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## RESEARCH ARTICLE

# Courtroom proverbial murals in Lebanon: a semiotic reconstruction of justice

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Inspired by the “rituality” and “symbolism” of the courtroom as a discourse of space, this paper sheds light on the semiotic weight of the tiled-mosaic murals of Arabic proverbs displayed in the courtrooms of the Palace of Justice in Beirut, Lebanon. This paper attempts to draw attention to the discursive importance of these courtroom proverbial murals in the conceptualization of justice in the Lebanese legal and judicial system by unfolding the semiotic code of the proverbial murals. This work categorizes the murals under investigation (20 murals) into three “functional” or semiotic categories: social (six proverbs), quasi-judicial (nine proverbs; three of which are religious, two ethical, and four political) and judicial (five proverbs). On a positive note, this investigation highlights the functionality of the linguistic (i.e. proverbiality) and artistic (calligraphy and design) components of the proverbial murals as a semiotic tool to inter-faith national unity in Lebanon. Nonetheless, the same semiotic features signal a spatially “mutating” justice, from one courtroom to another and thus a socioethical, religious and political relativism in perceiving justice.

**Keywords:** courtroom murals; proverbiality; semiotic code; Lebanese courtroom; Aramaic and Islamic calligraphy

### Introduction

In general terms, social ordering of space defines the formality and informality of people’s interaction in that space. In the courthouse context, architectural design affects the perception of the legal system and preserves someone’s respect for justice.<sup>1</sup> For Rosenbloom (1998), the courthouse is a vehicle to explore the spatial manifestation of social ideology (i.e. values and ideals of jurisprudence). A case in point is the excessive use of glass in the Federal German court. This social ordering of space through glass enables the court to transcend optical transparency of design, in an attempt to reach metaphorical transparency elemental to overcome the opaqueness of Third Reich Germany (Burklin 2004 cited in Mulcahy 2007). Rosenbloom indicates that courthouses designed according to the classical style (i.e. Greek Revival) embrace classical motifs such as formalism, worldliness, stability, monumentality, strength and power and “evoke perception of the everlasting stature of the new country [United States of America] ... and the greatness to which it aspired” (1998, 503).

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In the same vein, Mulcahy highlights the perceptual importance of the bench in the courtroom layout by indicating that “[e]ach time a floor is raised it has the potential to become the physical manifestation of hierarchy and power” (2007, 385). In addition, courtroom layout and its spatial accessories and cues are essential in reconstructing the sociocultural bases of law. Searcy, Duck, and Blank (2005) draw a contrastive legal reality between China and the United States based on the positioning of the defendant in the spatial distribution of the courtroom physical layout. Due to the presumption of innocence in the United States, the defendant and the plaintiff have equal rights and accordingly enjoy equal seating arrangement and equal distance from the judge. On the contrary, Chinese courtrooms position the defendant in the centre and systematically surround him/her by all other courtroom participants, making a “spectacle” of the defendant (Chang 2003 quoted in Searcy, Duck, and Blank 2005). Accordingly, such environmental spatial cues (i.e. circularity) establish a legal context that marks an interactive and dynamic set of courtroom “expectancies about guilt, roles, and the purpose of the trial as a public re-education of a miscreant” (Searcy, Duck, and Blank 2005, 47).

Definitely, courtroom semiotics is a primary matter that transcends the aesthetics of governance and the attractiveness of a public building; its importance lies in the study, analysis and interpretation of law as a *system of signs* and *methods of signification* (Balkin 1996), disseminated by *courtroom rituals*, partly framed in a *discourse of space*. When courtroom rituals are treated with “mindlessness”, the sustainability of a courtroom and what it represents may suffer drastically. To borrow Gifford’s (2007) term, “environmental numbness” – be it intentional or unintentional – renders courtroom proceedings a mundane procedure rather than a ritual guaranteeing the transparency, predictability, efficiency, sustainability, stability and maintenance of the free, just and fair spirit of democracy and thus the inspirations of every individual/citizen (see Butler 2009; Mootz III 2009; Mulcahy 2007). As highlighted in Richardson (2007), discourse of space is elemental in the framing of courtroom rituals. The importance of “correct” courtroom rituals transcends legal significance; as such, laws require symbolism for their transformation into “a living reality, a concrete experience” (Tait 1999). Inspired by the “rituality” and “symbolism” of the courtroom as a discourse of space, this paper sheds light on one semiotic discursive function of the courtrooms of the Palace of Justice in Beirut: tiled-mosaic murals of Arabic proverbs.

The display of murals, as a discursive “semi-fixed”<sup>2</sup> symbol<sup>3</sup> of courtroom space, is by no means a Lebanese sociolegal phenomenon. In Bluffton, Indiana, the courthouse and courtrooms have displayed murals since 1906. Due to a package of socioeconomic welfare programs and public spending initiatives,<sup>4</sup> introduced by President Franklin D. Roosevelt to counter the devastating effects of the 1929 great depression, a surge in US courtroom murals was witnessed. The tradition of displaying murals in US courtrooms is still noticeable today. The latest addition of murals to a US courtroom took place in 2003 in the county’s juvenile court regional center on Fifth Avenue in McKeesport, Pittsburgh. The murals are thematic paintings consolidating hope and care. In general, US-style murals are paintings that visually depict social, economic and/or political events important to the fundamentals of American justice and democracy. On the contrary, the uniqueness and originality of the murals in the Lebanese courtroom lie in the display of *proverbial* messages, a linguistically and thus semiotically demanding task when

compared with the “straightforwardness” of a visual task (i.e. paintings). Accordingly, this paper attempts to draw attention to the discursive importance of these courtroom proverbial murals in the conceptualization and/or reconstruction of justice in the Lebanese legal and judicial system by unfolding the semiotic code of the murals under investigation.

### Methodology

In line with semiotic approaches to proverb analysis (see Hussein 2009; Orwenjo 2009; Shitemi 2009; Asiyanbola 2007; Hussein 2005; Beck 2005; Yankah 1986; Briggs 1985; Giovannini 1978) and van Dijk’s (1995) bridging between critical discourse analysis and social semiotics as having the same critical dimension (i.e. discourse and society), this paper uses a discourse analysis framework. In essence, this paper considers the proverbial messages<sup>5</sup> as generic texts (legal discourse genre), defining conventional legal relations between speakers (judges, government) and listeners (courtroom players: regulars [i.e. lawyers] and irregulars [i.e. defendants]; plaintiffs and the public) within a particular semiotic event (i.e. speech acts: assertive, directives, commissives, expressive and declarations). The target courtroom proverbs will be dealt with as performative “utterances” initiating actions by an authority, a legal authority, mainly through illocutionary acts (speaker’s intentions: promising, advice, admonition, warning, etc.) and perlocutionary acts (impact on feelings, thoughts, etc.) (see Bhuvanewar 1999). The speech act analysis framework assesses the semiotic event signaled by the proverbial murals in relation to the courtroom social interaction and practice. In other words, this paper attempts to unfold the potential of the “proverb speech acts”, as referred to in Prahlad (1996), as a semiotically communicative process perceived by courtroom regular and irregular players and disseminated as the courtroom space discourse. This methodological approach attempts to understand the courtroom proverbial murals’ semiotic code from an “ideology of iconic causation” perspective (Stasch 2003, 361).

In addition, the visual aspects of the murals (i.e. size, calligraphy, color) are treated as semiotic enhancers<sup>6</sup> of the linguistic message. In a Saussurean sense, this paper analyzes the relationship between the signifier (visual and linguistic) and the signified in the different murals under investigation, through codes “of a particular socio-cultural system within a specific space” and time (Wagner 2009; Stasch 2003).

### Data analysis

The mural corpus is comprised of 20 tiled-mosaic murals of Arabic proverbs housed in the courtrooms of the Palace of Justice in Beirut, Lebanon. Each courtroom displays one proverbial mural and the average surface area of each of the murals is about 8 m<sup>2</sup> (4 m × 2 m), except for the murals in the court of cassation (two courtrooms) that are approximately three times larger. The location of the murals is central and straight above the presiding judge’s bench. The murals have no reference to the source of the proverbs. Artistically, the distinctive design (mosaic and arabesque), the exuberant use of color (yellow, red and green) and the symmetrical calligraphy are repeated themes in the composition of the murals.

The initial analysis of the corpus entails the categorization of the displayed murals. These proverbial texts yield thematic categories in the same fashion as the

Solomonic proverbs were classified (see Yuasa 1891); that is, following Yuasa's *categorization by thought*, the proverbial murals are arranged according to their thematic content (for similar thematic categorization of proverbs, see Hussein 2005; Prahlad 1996). Not different from the sociopolitical, legal, economic, educational, ethical and religious Solomonic proverb categories, the proverbial murals under investigation revealed three thematic/thought categories: social (six proverbs) (Table 1), quasi-judicial (nine proverbs; three of which are religious, four political and two ethical) (Tables 2, 3 and 4) and judicial/legal (five proverbs) (Table 5). In an attempt to accommodate to discourse analysis, the translation of the proverbs provided below intends to preserve the literal meaning of the original proverbs in Arabic. As a consequence, the translation is at times difficult to read and may not make perfect sense. In cases where translation may be ambiguous and obscure, equivalent proverbs in English, if available, are provided.

The six proverbs categorized as "social" touch upon education (Proverb 1), generosity (Proverb 2), ignorance (Proverbs 3 and 4), accomplishment (Proverb 5) and hard work (Proverb 6) (see Table 1). Phenomenally, this legally decontextualized category only elaborates on how to succeed and prosper in life, with neither direct nor indirect legal correlations.

The second semiotic category (Table 2) highlights justice along religious, ethical and political themes. Proverbs 7–15 establish the fundamentals of "justice" as an integral part of religion, ethics and politics. That is, these proverbs – by legally contextualizing religion, ethics and politics – render justice an accompanying theme rather than the only theme as categorized in Table 5. In such a quasi-judicial trend, Proverbs 7–15 correlate justice with religion, ethics and politics. Contrary to the "social" one-theme-proverb category, the "quasi-judicial" proverbs comprise two themes, one fixed and one variable. The fixed theme is judicial, whereas the variable theme varies along religious, ethical and political aspects. Table 2 indicates the judicial contextualization of religion. Proverbs 7–9 show the association between justice/truth and religion. God (Proverb 7) and piety (Proverbs 8 and 9) themes define the religious variable.

The second variable theme in the "quasi-judicial" category of proverbs is political. It provides a proverbial vehicle to blend justice and the state's political welfare. A nation's lifespan (Proverb 10), ruling (Proverb 11), stability (Proverb 12) and continuity (Proverb 13) are political themes fused in the proverbiality of justice/truth (see Table 3).

Table 4 frames the ethical dimension of truth/justice of the proverbial murals. Justice is characterized with descriptive parameters such as personal transparency (Proverb 14) and inner strength (Proverb 15).

Table 1. "Social" semiotic category.

Social
1- Education is the light of life العلم نور الحياة
2- Generosity is the honor of rightness الجود شرف الأخلاق
3- Ignorance is the death of the living الجاهل موت الأحياء
4- People are the enemy of what they ignore الناس أعداء ما جهلوا
5- The best of deeds are accomplished deeds خير الأعمال بالاكتمال
6- Success is the son of hard work النجاح هو بن العمل

Table 2. “Quasi-judicial” semiotic category – theme: religion.

Quasi-judicial Religious
7- Fearing god is optimal wisdom (“the fear of the lord is the beginning of wisdom”) رأس الحكمة مخافة الله
8- No pious people, everything is pious (“grace finds goodness in everything”) لا ابرار وكل شيء بر
9- Be fair; it is closer to piety (“justice is the way to piety”) أعدلوا هو أقرب للتقوى

Table 3. “Quasi-judicial” semiotic category – theme: politics.

Quasi-judicial Political
10- No life for a nation without freedom لا حياة للأمة بلا حرية
11- Justice is the foundation of ruling العدل أساس الملك
12- Stability of reign is in justice ثبات الملك بالعدل
13- Truth has a state (i.e. Governing body) and untruth has a round (“truth conquers all”) للحق دولة والباطل جولة

Table 4. “Quasi-judicial” semiotic category – theme: ethics.

Quasi-judicial Ethical
14- Straightforwardness is strength الصراحة قوة
15- The soul is the protector of justice أمانة العدل للنفس

The last semiotic category of the proverbial murals under investigation is “judicial” (Table 5). Proverbs 16–20 are justice comprehensive and exploratory: punishment as a life necessity (Proverbs 16–18) and justice as a fair and transparent process (Proverbs 19 and 20), respectively.

Before embarking on the semiotic journey of reconstructing justice in Lebanon, it is elemental at this stage to provide a brief account on the legal/judicial system in Lebanon; this section also highlights people’s attitude towards the legal system.

Table 5. “Judicial” semiotic category.

Judicial
16- And you’ll have life in punishment ولكم في القصاص الحياة
17- Harshness in context is soft (“necessary harshness is tender”) القسوة في موضعها لين
18- Judge fairly وإن حكمتكم أن تحكموا بالعدل
19- Tell the truth even if it is not in your favor (“let justice be done even though the heavens fall”) قل الحق وإن كان عليك
20- Truth is high and nothing is higher (“there is no god higher than truth”) الحق يعلو ولا يعلى عليه

### Lebanese legal system

Lebanon is a civil law country, with a legal system mostly acquired under the French mandate (1920–1943). The Lebanese legal system's main judicial and legal elements are based on the French legal system. The Lebanese Code of Obligations and Contracts is a clone of the French Civil Code. However, personal status issues (e.g. family, marriage and divorce) are the responsibility of an independent religious court system that accommodates for the needs of 18 nationally recognized religious sects under Christianity and Islam.

In a criminal case, the inquisition process the Lebanese judicial system follows has three functions, manifested in three judicial procedures. The first involves the Preliminary Investigative Authority (i.e. Judicial Police). Preliminary investigations, including the collection and assessment of evidence, lead to the provisional arrest of a suspect. The second step involves the General Public Prosecutor's Office (*niyaba*). In light of the suspect's signed statement/confessions, the General Public Prosecutor's Office reviews and cross-examines the suspect's testimonies in the presence of his/her lawyer. Accordingly, the Public Prosecutor decides whether the case should be taken to court (step three) or not. Although the both the Preliminary Investigation Authority's and the General Prosecutor's statements are pivotal to the case, the presiding judge functions independently from previous reached judgments. The courtroom system in Lebanon is based on bench trials, a system that transforms the bench judge into the sole judicial decision-maker in the courtroom. In addition, the courtroom system in Lebanon provides appeal channels through the "appeal" and "cassation" courts.

Priority to improve the reputation and perception of the Lebanese judiciary and to the integration of international norms in the courts has led the international community (the UN Development Programme, the World Bank and countries such as France, Spain and the USA) to assist Lebanon in reforming its legal and judicial system. The lack of confidence in the country's judicial system is rooted in transparency and fairness issues, mainly due to the political interference judges undergo and complain from. It is the general belief that "courts are unable to confront political pressures" (Mallat 1997, 33) and justice is hard to fulfill due to "the double standards inherited from the war years, with former militia leaders sitting comfortably in government" (1997, 34).

### Discussion

Corpus analysis indicates the semiotic multi-layering of the proverbial murals. Each of the murals connects its various semiotic elements into a "meaning" package that transcends the proverb as "text"; the murals' semiotic components draw the judicial context in light of Harvey's (1996 cited in Magalhaes 2005) discursive moments of power, social relations and material practices. A first step toward unfolding the semiotic code of the murals necessitates a discussion of linguistic and artistic elements. Linguistically, proverbiality and calligraphy are essential to the understanding of the semiotic signal of the murals. Proverbiality is "a useful entry point into the total meaning system of a society" (Giovannini 1978, 331; Briggs 1985) and a cultural vehicle for the expression of imagery and abstract ideas in the most economical linguistic means (Hussein 2009). In the same vein, Orwenjo (2009)

observes that proverbs are meaning-condensed, culturally identified and undeniably accepted; Orwenjo argues that proverbs function as a linguistic vehicle that ultimately enriches meaning by adding “power, authority, clarity and expressiveness” to discourse,<sup>7</sup> and advancing “views and ideologies as if they were the absolute truth” (2009, 125). Last but not least, proverbs allow speakers, as expressed by Yitah (2009, 83), “to deny any responsibility for the cultural values and principles that are expressed in the proverb or other traditional saying, and yet appeal to these same values and principles as moral paradigms”.

Not so different from the African context, proverbs in Lebanon (in both Lebanese and Standard Arabic) are associated with a high cultural status and are frequently used and systematically transmitted from one generation to another (for the sociocultural functionality of proverbs in the Arab world, see Webster 2000). Traditional wisdom is linguistically embodied in proverbs; that is, a major reason why Arabs have respect for the frequent use of proverbs in day-to-day activities, formal or informal in Standard Arabic or colloquial. By the same token, this high sociocultural standing of proverbs in the Arab world necessitates that the proverb user can determine accurately the appropriateness and timing of the proverb (Barakat 1980 cited in Webster 2000). Having contextualized Arabic proverbs in terms of appropriateness and timing, it becomes elemental for the proverbial murals under investigation to claim their courtroom context through a semiotic transformation of the *discursive moment of social interaction and practice* into a signal of courtroom authority, beliefs, values and desires.

Semiotically, the proverbial murals are expected to enhance the concept of justice (i.e. integrity, fairness and transparency) the courtroom represents. Firstly, the socially categorized proverbs (see Table 1), although contextualized in a legal space, are legally de-contextualized, for their timing and appropriateness are not easy to stream into the courtroom. This semiotic de-contextualization of the social themes may distract the courtroom players (regulars and irregulars). There is a semiotic transformation of space. The courtroom as such, instead of dealing with a specific case involving a plaintiff and a defendant, transcends this legally-narrow context and transforms into an educational venue aiming at improving people’s social welfare in general. Proverb 1 emphasizes the importance of education in life. The theme of education is followed up in Proverb 4, which deals with ignorance and how ignorance creates fear and animosity in people. Remarkably, education culminates in Proverb 3 in an irreversible way: (“ignorance is the death of the living” الجاهل موت الأحياء). (See Figure 1.)



Figure 1. A socially-categorized proverbial mural emphasizing education.

Proverb 2 brings into the court the theme of generosity and how essential generosity is to rightness. In addition, the theme of hard work manifests itself in the courtroom. Proverbs 5 and 6 stress the importance of success in life and that is only achieved through hard work and perseverance. Despite the undeniably motivating messages disseminated through the proverbs, the rewarding aspects of such message may only be efficient in general context (i.e. passive involvement) rather than one that involves the courtroom main players (i.e. active involvement). For courtroom irregular players, whether educated, successful, generous or not, the semiotic significance of the “social” proverbial murals becomes difficult to contextualize. That is, for the successful/educated/generous courtroom players, the proverbial signals would be like “preaching the chorus”. Similarly, the unsuccessful/uneducated/ungenerous players might lament their situation with no avail. Success, education and generosity are not simply a decision to make; these are virtues people grow up with. Eventually, this socially-driven semiotic category fails to achieve its legal semiotic functioning and accordingly fails to establish a channel of sociolegal communication (i.e. context of situation). Nonetheless, the messages definitely signal semiotically the refinement of the legal system and the state that protects it. These proverbial messages indicate civility and thus accordingly may minimize anxiety in irregular courtroom players.

Visually, the “social” proverb category, through the use of Arabic calligraphy, embedded in arabesque and mosaic designs, signals to all courtroom players familiar artistic norms (see Figures 1 and 2).

Standard Arabic is the official language in Lebanon; more specifically, spoken and written Standard Arabic<sup>8</sup> are regularly used in the courtroom. In addition, mosaic and Arabesque designs represent the core of artistic handcraft works in the Arab world. Semiotically, this familiarity in calligraphy, design and accompanying vibrant colors may add to the courtroom a comfort zone, by bringing the familiar outside into the unfamiliar inside (mainly for irregular courtroom players).

Secondly, the functionality of the “quasi-judicial” proverbial category could possibly be understood within the framework of intertextuality. To explain, Proverbs 7–15 transcend their proverbial context to reach intertextually religion, politics and ethics. Semiotically, this proverbial intertextuality clearly unfolds the intertwined nature of justice as a coherent whole. In other words, “the textual and intertextual reality of cultural and ideological representations in one text is framed by other texts in various dimensions” (Hussein 2009, 100). In the context of Stasch’s view on semiotics as “study of the varieties of logics of spatiotemporal linkage through which people live their lives” (2003, 380), the religious semiotic factor of the proverbial



Figure 2. Proverbial mural 2: the integration of Islamic calligraphy, arabesque design and vibrant colors.

murals investigated in this paper (see Table 2) becomes a determining factor in shaping and reshaping time and space inside and outside the courtroom.

Linguistically, the origin of Proverbs 7–9 (quasi-judicial: religious) can be traced to Lebanon's largest religions: Christianity and Islam. Proverb 7 ("Fearing God is optimal wisdom" رأس الحكمة مخافة الله) and Proverb 8 ("no pious people, everything is pious" لا ابرار وكل شيء بر) are biblical statements, whereas Proverb 9 ("be fair; it is closer to piety" اعدلوا هو اقرب للتقوى) is a Qur'anic verse. Although it requires deep religious knowledge to contextualize these proverbs in Christianity and Islam, the reference to God and piety has a semiotic weight that signals to the courtroom players a religious ceiling, overseeing the judicial system. In the case of courtroom players who can determine the religious roots of these proverbs and happened not to belong to the same religion testified to in the mural, this may signal a religious discomfort and accordingly may perceive and react negatively to this legal context (i.e. courtroom).

The visual elements in the proverbial murals in this category are the same as the ones exposed in the "social" category murals. Accordingly, the same semiotic analysis carried on the "social" category may as well be applicable to the "religious" quasi-judicial proverbs.

The judicial pegging of political survival and continuity is a recurrent theme: a nation's lifespan (Proverb 10), ruling (Proverb 11), stability (Proverb 12) and continuity (Proverb 13) (see Table 3). These "political" quasi-judicial proverbs testify to Michel Foucault's "regime of truth" that determines a society's discourse appropriation and thus grants the dominant groups power and legitimacy (Foucault 1980). This judicial contextualization of politics matches Garapon's (1997 cited in Tait 2001) view of doing justice well. By passing sentences, judges – according to Garapon – "re-live symbolically the foundation of the state; they re-affirm the collective good and they embody sovereignty" (Tait 1999, 3). Proverbiality, in this context, transits its dialectical moment (social relations/meaning) into institutional moments of power.

Interestingly, the visual elements used in Proverb 11 ("justice is the foundation of ruling" العدل أساس الملك) are elemental different for those discussed so far (see Figure 3). Proverb 11 mural is located in the Court of Cassation No. 1. Linguistically, the roots of this proverb are easily traced to the non-religious repertoire of Lebanese proverbs.

The visually remarkable aspects of this mural lie in its calligraphy and design. Contrary to all other murals (except for Proverb 18 mural under "judicial" category in the Court of Cassation No. 2), this mural expose the viewer to non-Arabic calligraphy and to a design that is not woven into arabesque mosaics. The calligraphy



Figure 3. Proverbial mural 3: the Greek motif mural portraying Aramaic calligraphy and human figures.

this time does not accommodate to the Arabic normative font. Instead, the calligraphic font is Aramaic (ancient Middle Eastern language used by early Christians and by Jesus himself) (see Figure 1). Obviously, there is a visual melt-down of Standard Arabic (i.e. the linguistic identity of Islam) in Aramaic font (i.e. linguistic identity of Maronite Christians). In addition, the mural's calligraphy includes Greek writings as well. Preferably, the logical link to establish here should be in reference to the founders of democracy and justice, rather than a religious preference.

On the design front, Proverb 11 drifts away from the floral, geometric styles and vegetative motifs of arabesque decor to a full-fledged implementation of figural imagery (i.e. Greek human figures) (Blair 2006). In a religious context, this juxtaposition is a shift from Islamic art<sup>9</sup> to a Christian one. Having set this semiotic dichotomy in terms of religion, one may ask about the circumstances (intentional or unintentional) that led the judicial authority to semiotically divide along religious rifts the courtrooms in the same fashion the country itself is divided. A response to this question seems impossible to provide simply in light of the absence<sup>10</sup> of background documentation on the decision-making process regarding the implementation of these proverbial murals in the courtrooms of the palace of justice in Beirut.

The last quasi-judicial proverb category is "ethical" (Table 4). This category defines clearly the primordial ethical fundamentals of the legal system in Lebanon. Proverb 14 ("straightforwardness is strength") and Proverb 15 ("the souls is the protector of justice") sum up the ethical responsibility/expectations citizens (i.e. courtroom players) must have to cherish a rule of law that is not only socio-political but ultimately ethical. That is, justice is a collective responsibility (i.e. ethical national pact) between the Lebanese people and the state (i.e. legal system). This imbued ethical responsibility signals a shift in legal accountability for truth, from the state to the public. This legally-set ethical commitment/threshold transforms citizenship into the custodian of truth. In other words, if citizens are not ready to contribute their "fair bit" of truth, they become directly responsible for the unethical ceiling of their community/state. The importance of the ethical quasi-judicial category lies in the irreversibility of telling and fostering truth on the citizen-state continuum; citizenship's truth breeds state's justice: a self-fulfilling prophecy of truth.

On the visual level, the "political" quasi-judicial proverbial murals follow systematically the same calligraphy, arabesque and mosaic design. That is, semiotically, it may be impossible to derive from the visual elements different conclusion than those reached previously (see "social" category and "religious" quasi-judicial category).

Last but not least, the mural corpus categorizes five straightforward "judicial" proverbs only (see Table 5). One expects that these murals' discursive function lies in the communicative code and force of the selected proverbs and their relevance to the courtroom context. As indicated in Table 5, the "judicial" proverb category signals the interrelated nature of sentencing (i.e. state) and acceptance/obedience (i.e. citizens). Acceptance of a prison sentence must not be questioned by the sentenced and the public; rather, it must be appreciated for its redemptive power in making outlaws conscious of their self-destructive social patterns. Being the only "judicial" mural that directly addresses the presiding judge, interestingly, this mural engraving Proverb 18 ("judge fairly" *وان حكمتكم ان تحكموا بالعدل*) happens to be a Qur'anic verse (see Figure 4).



Figure 4. Proverbial mural 4: “the Phoenicians” mural portraying Aramaic calligraphy and human figures.

This religiously-loaded proverb functions as a reminder of the responsibility the judge is in charge of. Nevertheless, when considered in the context of other remaining “judicial” murals, it becomes obvious that, no matter how harsh or unfair a sentence passed by a judge, Proverb 18 remains within the realm of soul redemption through corporal punishment and a matter no citizen must assess otherwise .

Assessed visually, this category, except for Proverb 18 (see Figure 2), does not differ much from the majority of the murals (i.e. Arabic calligraphy and Arabesque mosaics). Similar to the venue of Proverb 11 (Court of Cassation No. 1), Proverb 18 is situated in the Court of Cassation No. 2. In addition to this similarity in venue, Proverb 18 displays Aramaic calligraphy and Phoenicians<sup>11</sup> human figures. This triangulation of the Qur’anic verse, Aramaic calligraphy and the Phoenicians is semiotically intense in a country that, since its independence in 1943, has been rooted in Islamic and Christian compromises. The Phoenician legacy has always been controversial in Lebanon, at least in its racial and national identity dimension, an identity demarcation line that differentiates along Christian and Muslim camps; in other words, Lebanese Christians, mainly Maronites, have always identified themselves as Phoenicians, as opposed to Arabs. This semiotic marriage between the opposing religions through the integration of their linguistic and visual elements is much needed in a country such as Lebanon whose war legacy stands witness to the atrocities committed in the name of Christianity and Islam. This religious contextualization in the judicial, if disseminated to the public, may be an efficient semiotic tool that helps unify the Lebanese Christians and Muslims and become a testimony to the fairness and transparency (i.e. lack of religious discrimination) of the legal system in Lebanon.

Another semiotic reading of Proverb 18 can be traced along the cultural connotations of the Phoenicians. The mural tells explicitly the legacy of the Phoenicians who, beyond any doubt, are credited for their maritime commerce and sea explorations. This semiotic visual coding of the mercantile legacy of the Phoenicians, when decoded *vis-à-vis* its accompanying linguistic signal (“judge fairly”), re-contextualizes the courtroom legal standing from a pure legal context to a legal context that fairness/justice is defined by historic and commercial legacy.

## General discussion

### *Semiotically mutating justice*

The judicial de-contextualization of 15 courtrooms (Tables 1–4) is indicative of the lack of the judicial frame of reference associated with the courtroom and implicates a sense of judicial relativity. To explain further, one can detect a mutating justice that

changes according to space and time (i.e. from one courtroom to another). While the judicial system is constant, the mural-based perception of justice is variable and accordingly, perpetuating a judicial context defined by the message of the proverbial murals. To illustrate, the courtroom that displays the mural “fearing God is optimal wisdom” رأس الحكمة مخافة الله (Proverb 7) mirrors a religious value of a believer, and thus implies that the judicial system is based on such and similar religious values and all participants (i.e. judge, lawyers, defenders, offenders) should have this religious ceiling as their ethical threshold to achieve justice. On the contrary, the courtroom that disseminates the importance of hard work and achievement (“success is the son of hard work”; Proverb 6) implies directly status acknowledgment and accommodation within the walls of this courtroom; that is, underachievers may perceive the proverb as a message that justice (and what it represents in the courtroom) may be more tolerant of hard workers and high achievers, regardless of innocence or guilt.

### *Proverbs as judicial directives*

Another aspect of the murals that is worth noting is their persuasive elements. The persuasive structure (i.e. mode of reasoning) of the murals is deductive. To be more specific, the murals are proverbial syllogisms that are mostly realized through the use of “major premise” (16 proverbs) and conclusion (four proverbs). The social and quasi-judicial categories, except for Proverb 9 (“be fair; it is closer to piety”), manifest themselves in the form of “major premise”. A main feature of the “major premise” in a logical syllogism is its general soundness and wide acceptability. In addition, four proverbs (judicial category, except for Proverb 18) and Proverb 9 represent the third element of the logical syllogism: conclusion. The conclusion-based proverbs are conclusive orders (i.e. directives/speech acts) and exclude, similarly to the general premise, possible reconsideration or assessment. Whether the proverbs are in the form of “major premise” or “conclusion”, they semiotically function as a vehicle of knowledge and values that are beyond doubt and questioning. All in all, the proverbs transform the courtroom space into a space that is not negotiable and simultaneously transform the court representatives from the gatekeepers of the judicial system (justice) to public servants carrying truth “from above”. A case in point is the directives of the judicial categories that call for obedience and submission to the will of the court that semiotically prepare defendants for punishment instead of innocence (Table 5).

### *Murals as a communicative vehicle*

Having exposed the semiotic potential of the courtroom proverbial murals in the Palace of Justice in Beirut, it is important to conclude that the provided communicative vehicle is knowledge-based and, accordingly, in its simplest form requires a high level of literacy to be able to decode the linguistic content of the proverbs. Undoubtedly, decoding the visual elements transcends literacy skills and involves specialized knowledge, a privilege to only a few. Consequently, irregular courtroom players (i.e. witnesses, defendants, plaintiffs and the public) who lack this literacy-knowledge package are, to a great extent, excluded from this communicative context. The partial communication they may be part of is the dynamics of design and color.

Due to the unfortunate absence of official literacy data on Lebanese prisons, literacy rates can only be approximated in light of available research. The only relatively recent studies on literacy in Lebanese prisons were conducted in female prisons (Khalaf 2001/2002; Sinno 2001/2002). Although female prisoners make up only 4.7% of the total prison population in Lebanon, their socioeconomic conditions may be generalized in an attempt to define the literacy profile of males. According to Sinno (2001/2002), 31.9% of women in Lebanese prisons cannot read nor write. Taking into consideration the sophisticated linguistic nature of the proverbial murals, the “basic” education claimed by 27.7% of female prisoners can be comfortably added to the ranks of those deprived of the communicative vehicle of the murals during trial. This brief account on literacy in Lebanese prisons is witness to the inefficiency of the (semiotically) delivered linguistic messages in the courtroom and thus the failure of any educational purposes or intentions behind them.

### Conclusion

The systematic presence of the proverbial murals in the courtrooms of the Palace of Justice was eventually called for, or, at least, approved by the Lebanese judicial authorities. As this paper is the first semiotic attempt into courtroom discourse in Lebanon, what remains of utmost importance is whether the decision to include these murals (in the late 1960s) was made on their semiotic value. Were these murals chosen for their possible contribution (i.e. communicative vehicle) in the dissemination of justice, fairness and transparency? Were they selected systematically, so to result in a positive perception of the judicial system and what it represents? Regardless of the circumstances that then surrounded the making of this decision, the present work – in light of Shitemi’s (2009) definition of semiotics as “anything that has meaning within a given culture or conceptual framework” – unfolds the functional importance of these murals in perpetuating the social, religious, ethical, political and judicial foundations of the state. Semiotically, the investigated courtrooms transcend their legal context and open their doors to sociocultural possibilities. Although these murals do not contextualize justice consistently from one court to another, they (specifically the “religious quasi-judicial” category) can be a rewarding tool to unify the country’s religious differences; this potential the murals have may give an edge to the judicial system to play a national compromising and unifying role, the ultimate function and *raison d’être* of any democratic judicial system.

### Notes

1. As accounted for in Brawn (2004), spatial social ordering was pioneered by New Zealand (1993–1996) and followed by the work of the Law Reform Commission of Western Australia in its legal landmark 1997–1999 Review of the Criminal and Civil Justice System in Western Australia.
2. Richardson (2007) categorizes courtroom symbols into fixed (e.g. buildings and architecture), semi-fixed (e.g. wigs, robes, coat of arms) and non-fixed (e.g. behavioral patterns of lawyers, police, bailiffs).
3. Not in the Peircean sense; closer in meaning to “code” or “sign”.
4. President Roosevelt’s incentive plan was known as “New Deal” (1933–1936).
5. Investigating the influence of proverbial murals on courtroom players (e.g. defendants, lawyers, the public) is beyond the scope of the present work – see Richardson (2007) for a

- detailed account on the effects courtroom symbolism: fixed, semi-fixed (i.e. wigs; shields, flags) and non-fixed symbols.
6. Visual codes can forge “conceptual thinking” (Wagner 2009).
  7. Orwenjo’s article investigates proverbiality in political discourse in Kenya.
  8. Despite the use of Colloquial Lebanese Arabic by irregular court players (i.e. witnesses, offenders), the court proceedings only document a translated version of the Colloquial into Standard Arabic (see Khachan 2010).
  9. Islamic art is associated with the symmetrical and balanced composition of arabesque mosaics characterized with the abstraction of organic forms into geometric style and vegetative motifs (forms, stems, tendrils and leaves) and the exclusion of figural imagery (for a detailed account on Islamic calligraphy, see Blair 2006).
  10. The author failed to locate any background information on the proverbial murals in the Palace of Justice in Beirut; in addition to the lack of documentation on the issue in Law libraries in Lebanon, aged lawyers and judges seemed ill-informed about the murals.
  11. An ancient civilization that inhabited Lebanon and parts of the Mediterranean basin; it is also associated with the invention and spread of the Alphabet. The Phoenicians are also reputed for their maritime trade and sea explorations of the old world.

### Notes on contributor

Victor Khachan’s interest in the semiotics of law has come along his ongoing research on courtroom language in Lebanon, a country whose legal system has been enduringly scarred by its war legacy. Prior to his work on the legal implications of courtroom space semiotics in Lebanon, he has embarked on a comprehensive assessment of diglossic courtrooms and their threat to linguistic rights. In 2010, he published “Arabic–Arabic Courtroom Translation in Lebanon” in *Social & Legal Studies*. His academic qualifications include a PhD and a Master in Applied Linguistics both from Macquarie University, Sydney, Australia. He is currently teaching at the Lebanese American University, Lebanon.

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