Phallus Art Brings Luck in Bhutan - and Tourists, Too

LOBESA, Bhutan — For centuries, Bhutan has celebrated the phallus.

They are painted on homes, or carved in wood, installed above doorways and under eaves to ward off evil, including one of its most insidious human forms, gossip. They are worn on necklaces, installed in granaries and in fields as a kind of scarecrow. They are used by masked jesters in religious festivals and at one temple near here in Lobesa as a blessing of fertility.

Now, as Bhutan increasingly opens up to the world, the ancient tradition has been evolving or, some say, sullied — by commercialization.

Though still a religious symbol, it has become, to some, a relic of a patriarchal past, something vaguely embarrassing and not fit for the modern new democracy that has, by all appearances, taken firm root in Bhutan after decades of relative isolation and absolute monarchy.

It has also become a curio to peddle in all sizes and colors to the increasing number of tourists.

“People still use it as a symbol,” said Needrup Zangpo, the executive director of the Journalist Association of Bhutan, who has written about the historical inspiration for the symbol, “but the necessity of having it painted on your house is going away.” He attributed this erosion of tradition to “the exposure to Western culture.”

Phallus symbols are worn as necklaces, used as scarecrows and donned by masked jesters in religious festivals. Credit Gilles Sabrié for The New York Times

The symbol, like Bhutan itself, seems suspended between two impulses: the country’s headlong embrace of modernity and its preservation of traditions that made it unique to start with.

“Stories of Bhutan’s engagement with the phallus shed light on traditions and lifestyle that make Bhutan one of the happiest places on earth,” Karma Choden wrote in the 2014 book “Phallus: Crazy Wisdom from Bhutan,” which was published here and claims to be the first scholarly effort to document the ubiquity of the phallus.

The tradition has been widely traced to one lama, Drukpa Kunley, who spread the tenets of Buddhism through Bhutan in the 15th and 16th centuries.
Called the “Divine Madman,” he was a holy fool, a mendicant, drunkard and Lothario who subdued women and demons alike with his heightened spirituality and what legend called his “Flaming Thunderbolt of Wisdom.”

Drukpa Kunley is celebrated throughout the country — and in Tibet, across the border — but his cult is centered on Chimi Lhakhang, the “no dog” monastery, near Lobesa, which encompasses a cluster of still smaller hamlets nestled in a valley of terraced paddies of red and white rice.

The monastery was built in 1499 on a knoll above the Puna Tsang River, though given the hazy mythology surrounding Drukpa Kunley’s evangelism, there are contradictory accounts of the monastery’s founding.

In the prevailing one, the lama subdued a demon haunting a nearby mountain pass called Dochula by turning her into a red dog, which he buried “with a pile of earth to resemble a woman’s breast.” Hence the name “no dog.”

In the other, according to an oral history compiled in the 1960s and translated into English as “The Divine Madman: The Sublime Life and Songs of Drukpa Kunley,” the lama built a stupa, or monument, on the spot where a follower died after repeating a ribald prayer the lama had taught him. (“I take refuge in the maiden’s Lotus,” one couplet begins.) The lama himself was said to have lived to 115.

In neither scenario of the monastery’s founding, Mr. Zangpo emphasized, did he use his penis, though that is how the legend is often garbled.

“We don’t have a clear line between history and mythology,” said Mr. Zangpo, who is compiling his own translations of the oral histories that he hopes will set the record straight. Like other scholars, he argues that the phallus symbol can more likely be traced to pre-Buddhist pagan rituals than to the Divine Madman’s legend.

Nevertheless, the tales of the lama’s sexual appetite have prevailed — in no small part because of the oral histories, in which Drukpa Kunley flouts both secular and religious sensibilities by reveling in sex and alcohol on his path to enlightenment.

To this day, hopeful couples traverse Bhutan to partake of the monastery’s fertility blessing. They reach it by climbing the knoll on foot after passing through the hamlets of Sopsokha and Teoprongchu. The valley is indisputably beautiful. Dragonflies swarm in circles overhead. Small aqueducts feeding the green rice paddies spin colorful prayer wheels like water mills.

What has made the area famous, though, are the phalluses, a must-see for foreigners who pay the $250 per day minimum that Bhutan requires for tourist visas. And more tourists, perhaps inevitably, mean more phalluses.
House after house is painted with phalluses. While highly stylized, they are in some cases graphically detailed: always erect, often ejaculating. One appears with the country’s name, a marketing ploy by the owner of one of the proliferating souvenir shops. The displays in some — rows of colorful wooden carvings — would not seem out of place in a sex shop.

Bhutan’s phalluses are not considered explicitly sexual, noted Ms. Choden, the writer.

“In essence, the phallus represents the center of the male ego, and not a celebration of sex,” she writes. “It reminds onlookers that if this force is harnessed properly, it will fuel productivity and creativity rather than wanton lust.”

Lotay Tshering, a 51-year-old rice farmer, owns a house in Sopsokha that is adorned with two giant penis murals. His wife’s uncle painted them in homage to the Divine Madman, “who has blessed this place,” as he put it. He and his wife have six children.

Over a cup of salt butter tea, Mr. Tshering lamented the proliferation of shops and cafes that accompanied the rise of tourism (though his main complaint for the authorities was the sorry state of the local roads).

“When I grew up, there were no shops,” he said. He says the trend came with the advent of parliamentary elections in 2008, which Bhutan’s former king ordered after abdicating in favor of his son, Jigme Khesar Namgyel Wangchuck.

By The New York Times

“From then on there was no stopping the number of shops sprouting up,” Mr. Tshering said, adding that he found the trend unseemly.

“I have no commercial interest,” he said, referring to his display of phalluses, which have been so widely photographed that they appear on Wikipedia. “I ask for nothing.”

The phalluses certainly have been a boon for the villages here, a two-hour drive from the capital, Thimphu. The area has around 2,700 people, according to the most recent census, in 2005. Most are farmers, though there is a growing number of shopkeepers and artists.

Tenpa Renchen, the deputy headman of the village, an elected post, said the gains to the local economy had come mostly from the rents that villagers can charge to the souvenir shops. A few more opened in the last year, as did a restaurant with a stunning view of the monastery.

“Personally,” he emphasized, with a diplomatic touch, “I don’t like people selling these in shops, but they have to make a living.”
The village elders, however, are watching the commercialization with caution. The proliferation of shops has not yet reached a crisis, Mr. Renchen said, but could soon test the limits of tolerance.

Mr. Renchen sounded wistful in an interview, lamenting the modern exploitation of something with a deeper religious significance.

“The Divine Madman,” he said, “has much more to offer than just a phallus.”