts of ideas and practices and Saudi Arabia. It might be tempting to identify in the appearance of this motif in northern Nigerian lorry decorations evidence of a pervasive influence of Saudi Arabia and the interpretation of Islam promoted by its scholars. Indeed, Saudi Arabia has provided funding including for mosque construction, education, and proselytization since the 1950s and, as mentioned above, Salafi discourses influenced ideas and practices of some Muslims in northern Nigeria including the 'Yan Izala. But, Saudi Arabia was not the only Muslim donor nation and Nigerian Muslims have maintained relations with scholars in other countries including, most prominently, between Sheikh Ibrahim Zakzaky's Islamic Movement and Iran. However, what distinguished Saudi Arabia from other Muslim nations was its status as the country from which Islam emerged and in which the pilgrimage sites were located. As a result, it featured prominently in local Muslim imagination. On the one hand, visual references to Saudi Arabia in the form of photographs and reproductions of its regalia including the coat of arms and the flag are documented in other forms of religious art. These include religious posters in which they were combined with portraits of respected Sufi leaders including the Senegalese Tijani Sheikh Ibrahim Niassé. Here, reference was almost certainly made to Islam's historical roots and sacred sites in Saudi Arabia rather than the principally anti-Sufi teachings of contemporary Saudi Arabian scholars. In the context of northern Nigerian lorry decorations, this significance was

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emphasised through the caption, *Islam*, and, like the mosque motif, the palm tree and the swords publicly positioned the owner as a Muslim. On the other hand, Saudi Arabia featured prominently in Nigerian discourses about Shari'a and pietisation as a country that — in the image proposed by popular Nigerian discourses —

has overcome 'social decay and moral decadence' through adherence to Islam and achieved public piety, political stability and prosperity.²² This significance is well expressed by the palm tree and swords motif. According to the Saudi Ministry of Higher Education, the swords symbolise 'strength and sacrifice rooted in faith' while the date palm tree stands for 'vitality, growth and prosperity'.²³ Another popular interpretation identifies in the crossing swords a symbol of the bond between the reigning house of Saud and Islam²⁴ and, by extension, politics and religion. As such, it provided an appropriate symbol for related ideas in northern Nigeria and in particular discourses that framed calls for the implementation of Shari'a and (public) piety in terms of preconditions for political stability and social justice.

Conclusion

This paper was inspired by the work of historians of South Asian visual cultures. It reflects a first attempt to apply analytical approaches pioneered in the study of South Asian truck decorations to northern Nigerian lorry art. Through his analysis of the decorative programmes of Pakistani trucks, Elias for example was able to provide insights into religious ideas and practices within the local road transport community. On the basis of tailgate paintings alone, northern Nigerian lorry decorations do not lend themselves to such detailed analysis. The religious motifs discussed here nevertheless highlight the significance of religion in the professional lives of artists, transport entrepreneurs and drivers. On the one hand, artists and owners operated in a social and professional context in which to publicly identify as a pious Muslim carried beneficial connotation. On the other hand, the Nigerian religious arena was

characterised by competing and sometimes conflicting religious discourses and publicly affiliating with any one religious group may have been potentially detrimental to business. Nevertheless and despite their comparatively generic character as symbols of Islam motifs including the mosque and the Saudi Arabian coat of arms possibly inflected further positionings within the northern Nigerian social and religious space. Against the background of local and international discourses, the Prophet's mosque possibly inflected opposition to Salafi iconoclastic tendencies. By contrast and despite its appearance also in contexts of Sufi visual piety, the coat of arms of Saudi Arabia potentially inflected support for Salafi ideas and practices. However, these ideas require further research to ascertain the currency of the relevant ideas among lorry artists and road transport entrepreneurs. Future inquiry will also extend the scope of analysis to consider a greater variety of tailgate motifs including symbols of Christianity as well as those elements of the decorative programme that stand out less and are not geared towards fellow traveller. Particular attention will have to be paid to the epigraphic programme.

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Notes

- 1 Research for this article has been conducted in the context of doctoral studies at the Department of Art and Archaeology, School of Oriental and African Studies, London. Fieldwork in Nigeria was funded by the Arts and Humanities Research Council of England.
- 2 Vansina 1986: 211.
- 3 Gewald, Luning & Walraven 2009.
- 4 Beck 2009: 152. Publications that have considered aspects of vehicle decoration in West African contexts include Pritchett 1979; Bah 1980; Osinulu 2008; Geest 2009.
- 5 There exists a comparatively extensive body of published literature on lorry decorations in South Asia that suggests approaches to the study of lorry decorations in Nigeria and West Africa including Rich and Khan 1980; Lefebvre 1989; Grothues 1990; Elias 2003; Covington 2005; Elias 2005; Schmid 2005.
- 6 Pinney 2004.
- 7 Pinney 2004: 29, 196.

- 8 My discussion of practices of lorry decoration and its motifs in northern Nigeria is based upon observations during personal journeys primarily between Kano, Maiduguri and Zaria as well as lorries documented at artists' workshops. I conducted interviews with artists based at Bacirawa, NNPC Roundabout and Sabon Gari in Kano and Tashin Baga in Maiduguri. Additional documentation was provided by Sylvie Bringas, a London-based film producer and lecturer in animation at the University of Westminster and the Royal College of Art. Bringas photographed decorated lorries and conducted interviews with artists in the Kano area in July and August 2010.
- 9 Elias 2003: 199; Elias 2005: 66; also Goodmann 1976: 68-71.
- 10 Kalla 1988: 12-13.
- 11 Aliyu Mohammed, pers. comm. 21/10/2010, via email.
- 12 Pritchett 1979: 30.
- 13 Among others see Loimeier 1997; Kane 2003.
- 14 Kendhammer 2010: 2-21.
- 15 Pers. comm., Gamboru Market, Maiduguri, 20/03/2008.
- 16 Aliyu Mohammed, pers. comm. 21/10/2010, via email.
- 17 Syed Ariffin 2005: 47-65, 88-95; Ondrej Beranek & Pavel Tupek, 2009. *From Visiting Graves to Their Destruction: The Question of Ziyara through the Eyes of Salafis*. [Crown Papers 2] Brandeis Univeristy: Crown Center for Middle Eastern Studies. 5.
- 18 An overview of the historical development of legal arguments regarding the marking and visits to graves see Beranek & Tupek 2009.
- 19 Beranek & Tupek 2009: 17-20.
- 20 Beranek & Tupek 2009: 17-20.
- 21 *Jama'at Izzalat al-bid'a wa iqamat al-sunna* (Society for the Removal of Innovation and Reinstatement of the Tradition). For further information see Loimeier 1997 and Kane 2003.
- 22 Ostien 2007, vol. 3: 3-4.
- 23 Homepage of the Saudi Arabian Ministry of Higher Education, <http://www.mohe.gov.sa/en/studyinside/aboutK-SA/Pages/default.aspx>, accessed 29 August 2012.
- 24 Nevo 1988: 49.



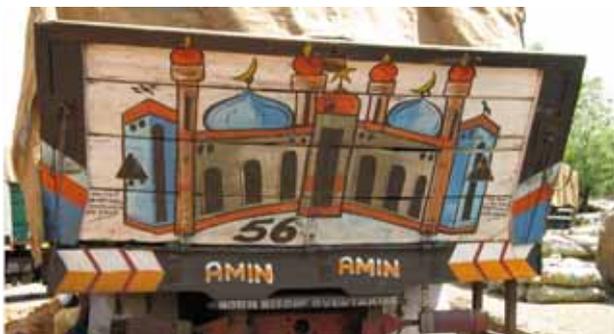
Maiduguri

4 February 2008 © Katrin Schulze



Christian motifs, Kasuwar Lemo, Kano

23 May 2008 © Katrin Schulze



Mosque, Kasuwar Lemo, Kano

23 May 2008 © Katrin Schulze



Christian motifs, Kasuwar Lemo, Kano

23 May 2008 © Katrin Schulze



Palm and swords, Sabon Kwakwaci, Kano

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Palm and swords, Sabon Kwakwaci, Kano

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