

Wheels of Meaning: A Conceptual Framework for Mobile Semiosis and Intercultural Communication in Urban African Transport Spaces

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Abstract

Visual texts inscribed on commercial vehicles constitute an emergent yet underexplored domain of intercultural communication scholarship. This conceptual paper advances the notion of “mobile semiosis” as a theoretical construct for interrogating how decorated commercial vehicles such as: buses, tricycles, taxis, and trucks, function as circulating repositories of cultural identity, religious ideology, socio-political commentary, and vernacular aesthetics within urban African contexts, with particular reference to Kano State in Northwest Nigeria. Drawing on Peircean semiotics; Barthesian myth analysis; Kress and van Leeuwen's social semiotic visual grammar, and Sheller and Urry's new mobilities paradigm. The paper proposes an integrated “Mobile Semiotic Framework” that systematically accounts for the triadic interaction of sign structure, cultural context, and spatial circulation in meaning-making processes. The conceptual argument positions commercial vehicle visuals not as incidental decor but as structured semiotic systems embedded in Hausa sociocultural traditions, Islamic aesthetic conventions, and contemporary popular image culture. The paper critically examines how mobility intensifies semiotic exposure, how cultural norms regulate visual production and reception, and how the decorated vehicle body constitutes a mobile public sphere for identity negotiation and ideological expression. Implications for intercultural communication theory, visual semiotics scholarship, and African communication studies were elaborated.

Keywords: *mobile semiosis; visual communication; intercultural communication; semiotics; multimodality & mobility theory*

Introduction

The Communicative Vehicle

Communication has always adapted itself to the surfaces and spaces available in every era of human civilization. From cave paintings and petroglyphs to medieval manuscript illumination and contemporary digital interfaces, human beings have consistently deployed available materials and technologies to encode, circulate, and contest meaning (Shigeru, Shiro, Robert, & Kazuo, 2014). In the postcolonial African city, one of the most ubiquitous yet least theoretically interrogated of these communicative surfaces is the body of the commercial vehicle. Buses, taxis, tricycles, and trucks are adorned with portraits of political figures, mosque silhouettes, Qur'anic inscriptions in Arabic calligraphy, stylized graphic motifs, Kannywood celebrity portraits, Islamic clerics, political figures and international football iconography traverse urban streets daily, carrying not only passengers but layered symbolic meanings across social, geographic, and ideological boundaries (Kofar-Na'Isa, Popoola, Williams, & Lawan, 2019; Salihu & Bello, 2023).

The scholarly neglect of this phenomenon is paradoxical. Urban visual communication has attracted considerable academic attention, particularly with the growth of visual semiotics, multimodal discourse analysis, and cultural studies (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2021; Rose, 2022; Bateman, Wildfeuer, & Hiippala, 2017). However, as Adegoju (2020) observes that Nigerian transport scholarship has historically privileged the linguistic, treating vehicle inscriptions as verbal texts, while subordinating the visual as mere illustration. The result is a substantial gap in our understanding of how images, colour schemes, symbolic motifs, and compositional arrangements on commercial vehicles function as autonomous semiotic systems whose meaning-making processes are shaped by cultural convention, religious ideology, and the peculiar dynamics of mobility.

This paper addresses that gap through conceptual analysis, by proposing a theoretical construct “mobile semiosis” that integrates the analytical vocabulary of Peircean semiotics (Peirce, 1932), Barthesian connotation and myth (Barthes, 1977), social semiotic visual grammar (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2021), and the new mobilities paradigm (Sheller & Urry, 2006) into a coherent framework for studying decorated commercial vehicles as intercultural communicative artefacts. This paper draws on the context of Kano state, which historically is the premier commercial city of West Africa's Sudan savannah zone, whose transport visual culture embodies centuries of Trans-Saharan aesthetic exchange, Hausa vernacular artistry, and Islamic symbolic convention, as a rich illustrative case for conceptual elaboration (Ya'u, 2016; Usman, 2021; Madugu, 2015).

This paper seeks to proceed through five substantive movements: First, it situates mobile semiosis within extant visual communication and intercultural communication scholarship; Second, it elaborates the theoretical foundations of the Mobile Semiotic Framework; Third, it analyses the distinctive semiotic characteristics of Kano's commercial vehicle visual culture; Fourth, it examines the role of mobility as a meaning-amplifying variable; and Fifth, it advances propositions for future empirical and theoretical work in African visual communication studies.

Conceptual Grounding: Visual Communication, Semiotics, and Mobility

Visual Communication as Intercultural Practice

Visual communication scholarship proceeds from the foundational recognition that images, symbols, colour, and spatial composition constitute structured systems for conveying meaning (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2006). Unlike verbal language, which depends on phonological and grammatical convention, visual communication operates through iconic resemblance, indexical connection, and symbolic association; categories that Peirce (1932) identified as the triadic architecture of signification. This triadic structure enables visual artefacts to communicate simultaneously at multiple semantic registers: the literal, the cultural, and the ideological (Barthes, 1977).

Within intercultural communication studies, visual texts occupy a distinctive position. Because visual signs are embedded in culturally specific codes of representation, interpretation, and aesthetic convention, the 'same' image may denote identical referents across cultures while connoting radically divergent meanings (Hall, 1997). A crescent moon may register in one cultural context as purely astronomical referent; in another, it operates as a potent Islamic symbol encoding religious identity, piety, and community belonging. As Chandler (2017) observes, the interpretive competencies required for visual meaning-making are always culturally distributed; learned

through socialization, religious practice, and everyday cultural participation rather than universally given.

This culturally contingent character of visual meaning is amplified in postcolonial urban contexts, where globalized popular culture, indigenous aesthetic traditions, and religious iconography circulate simultaneously, producing hybrid visual regimes of representation (Nwosu, 2022; Hiippala & Bateman, 2020). Commercial vehicles in Kano, for instance, display Hausa geometric patterns alongside Japanese anime characters, Islamic calligraphy alongside Kannywood celebrity portraits, visual assemblages whose meaning can only be decoded by audiences who possess the intercultural competence to navigate multiple semiotic codes at once (Kofar-Na'Isa et al., 2019).

Semiotics: From the Dyadic to the Multimodal

The theoretical tradition of semiotics offers the most systematic vocabulary for analyzing visual meaning-making. Two foundational traditions are relevant here. Ferdinand de Saussure (1916/1983) conceptualized the sign as a dyadic relationship between signifier (the perceptible form) and signified (the associated concept), emphasizing that this relationship is arbitrary and maintained through social convention rather than natural resemblance. Meaning, for Saussure, is relational; signs acquire significance through their differences from other signs within a structured system.

Charles Sanders Peirce (1932) advanced a triadic model of greater analytical flexibility, distinguishing among the representamen (the sign vehicle), the object (what the sign refers to), and the interpretant (the meaning generated in an interpreter's mind). More importantly, Peirce classified signs into icons (signs that resemble their objects), indices (signs connected to their objects through causal or existential contiguity), and symbols (signs whose relationship to their objects is established by convention). This typology is particularly useful for commercial vehicle visual analysis, as vehicle decorations typically deploy all three sign types simultaneously, a painted mosque is iconic, smoke from a vehicle indexes mechanical condition, and green colouration symbolizes Islamic affiliation through learned convention (Bateman et al., 2017).

Roland Barthes (1977) significantly extended semiotic analysis by differentiating between denotation (the literal, first-order meaning) and connotation (the culturally and ideologically loaded second-order meaning). His concept of 'myth' the process by which connotative meanings are naturalized, rendered commonsensical, and invested with ideological force, provides essential tools for interrogating how vehicle visuals in Kano may function to naturalize particular religious, political, or gendered meanings as self-evident and culturally normative (Mensah & Nyong, 2022).

The multimodal turn in semiotics, advanced chiefly by Kress and van Leeuwen (2021), extends the semiotic framework beyond individual signs to examine how multiple semiotic modes of image, colour, layout, framing, and materiality interact to produce meaning. Their social semiotic approach insists that visual grammars are culturally specific: rules governing representation, framing, and symbolic association vary across cultural communities. Thus, social semiotics reconceptualizes meaning-making as a social practice rather than a property of texts, signs are always made, not merely used, and their making is shaped by the interests, resources, and constraints of specific socio-cultural actors (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2021). This is directly applicable to Kano's vehicle decorators, who exercise deliberate compositional choices within culturally regulated visual conventions.

The New Mobilities Paradigm

Classical semiotics has tended to treat signs as static artefacts, fixed in space and time, available for systematic analysis in their stable locations. This assumption, adequate for analyzing museum paintings or advertising billboards, is fundamentally insufficient for signs that move. The new mobilities paradigm (Sheller & Urry, 2006; Urry, 2007) challenges the sedentary bias of social theory by insisting that movement, circulation, and flow are constitutive of social life rather than epiphenomenal to it.

For semiotic analysis, the mobilities paradigm introduces a critical variable: the dynamics of circulation. A sign encountered once in a single location produces different interpretive effects than a sign encountered repeatedly across multiple urban zones. When a commercial vehicle decorated with mosque imagery circulates daily through market districts, residential neighbourhoods, university campuses, and peri-urban highways, its sign system is exposed to heterogeneous audiences, each interpreting it within their specific socio-spatial context. Mobility thus intensifies semiotic exposure, multiplies interpretive encounters, and accumulates symbolic authority through circulatory persistence (Urry & Larsen, 2021; Akpan, Nwosu, & Obot, 2020).

Furthermore, as Karlander (2018) argues through his concept of “mobile semiotics” signs on moving vehicles participate in what he terms “circulatory semiotic assemblages” meaning-making processes constituted not at a fixed point of reception but across the entire spatial trajectory of a vehicle's movement. The decorated commercial vehicle, in this framing, is not a medium that transmits a pre-formed message to a waiting audience; it is itself an active semiotic agent whose meaning is continuously produced, reproduced, and contested through the act of urban circulation (Sheller, 2018).

Towards a Mobile Semiotic Framework

Building on the theoretical foundations elaborated, this paper proposes a Mobile Semiotic Framework (MSF) as an integrated conceptual apparatus for analyzing decorated commercial vehicles as intercultural communicative artefacts. The MSF rests on three inter-articulating analytical dimensions: Sign Structure, Cultural Context, and Spatial Circulation.

One: Sign Structure

The first analytical dimension concerns the internal semiotic architecture of vehicle visual texts. Following Peirce's triadic typology, visual elements on commercial vehicles may be classified as icons (portraits, realistic imagery, representational motifs), indices (colour schemes associated with particular communities or affiliations, directional signs), or symbols (religious calligraphy, national emblems, conventionalized logos). In practice, as Bateman et al. (2017) observe, visual artefacts characteristically combine all three sign types simultaneously, producing complex, layered sign systems whose meanings interact and amplify each other.

The Barthesian distinction between denotation and connotation further enriches this dimension. At the denotative level, a painting of a crescent and star on a Kano tricycle (Known as Adaidaita) represents astronomical objects. At the connotative level, it signifies Islamic affiliation, religious identity, and allegiance to a specific community of interpretation, meanings accessible only to audiences who share the relevant cultural code. At the mythological level, in Barthes' sense, such imagery may function to naturalize Islamic identity as the unremarkable, taken-for-granted norm of public life in Kano's urban space (Barthes, 1977; Mensah & Nyong, 2022).

Social semiotic visual grammar (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2021) adds compositional analysis: the placement of visual elements (centre versus margin, top versus bottom), their relative salience (achieved through size, colour contrast, and framing), and their modality (the degree of stylization or realism) all contribute to meaning. A portrait occupying the central, maximally salient position on a vehicle's rear panel makes different claims to significance than the same portrait placed marginally, at reduced scale.

Two: Cultural Context

The second dimension of the MSF insists that visual meaning cannot be analyzed outside its socio-cultural context. Signs do not carry intrinsic meanings; they acquire meaning through the interpretive frameworks that specific cultural communities bring to them (Hall, 1997; Chandler, 2017). In Kano, the cultural framework shaping both the production and reception of commercial vehicle visuals is constituted by several intersecting forces.

Firstly, the Hausa aesthetic tradition, rooted in centuries of trans-Saharan exchange, Islamic scholarship, and vernacular artistry, provides a visual grammar of geometric pattern, calligraphic ornamentation, and symbolic motif that predates motorized transport. As Usman (2021) documents, the decoration of horses, palanquins, and royal regalia with elaborate visual texts was already a well-established Hausa aristocratic practice centuries before the first motor vehicle reached Kano in the 1920s. The decorated commercial vehicle may thus be understood as a vernacular continuation of this pre-existing aesthetic practice, adapted to modern technological surfaces.

Secondly, Islamic aesthetic convention provides a distinctive set of visual resources and restrictions. Qur'anic calligraphy, crescent iconography, mosque silhouettes, and the green-and-white colour palette associated with Islamic culture function as immediately legible religious signifiers for Muslim audiences in Kano. Simultaneously, the Islamic prohibition on figurative representation of the divine shapes what may or may not appropriately appear on vehicles whose decoration is partly motivated by religious devotion (Schulze, 2012; Ibrahim & Danladi, 2023).

Thirdly, contemporary popular culture; Kannywood films, Afrobeats music, international football leagues, and global digital image culture; introduces hybrid visual resources that intersect with, and sometimes contest, traditional Hausa and Islamic aesthetic conventions. The result is a visual field characterized by what Nwosu (2022) terms “vernacular hybridity” a creative synthesis of indigenous and globalized semiotic resources that is itself a form of intercultural meaning-making.

Fourth, State regulatory frameworks condition which visual expressions are permissible in public space. The Kano State Censorship Board's 2025 extension of its mandate to commercial tricycle decorations targeting imagery deemed 'vulgar' or 'obscene' by Islamic moral standards, illustrates how state power intervenes in the semiotic field, disciplining visual expression in accordance with officially endorsed cultural norms (Daily Post Nigeria, 2025a; 2025b).

Three: Spatial Circulation

The third dimension of the MSF, contributed directly by mobility theory, concerns the spatial and temporal dynamics of sign circulation. Commercial vehicles in Kano do not remain stationary; they traverse diverse urban zones, the historically dense Hausa old city, the more ethnically mixed Sabon Gari, commercial market districts, and peri-urban residential streets, each characterised by

distinct audience demographics, cultural orientations, and interpretive frameworks (Salihu & Bello, 2023).

This spatial diversity of reception means that the 'same' visual text may be decoded differently or interpreted against radically different background assumptions, depending on where and by whom it is encountered. A portrait of a Northern Nigerian political figure on a bus may signify pride and aspiration in a predominantly Hausa neighbourhood, political neutrality in a mixed commercial district, and potential ethnic assertion in a minority community zone. The meaning of a circulating sign is therefore not fixed at the point of its production but is continuously renegotiated through its spatial encounters (Sheller, 2018; Urry, 2007).

Furthermore, repeated exposure across routes produces what may be termed “circulatory semiotic authority” the symbolic legitimacy that accrues to signs through the simple fact of sustained, widespread public visibility. Visual texts that appear daily across multiple urban zones normalize their referential content; they make their symbolic associations familiar, recognizable, and ultimately naturalistic, a dynamic closely analogous to the process of mythologization that Barthes (1977) identifies at the level of individual sign systems. Hence, the circulation of commercial vehicle visuals across Kano's urban space is simultaneously a semiotic and a political act: the act of claiming visibility in public space (Jaworski & Thurlow, 2020).

Kano's Commercial Vehicle Culture as Mobile Semiotic Landscape

Historical Depth: From Durbar Regalia to Decorated Tricycles

The semiotic richness of Kano's commercial vehicle visual culture is intelligible only in light of the city's historical depth as a centre of visual artistry and symbolic communication. Located in the semi-arid Sudan savannah zone, Kano has functioned for over a millennium as the southern terminus of trans-Saharan trade routes, attracting North African merchants, Islamic scholars, and craft specialists whose aesthetic influences are still traceable in contemporary urban visual culture (Mahdi, 1982; Madugu, 2015).

Long before motorized transport, the decoration of conveyances was an established Hausa aristocratic practice. Horses were adorned with embroidered saddles, dyed leather trappings, and silver ornaments whose visual elaborateness signalled the rider's social status, political affiliation, and religious piety (Usman, 2021). The annual Durbar festival; dating to the 14th-century reign of Sarkin Kano Muhammadu Rumfa, provides the most spectacular surviving archive of this tradition, assembling thousands of elaborately decorated horsemen whose visual regalia constitutes a public performance of Hausa cultural identity (Kaura5000, 2015). With the introduction of motor vehicles in the 1920s and 1930s, these aesthetic principles were progressively transferred to lorries, minibuses, and eventually tricycles, creating a continuous tradition of vehicular visual communication that connects pre-modern aristocratic display to contemporary popular urban art (Kofar-Na'Isa et al., 2019; Salihu & Bello, 2023).

The Tricycle as Mobile Semiotic Agent

The most significant contemporary carrier of commercial vehicle visual culture in Kano is the three-wheeled tricycle (known locally as Adaidaita Sahu, literally, 'park well' or 'arrange properly'), or Keke Napep in popular parlance. Introduced in the early 2000s as a successor to the motorcycle taxi (Achaba), the tricycle rapidly became the dominant form of urban transport in Kano

metropolis, circulating across market routes, residential streets, and inter-district highways (Madugu, 2025; Kofar-Na'Isa et al., 2019).

Unlike the relatively standardized decoration of earlier commercial minibuses, tricycle decoration is characterized by its individualized, competitive, and increasingly commercialized character. Drivers invest substantial portions of their income in custom paint jobs, decal installations, and vehicle accessories, treating their tricycles as mobile canvases for personal and communal self-expression (Kofar-Na'Isa et al., 2019). This investment reflects a sophisticated understanding of the vehicle's dual function: as a transportation technology and as a mobile visual medium that circulates the driver's identity, beliefs, and social affiliations through urban space (Oni, Olojo-Kosoko, & Jeje, 2022).

The visual regime of Kano's tricycles is characterized by four dominant thematic clusters. First, religious symbolism; mosque silhouettes, crescent iconography, Qur'anic phrases, and Arabic calligraphy; signals Islamic identity and invokes divine protection. Second, political iconography; portraits of emirs, governors, and national politicians; inscribes the vehicle body within existing power hierarchies while potentially contesting their authority through ironic or critical juxtaposition. Third, socio-cultural imagery; depictions of local crafts, Hausa proverbs rendered visually, portraits of community figures; reproduces vernacular cultural knowledge within the mobile public sphere. Fourth, popular culture references; Kannywood actors, Afrobeats musicians, sports icons; connect Kano's visual culture to national and transnational popular imaginaries (Salihu & Bello, 2023; Nwosu, 2022).

Intercultural Dimensions of Vehicle Visual Production

The visual production practices of Kano's commercial vehicle decorators constitute in themselves, a form of intercultural communication. The contemporary tricycle decoration industry involves specialist painters and decal vendors who operate within a structured market economy, mediating between the aesthetic preferences of individual drivers and the broader visual conventions of Kano's public culture (Muhammad & Ibrahim, 2024). In this sense, vehicle decoration is a form of intercultural brokering; translating personal meanings into publicly legible visual codes, and negotiating between local cultural traditions and the globalized imagery of digital popular culture.

This intercultural brokering is intensified by the hybrid character of contemporary Kano tricycle imagery. Where earlier lorry art drew primarily on local Islamic and Hausa geometric motifs, contemporary decoration incorporates Japanese anime characters, International football club logos, American hip-hop cultural iconography, and Kannywood aesthetics alongside traditional crescent motifs and Arabic calligraphy (Kofar-Na'Isa et al., 2019). This visual hybridization does not represent a simple subordination of local by global culture; rather, it exemplifies what Nwosu (2022) terms “vernacular semiotic creativity” the capacity of local producers to selectively appropriate, re-contextualize, and re-signify globalized visual resources within the frame of local cultural meanings.

Mobility as Meaning-Amplifier: Circulation, Visibility, and Semiotic Authority

The theoretical contribution of the new mobilities paradigm to visual semiotic analysis lies in its insistence that movement is not merely a contextual variable but a constitutive dimension of meaning-making. For commercial vehicle visuals, this means that the act of circulation, the movement of decorated vehicles through urban space, across social boundaries, and before

heterogeneous audiences, is itself a semiotic act, not simply the delivery mechanism for pre-formed visual messages (Sheller, 2018; Urry, 2007).

Three mechanisms by which mobility amplifies semiotic meaning may be identified. First, mobility multiplies exposure: a visual text attached to a commercial vehicle may be encountered by thousands of viewers daily, across diverse social contexts, generating a scale of semiotic exposure unattainable by any stationary medium of comparable size. This scale of exposure transforms what might otherwise be a private or locally significant visual expression into a constituent element of Kano's shared urban visual culture (Akpan et al., 2020).

Second, mobility diversifies audiences: unlike billboards or murals anchored in specific locations and thus encountered primarily by the residential and commercial communities of those zones, decorated commercial vehicles circulate across multiple zones, exposing their visual texts to audiences with varying cultural backgrounds, religious affiliations, and interpretive frameworks. This diversification of audience produces what may be termed 'multi-contextual semiosis' the simultaneous generation of multiple, contextually specific meanings from a single sign system as it traverses different spatial and social contexts (Salihu & Bello, 2023).

Third, mobility accumulates symbolic authority: the circulatory persistence of particular visual motifs; the recurrent appearance of mosque imagery, Islamic calligraphy, or specific political portraits across Kano's commercial vehicle fleet normalizes those visual expressions, investing them with the authority that accrues to the familiar and the ubiquitous. Through repeated circulation, what begins as individual expressive choice becomes collective visual norm a dynamic that parallels, at the level of the urban visual field, the mythologization processes that Barthes (1977) identifies at the level of individual semiotic systems (Jaworski & Thurlow, 2020).

The regulatory response of the Kano State government to vehicle visual culture illustrates how state authorities perceive the semiotic power of mobile visual texts. The Censorship Board's 2025 intervention, targeting 'vulgar' tricycle imagery as a threat to Islamic moral norms, reflects an implicit recognition that circulating visual texts are not merely personal expressions but public communicative acts with potentially significant social effects (Daily Post Nigeria, 2025a; 2025b; The Eagle Online, 2025). The state's attempt to regulate vehicle visuals is thus, at a deeper level, an attempt to regulate the semiotic constitution of Kano's public sphere.

Theoretical and Practical Implications

Implications for Intercultural Communication Theory

The Mobile Semiotic Framework proposed in this paper offers several contributions to intercultural communication theory. Most fundamentally, it extends the conventional understanding of intercultural communication beyond face-to-face interaction and media content to encompass the visual artefacts of everyday urban life. Commercial vehicle visuals in Kano function as intercultural communicative acts not because their producers consciously intend intercultural dialogue, but because their circulation through heterogeneous urban space structurally produces encounters across cultural, religious, and social differences (Jewitt & Kress, 2021; van Leeuwen, 2022).

Furthermore, the MSF contributes to intercultural communication theory's engagement with the spatial dimensions of communication. By incorporating mobility as a constitutive analytical variable, the framework draws attention to the ways in which communication is not only a social

process but a spatial one, shaped by the routes, zones, and trajectories through which communicative acts circulate. This spatio-communicative perspective resonates with recent geographical turns in communication scholarship (Jaworski & Thurlow, 2020) and with the broader theoretical project of understanding how meaning is socially produced through spatial practice (Lefebvre, 1991).

Implications for Visual Semiotics in African Contexts

This paper also advances visual semiotics scholarship by insisting on the specificity of African visual meaning-making practices. Much of the theoretical apparatus of visual semiotics; Peircean typology, social semiotic visual grammar, multimodal discourse analysis, has been developed primarily through analysis of Euro-American visual artefacts (advertising, films, digital media). Its application to African urban contexts requires critical adaptation: attentiveness to the specificities of Islamic aesthetic convention, Hausa vernacular artistry, postcolonial cultural hybridity, and the political economy of informal visual production (Adegoju, 2020; Okafor & Nwankwo, 2022).

The MSF addresses this requirement by insisting that Cultural Context is not a supplementary dimension of semiotic analysis, a background against which signs are decoded, but a constitutive dimension of the signs themselves. The Kano case demonstrates that there is no culturally neutral visual grammar: every compositional choice, every colour association, every iconic referent is shaped by the specific cultural resources and constraints available to producers and the specific interpretive frameworks available to audiences (Chandler, 2017; Rose, 2022).

Practical Implications

The practical implications of this conceptual framework extend to cultural heritage documentation, urban policy, and public communication practice. As Kano's transport visual culture faces increasing regulatory pressure from the Censorship Board and potential disruption from the Smart Transport Solution surveillance infrastructure (Daily Nigerian, 2026; Business Day Nigeria, 2026), there is an urgent need for systematic scholarly documentation of existing visual artefacts before regulatory constraint or technological change alters the visual landscape irreversibly (Rose, 2022).

For urban communication professionals and policy practitioners, the MSF offers a conceptual vocabulary for understanding why citizens invest significant resources in decorating commercial vehicles — not as irrational ornamental behaviour but as a structured form of communicative practice through which identity, belief, and social commentary are articulated within a shared public visual sphere. Policy frameworks that engage with vehicle decoration practices through the lens of cultural expression rather than mere regulatory compliance are more likely to produce outcomes that balance legitimate regulatory concerns with the legitimate communicative interests of urban citizens (Jaworski & Thurlow, 2020).

Conclusion:

Towards a Mobile Semiotics of Urban Africa

This paper has argued that decorated commercial vehicles constitute a significant and largely theoretically neglected domain of intercultural communication practice in urban African contexts. Through the conceptual apparatus of mobile semiosis integrating Peircean semiotics, Barthesian myth analysis, social semiotic visual grammar, and the new mobilities paradigm, the paper has proposed a Mobile Semiotic Framework that accounts systematically for the triadic interaction of

sign structure, cultural context, and spatial circulation in the meaning-making processes of commercial vehicle visual culture.

The case of Kano State, exemplifies with particular clarity the theoretical possibilities opened by this framework. Kano's commercial vehicles; historically continuous with centuries of Hausa aristocratic visual practice, embedded in Islamic aesthetic convention, hybridized with contemporary global popular culture, and subjected to increasing state regulatory intervention constitute a living semiotic archive of one of West Africa's most historically significant urban cultures. To study their visual texts is to access, through the distinctive optic of mobile semiosis, the cultural, religious, and political conversations that Kano's citizens conduct daily through the streets of the city.

The theoretical argument advanced here, invites a fundamental reorientation of how intercultural communication scholarship understands visual communication in the Global South. Intercultural communication does not occur only in boardrooms, classrooms, or international media; it occurs daily on the streets of Kano, Lagos, Accra, Nairobi, and Johannesburg, wherever decorated commercial vehicles carry their visual texts across the social boundaries of the urban landscape. A scholarship adequate to this reality requires the conceptual tools that the Mobile Semiotic Framework is designed to provide.

Future empirical work should operationalize the MSF through systematic qualitative visual analysis of commercial vehicle artefacts, incorporating field observation, driver and audience interviews, and multimodal semiotic coding to ground the conceptual propositions advanced empirical evidence. Comparative studies across multiple African cities, examining how shared semiotic traditions are adapted to the specificities of different urban contexts, would further extend the theoretical reach of mobile semiosis as a contribution to global visual communication scholarship.

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