

NOTE

PHALLIC SYMBOLS IN TIBET

—BY HUGH E. RICHARDSON.

Phallic symbols are by no means an obtrusive feature, in the Tibetan scene. They are not connected with a cult such as the Saivite Hindu worship of the *linga* but are part of ancient geomantic practices, influenced perhaps by those of China.

Although anthropologists might see phallic undertones in the white stone set up by farmers at the centre of each cultivated field in honour of the *sa bdag*—"the lord of the land"—or in the tall pillars erected at the royal tombs, these have no such overt association in Tibetan minds but are magical "navel stones" or "earth pegs" (see R.A. Stein, *Tibetan Civilization*, 1972, p. 203).

Overt phallic signs were the realistic representation of the male organs, often painted red and surrounded by a bush of yak-hair, set over the main door of some farm houses in Tibet and Bhutan. These, I was told, were intended to avert bad influences in the immediate neighbourhood. A.H. Franke saw objects of the same sort in Ladakh (*Antiquities of Indian Tibet*, Calcutta, 1914, Vol. I p. 61); and the red painted pillars in front of houses there, recorded by William Moorcroft in 1822, may have had similar associations (*Travels in the Himalayan Provinces of Hindustan*, 1841).

A rather surprising example existed on the roof of the Jo-khang, the Cathedral of Lhasa. Its presence and purpose are explained by a story in several Tibetan histories including the *rGyal-rabs gsal-ba'i me-kong* (14th century), the *Chos-'byung* of dPa'-bo gtsug-lag phreng-ba (16th century) and the Chronicle of the 5th Dalai Lama (17th century). It relates that when the Nepalese queen of Srong-brtsan sGam-po wanted to build the 'Phrul-snang (the Jo-khang) at Lhasa and was looking for a suitable site, she consulted Srong-brtsan's Chinese queen who had already built the Ra-mo-che. The latter had recourse to occult divination (*spor thang*) to ascertain in the geomantic auspices. It was revealed that Tibet was like a female demon lying on her back and that chapels—known as the *mtha' 'dul yang 'dul lha khang rnam s*—should be built at vital points on the extremities and the limbs of the demon in order to keep her in subjection. The 'Phrul-snang itself was to be built on the 'O-ma-thang, over the demon's heart. Eight specific topographic

features around the site harboured hostile influences that had to be countered in different ways. While some which were the haunts of 'dre, baud and btsan spirits could be controlled by building a chapel or a mchod-rten, the evil omen emanating from a cave on a hillside to the east which resembled the private parts of the she-demon had to be opposed by setting up a phallus—dbang-phyug chen-po or dbang phyug mtshan—pointing in that direction. I was told that that sign, together with different apotropaic objects—a conch shell, a garuda image, a stone mchod-rten and a stone lion—prescribe to repel dangerous influences from other sources, was placed in semi-concealment under the gilded pagoda rooflet (rgya-phibs) on the east side of the Jo-khang roof.

The story of the bad omens and the magic to neutralize them is familiar to readers of Tibetan historical works but it may not be so well known that the symbols were actually placed on the Jo-khang itself and survived there until very recent times.

Following that example phallic signs were placed, unobtrusively and always on the east side, on several of the great houses of Lhasa; and there is one of stone, rudimentary but unmistakable, on the east side of the perimeter wall of the Dalai Lama's summer palace of Norbu Lingka, built in the 19th century.

Other manifestations, perhaps of the same nature, are the strange wooden figures, some nine feet high, standing usually in pairs, one male and one female, at the entrance to some villages sPo yul and rkong-po. A photograph of one such pair can be seen in *The Riddle of the Tsang Po Gorges* by F. Kingdom Ward (1926); and a male figure is illustrated in *A Cultural History of Tibet* by D. Snellgrove and H. Richardson (1968). From those photographs it appears that the images were neglected and in a damaged state but it is evident that they were originally ithyphallic.

Pairs of similar crude wooden figures occur in many primitive cultures. For example, forked tree trunks shaped into male and female figures have been dug up from a bog in Sweden (*Country Life*, 19th April, 1968); more relevant geographically is a pair of wooden village guardians in the Nepal Terai, reduced to symbols, illustrated in *Deux Fêtes chez les Thâru de Dâng* A.W. Macdonald in *Objects et Mondes*, 1969; while from a part of Nepal much closer to the Himalaya D.L. Snellgrove in his *Himalayan Pilgrimage* (1961) has a photograph of a pair of wooden images on the roof of a low caste Hindu house at Tibrikot where, he states, there is a large number of such figures; and, again, in the *Geographical Magazine* for Dec. 1956 Verrier Elwin illustrates tall figures of bamboo and straw erected in the tribal areas of Assam to avert disease.

Although in the examples from Tibet the male figure looks something like one of the fierce deities of Vajrayāna Buddhism, the resemblance is probably superficial for sPo-bo and upper rKong-po are regions where old practices were slow to die. The local name for the images is rendered phonetically by western travellers as "Tombe" or "Tembe". The Tibetan orthography does not seem to be known; but I wonder whether it may be connected with *Idem*, *Idem-po*, "statue, image, idol (standing upright)"—see Das' Dictionary p. 712. Tibetan scholars at the Namgyal Institute of Tibetology or elsewhere may care to throw light on that and on other matters mentioned above.
