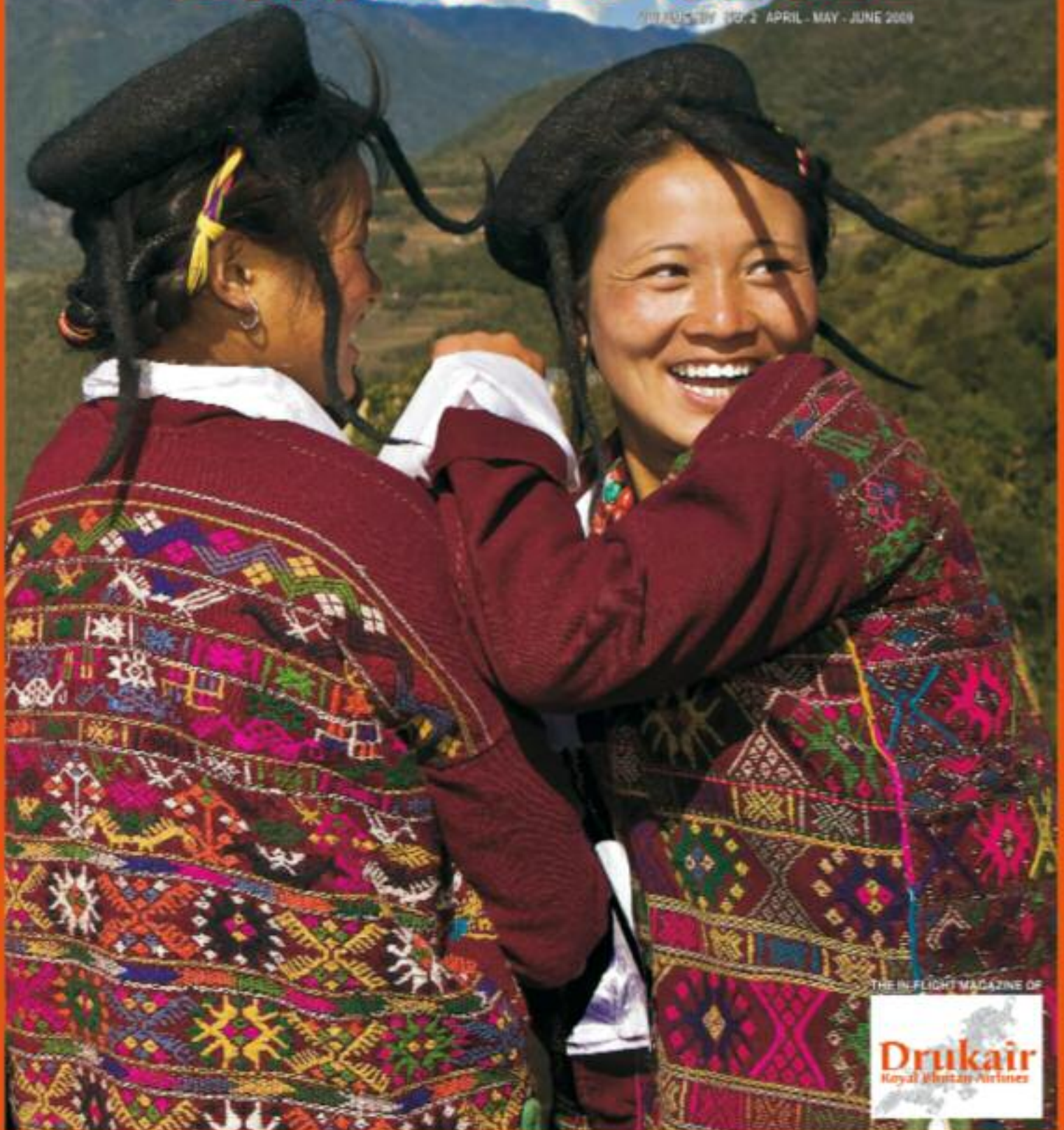


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Tashi Delek

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Tashi Delek is an auspicious and versatile Bhutanese expression. It encompassing a number of meanings such as: wishing you well, good wishes, congratulations, cheers, good luck, and so on.

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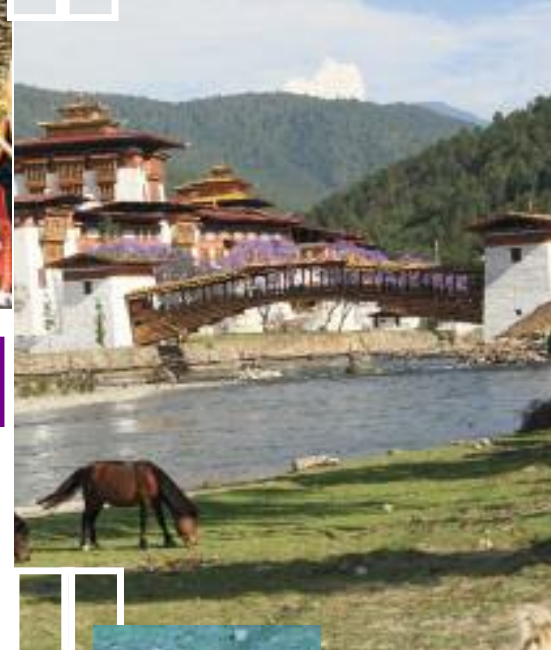
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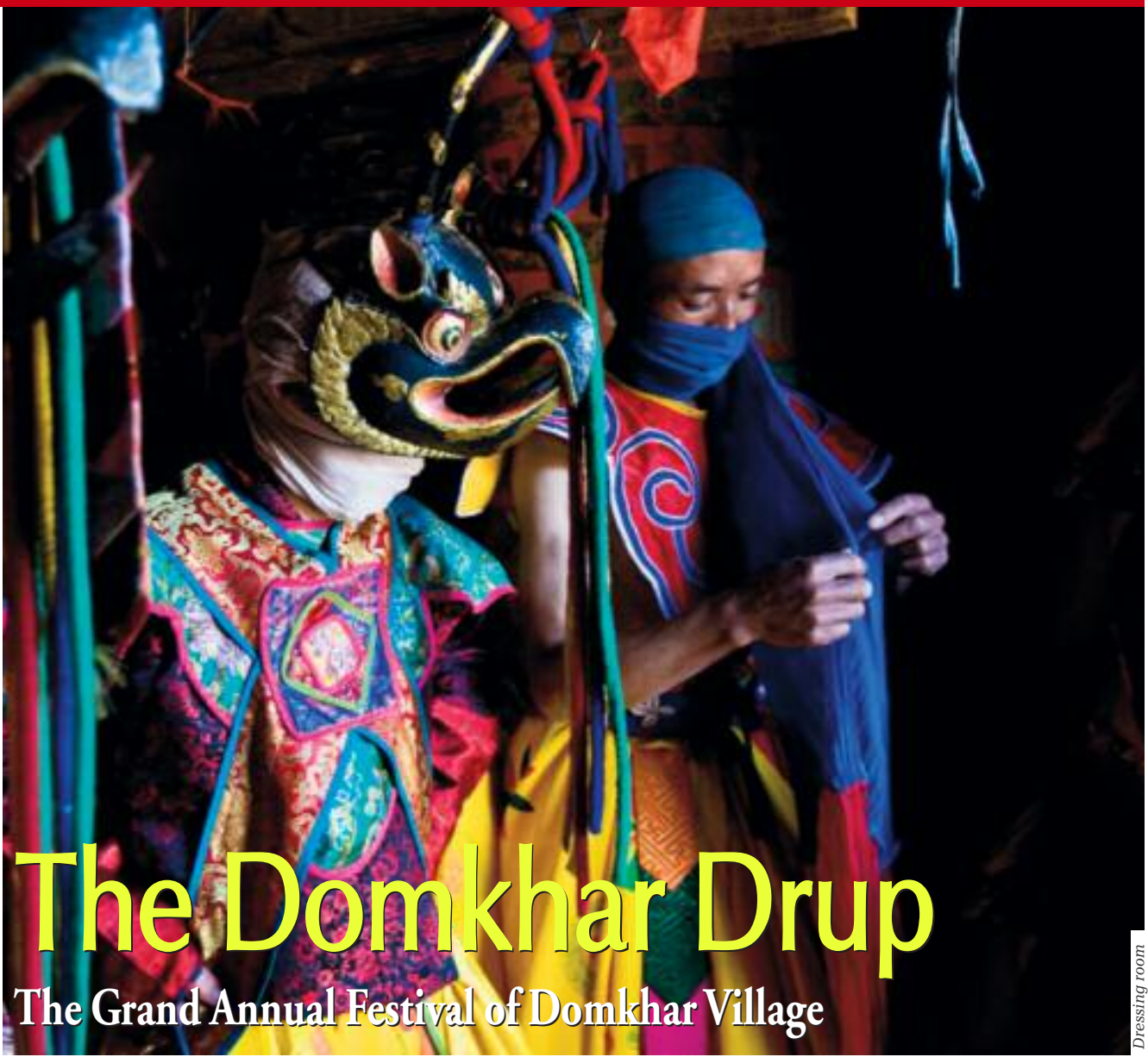
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Cover picture courtesy: Robin Smillie



The Domkhar Drup

The Grand Annual Festival of Domkhar Village

Dressing room

“You have killed many yaks,” yells a soldier of Yamaraja as he chases a festival dancer dressed like a monkey through the crowd. “You have killed fish and chickens and cows to fill your belly and you

must now answer to The Lord of Death!” Breaking away from his would-be captor, the sinner climbs a tree while the crowd below in the small and intimate courtyard of the Domkhar temple laugh at his antics.



Masks



Death mask

Thus begins my favourite masked dance of the Domkhar Drup, a Buddhist festival held every year on the auspicious date that coincides with the death ceremony of Zhadrung Kuchoe—the 10th day of the 3rd month of the Bhutanese calendar. The festival is held in the heart of Domkhar village, a cluster of 30 farming households in Chumme valley, one of the four valleys that make up the Bumthang district in central Bhutan.

Bhutanese mask dance festivals are held every year in most major villages to honour Buddhist heroes and vilify demons. The

sacred dances and lyrics convey moral messages and promote understanding by re-enacting Vajrayana Buddhist history. They have a deep spiritual impact on those believers who witness them. Using precise and complicated choreography passed down through the centuries by master performers, dancers of the Domkhar Drup perform the iconic Black Hat Dance, the Dance of the Heroes, the Dance of the Lord of Death and several others.

Every costume, mask, and utensil has symbolic meaning, from the lion-headed dancer holding an iron chain that manifests the bond of love, to the snake-headed dancer

The Temple at Domkhar

The Domkhar Lhakang (meaning temple) was built by the villagers of Domkhar and is maintained by them with donations coming mostly from the locals who sell agricultural products to raise funds. The Domkhar Festival is supported entirely by voluntary service and contributions from those who attend it. The underlying theme of the festival is to promote Buddhism, maintain local tradition and appease village and family deities.

Festival Etiquette

Always be considerate and mindful that you are an invited guest. These ancient religious festivals are for the Bhutanese people and not for a tourist's frivolity. I've witnessed rude behaviour at festivals, such as a film crew with sound booms walking in amongst the dancers sticking video cameras in their faces, causing them to change their centuries-old choreography and walk around the cameraman. At one festival, I saw a foreign visitor dancing the hokey pokey on the cobblestones with the masked dancers. At the smaller more intimate festivals like the *Domkhar Drup* and the *Ura Yakchoe* where you are seated in a small courtyard, be mindful not to block the view of villagers. Always keep in mind that the Bhutanese people are very shy and would probably never tell you that you are committing a cultural faux pas, so you should always consult your guide before entering the temple or moving about the courtyard.

Try to relax and enjoy the moment, and don't forget to memorise the faces of the deities because you never know, you may meet them again some day.



Courtyard

holding a mirror that reflects all deeds, virtuous and sinful.

I confess to not having the religious background to comprehend the deep philosophical and moral meanings of these masked dances, but I will try to give the general meaning of my favourite Domkhar Festival dance, the Dance of the Lord of Death.

First introduced by Tertön Karma Lingpa, the famous treasure revealer of the fourth century, this dance is an elaborate ritual known to the Bhutanese as the *Raksha Mangcham*. The Tibetan word *bardo* means literally "intermediate state of consciousness" but is sometimes translated as "transitional state" or "in-between state" — the time between death

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Atsara! Jesters of the Himalayas

While the dancing masked clowns may appear to be nothing but buffoons and tricksters that constantly annoy the crowd and dancers with their wooden phallic and vulgar antics, the Atsaras play several important roles at Buddhist masked festivals. During the dances they are costume repairmen on the fly, tucking in the errant sash and retying the cloth knots that hold a heavy carved wooden masks tight to a dancer's face. In his colourful and patchwork tunic and pajamas, the Atsara sometimes makes a fool of himself by mocking a dancer with grotesque imitation of the dancer's expert step, all the while reaching in to the serious business of retying a knot. They are beggars that roam the crowd, seeking donations to help defray festival costs, cajoling those who give only a few pennies, urging a deeper dig into the pocket for the preservation of festival masks and food for the dancers. I once saw an Atsara take a small donation from an amused American woman and then try to embarrass her by saying, "I am an American too, and I know George Bush." Waving his wooden phallic in the air he yelled, "Mine is bigger than his." Then to the roar of the approving crowd he approached again and with a currency note worth a few pennies folded over on the end of the phallic said, "Do you have something bigger?"

The Atsaras must know every dance step because they are cultural guides who explain the meaning of the dances and characters, even going so far as to openly and sarcastically correct a dancer if there is a misstep. Lastly, and probably most important, they are goofy entertainers who break the tension of an otherwise formal festival.



Inside the dressing room



Monkey

and the next life. Immediately after his death and during *bardo*, a sinner is chased and captured and brought before the court of *Yamaraja*, a manifestation of the Buddha known as the Lord of Death, to face judgment for his sins. *Yamaraja's* retinue is made up of many spirits, gods and ghosts, including an ox-headed minister of justice, a hog-headed record keeper who records the sinner's lifetime of good and evil deeds, and a bear-headed dancer that carries a noose to represent the need to eliminate the sinner's selfishness.

One of the many important purposes of this masked dance is to show the living humans who witness it, what each spirit and god looks like, so that during the afterlife the deceased would recognise and understand the different roles played by each. Then by faith, learned and re-learned during a lifetime of attending the festival, the believer achieves a happier stage of life in the Hereafter, be it returning to life on earth by way of reincarnation, or better yet, moving on to *Nirvana* where one is freed from suffering and the never-ending cycle of rebirth.

Text & Photographs: Robin Smillie

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