

# MAGICAL OBJECTS CONVEYING POWER IN THEIR OWN RIGHT – THE MATERIALITY OF RED TAPE

***„The management of the modern office is based upon written documents (the “files”), which are preserved in their original or draught form. There is, therefore, a staff of subaltern officials and scribes of all sorts. The body of officials actively engaged in a “public” office, along with the respective apparatus of material implements and the files, makes up a bureau” (Max Weber 1978: 957).***

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Visualizing bureaucracy, one tends to think of offices, waiting rooms, convoluted hallways, forms, and interfaces, into which one occasionally enters their data. It is no coincidence that these physical representations and kafkaesque scenarios of something initially pretty abstract come to mind. As Matthew S. Hull's thorough analysis of the materiality of Pakistani Bureaucracy shows, the materiality of graphic artifacts matters to the bureaucratic context, for it largely constitutes the semiotics of its processes. Documents, just like buildings, uniforms or cars are part of a material culture of the state and therefore represent and reproduce the state (Hull 2012: 26). Broadly ignored in writings on bureaucracy from the side of other social sciences, anthropologists' point of view can provide a better perspective on the artifact itself. „[R]epresentations exist as things in the world [...] A medium of representation is not only something that stands ,between' those things it mediates, it is also a ,thing' in its own right” (Keane 1997: 8). The physical representation of a file, document, form, letter or software tells us a lot not only about their meaning in the first place, but also about the actors involved, the way these representations circulate, of which importance they are, how they are to be interpreted, and even more. Hull (2012: 14) terms these semiotic functions of graphical artifacts „graphic ideologies”. The users of graphical artifacts share a set of conceptions about their meaning, use, value, and interpretation.