

## Erotic Iconography in Nepalese Temples: Archival Analysis and Comparative Study with South Asian Sacred Art

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### ABSTRACT

This study examines the erotic iconography carved on the wooden struts (tudāls) of temples in the Kathmandu Valley and situates these motifs within the wider South Asian artistic tradition through a comparative, archival, and interpretive approach. The research categorized erotic motifs by the type of act, posture, and architectural position, as well as the condition and history of the continuity, by means of a database of archival photographs. The results showed that paired maithuna images were the most prevalent type of carving in Nepalese temples, comprising more than 40% of the carvings in temples, and were much more common than triadic or group scenes. Placement studies found that Erotic struts were placed in the Second tier of temples with south and west direction to indicate the cosmological arrangement, which was observed in tantric semiotics of liminality and fertility. Consanguinities and dissimilarities with Khajuraho and Konark, too, could be summarized. Common systems of symbolism of fertility, auspiciousness, and cosmic harmony represent an affirmation of the pan-South Asian relevance of erotic imagery. Yet divergences were apparent in terms of materiality and ritual function: Nepalese wooden struts privileged an intimate, self-contained vignette set in a communal shrine; the Indian stone temple monumentalised erotica in sprawling narrative reliefs for dynastic and pilgrimage settings. The susceptibility of wooden images to subvert earthquakes and their discriminatory replacement in post-earthquake reconstruction drew attention to the fragility of erotic themes as part of the inheritance. With the combined use of iconographic analysis, tantric hermeneutics, and heritage studies, the present study addressed an important lacuna of scholarship. It has been shown that Nepalese erotic struts are not peripheral decorations, but are instead integrally related to the theme of temple sculptures as well as to metaphysical concepts and group ideals. The research facilitates broader dialogues regarding the intersections of sexuality, spirituality, and heritage in South Asia, highlighting the necessity of preserving the archive and maintaining the space with community awareness.

**Keywords:** Erotic Iconography, Tudāl Carvings, Temples In The Kathmandu Valley, Tantric Symbolism, South Asian Comparative Art, And Heritage Conservation

## INTRODUCTION

Erotic iconography has served as a significant source of meaning and interpretation in South Asian sacred art, especially in temple architecture. Representations of erotic unions—divine, mythological, or human—have traditionally expressed complex themes, encompassing fertility, auspiciousness, esoteric cosmology, and ritual power. These images are significantly integrated into tantric systems, where the synthesis of opposing principles—such as Śiva/Śakti, wisdom/method, and contraction/expansion—represents metaphysical pathways to transcendence (Skora, 2007; Timalsina, 2012). These images are not just decorations; they are visual metaphors for spiritual principles that are embodied. In the Kathmandu Valley, the Newar tradition of wooden temple construction adds a distinctive dimension to this heritage. The *tudals*, or carved wooden roof struts, frequently bear erotic engravings that are both structural and symbolic. These carvings are integrated into active ceremonial contexts, juxtaposed with deities, guardians, and narrative figures to create dynamic visual programs within temple precincts and courtyards. Despite their cultural and ritual importance, Newar erotic woodcarvings have not been extensively studied in Scopus-indexed literature compared to Indian stone temple contexts like Khajuraho and Konark (Verardi, 2010).

However, heritage and conservation studies in Nepal have assumed a sense of urgency since the catastrophic Gorkha earthquake of 2015. While in Nepal, the focus on heritage and preservation is felt as a reiteration following the devastating 2015 Gorkha earthquake. Recent peer-reviewed literature discusses the seismic response, the restoration effects, and also faces the issues of conserving heritage values in a seismic environment (Pandey, 2018; D'Amico et al., 2019; Pejatović et al., 2020). These contributions signal how the visibility and interpretational terminus of carved features has been altered by the physical intervention of restoration and earthquake response, in turn prompting the requirement for iconographic narratives of transformation and survival. Meanwhile, there's been a turn in art history and religious studies toward trying to understand erotic imagery on indigenous terms, e.g., tantric embodiment, rather than through the perspective of Western aesthetic or Orientalism. With this, sexual imagery is revived as a ritual technology as essential for salvation as anything else (Gray, 2005; Gray, 2006; Urban, 1999).

A paper (Adhikary, 2025) considered the psychological and cultural significance of erotic carvings on Kathmandu Valley temple *tudals* by incorporating psychoanalytic, tantric, and Newar interpretations. Building on this, the current study advances a comparative iconographic methodology. It juxtaposes Nepali erotic woodcarvings with notable South Asian stone temple carvings—particularly from Khajuraho and Konark—through a rigorous, archival-image-based approach. By incorporating materiality, ritual context, and institutional dynamics, the study reconceptualizes erotic imagery not as uniform aesthetic content but as contextually diverse and culturally ingrained.

This study seeks to reconstruct the changing visibility and placement of carved programs by analyzing archival photographs, including those affected or modified by natural disasters or restoration efforts. Coding aspects such as gesture type, placement tier, associated iconography, and preservation condition will support an evidence-based comparative analysis (D'Amico et al., 2019).

Even though more people are paying attention to South Asian erotic temple art, there isn't much peer-reviewed, Scopus-indexed literature on Nepal's tradition of erotic woodcarving. Consequently, interpretations derived from Indian stone temple contexts are frequently uncritically applied to the Newar case, disregarding material, ritual, or institutional distinctions (Verardi, 2010). Moreover, iconographic studies often depend on generic or moralistic classifications like “erotic,” “explicit,” or “profane,” which do not address the structural or contextual logic of the carvings (Skora, 2007; Timalsina, 2012). Additionally, the mediating function of *guthi* (trusts)—local community institutions tasked with temple maintenance and rituals—has yet to be incorporated into visual studies. *Guthi* governance frequently dictates the preservation, restoration, or ceremonial engagement of carvings, thereby directly influencing their visibility and significance (Maharjan & Barata, 2021). The 2015 earthquake changed how iconographic interpretation works: repairs and photographs taken after the disaster are not always included in studies, which makes it easy to mix up restored or replicated carvings with original designs (Pandey, 2018; Pejatović et al., 2020).

Finally, while symbolic or psychological analysis provides significant insights, there is a paucity of studies examining the reception of erotic carvings among stakeholders, including worshippers, local community members, heritage officials, or tourists, thereby creating a disconnect between interpretation and lived experience (Adhikary, 2025; Maharjan & Barata, 2021). These problems show how important it is to have a method that combines standardized visual classification, archival continuity, institutional context, and comparative breadth across South Asia.

This comparative study is important for many fields of study. In the field of art history, it creates a more detailed typology of erotic motifs in Newar temple woodcarvings, which makes it easier to compare them to stone-carved versions (Skora, 2007; Timalsina, 2012; Dehejia, 2009). By differentiating material and ritual specificity from

generic typologies, the study enhances analytical precision.

In religious studies, treating erotic imagery as embodied ritual technology corresponds with tantric epistemologies that view images as facilitators of spiritual cognition rather than as means to secularize or objectify the sacred (Gray, 2005; Gray, 2006; Urban, 1999). In the fields of conservation and heritage, the utilization of archival images as a diachronic repository provides insights into the changing state and arrangement of carvings, guiding ethical restoration, documentation, and interpretive practices (Pandey, 2018; D'Amico et al., 2019; Pejatović et al., 2020). Anthropologically, integrating the function of local guthi institutions recontextualizes erotic carvings within contemporary ritual economies and civic-heritage practices, thereby bolstering participatory conservation frameworks (Maharjan & Barata, 2021). Methodologically, the study develops a replicable archival-iconographic model suitable for contexts of disaster, reconstruction, or limited access, thereby providing a transferable instrument for comparative visual studies in heritage and art history.

The objectives of the study were to record and categorize erotic designs carved into the *tudāls* of certain temples in the Kathmandu Valley using old photos. This involved noting details like the type of sexual act, the positions of the figures relative to each other, the architecture, the associated iconography, and the physical condition of the carvings. The study also aimed to compare the sexual images on the recorded Nepalese temple *tudāls* with those on the renowned South Asian stone temple complexes of Khajuraho and Konark, examining their reciprocal relationship in terms of language, location, and the rituals or lessons that can be inferred from them. Additionally, it sought to discuss the symbolic and ritual significance of these sexual forms within interpretive contexts, such as tantric hermeneutics and the socio-religious ecology of Newar ritual institutions. The study also considered the implications for documenting, preserving, and caring for heritage in a community-centered manner.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

Academics who have devoted themselves to the study of erotic iconography in South Asia have now turned it into a complex cross-disciplinary field of study combining fields such as Art history, Religious studies, Anthropology heritage studies, and Heritage conservation. It has also become clear in recent years that the (erotic) images adorning sacred sites weren't just the icing on the cake: they contain a fertility message, cosmological understanding, tantric wisdom, and sense of community. Recent analyses similarly reveal how heritage politics, structural vulnerabilities, and reception dynamics mediate these carvings. Categorising them thematically, but still telling the story of Nepalese *tudāl* carvings as part of larger South Asian traditions, the review renews thirty key Scopus publications.

Early investigations into the iconography focused on the symbolic role of erotic couples in temple imagery. Banerjee (2016: 293-378) shows that erotic reliefs in the temples of Odisha are placed in architectural thresholds as threshold zones that serve a feeling of both limen and protection, but not to be enjoyed sexually. This perspective points to the architectural logic of position, useful when reading Nepalese *tudāls*, which themselves bridge supports between roof and wall. Bhattacharya (2016) has also suggested that erotic couples represent a liminal state between mundane desire and liberation, serving as metaphors for conception and cosmic equilibrium. Overall, these results indicate that these images are symbolically significant, rather than being merely sexually suggestive.

Deshpande (2017) analyses the dualistic distinction embedded in erotic sculptures, between the male musculature and female seduction. She demonstrates that images of sex union express cosmological polarity in balance, male and female energies divinely intertwined. This interpretive approach is particularly useful in reading Nepalese struts and how gendered figures are often combined to convey a sense of equilibrium rather than erotic display or visual spectacle. Joshi (2017) supplements these symbolic interpretations with an anthropological interpretation of Khajuraho that illustrates figural fertility in its role as cemented civic identity and community coherence. His ethnography of empire suggests that erotic carving in urban temples like Kathmandu did articulate collective good fortune. Kulkarni (2018) brings a storytelling aspect, as she studies how erotic scenes at Khajuraho develop in lines and registers in expertly timed narratives. His observations suggest that the consistency of narrative in Newar temples, sexual *tudāls* are interspersed with guardian as well as mythological iconography.

Newer Nepal-based investigations point up the way erotic imagery is woven into matters of tradition and community. Aryal (2018) provides an unprecedented visual documentation of Malla-period iconography and argues that sexual sculptures were deliberately clubbed between guardian figures and auspicious symbols. This study also supports that the sexual was reserved for comparable, integrated temple complexes. Maskey (2021) analyses heritage policies in Kathmandu, also showing tensions between state conservators who sometimes interpret erotic carvings as problematic and local communities who hold these as sacred. This dispute highlights the politics of representation in heritage. Stein and Singh (2019) take an ethnographic approach to demonstrate erotic themes in Newar fertility rites and solar festivals. Their conclusion corroborates that erotic idiom is at the

centre of ritual life and not peripheral. Pandey (2018) explains, from the field of Disaster Studies, that the 2015 Gorkha earthquake “retrofitted” heritage discourse and compelled selective restoration based on cultural priorities. Kumar, Shrestha, and Gautam (2020) underscore the importance of archival photography to recover lost or altered carvings and thus validate the methodological decision to compare photographs through archival imagery.

Additional such architectural assessments placed erotic carvings in a broader context: “St.-Émilion has its erotic carvings documented by both structural and conservation studies; these not only contextualize such carvings by considering how they contribute to 'architectural performance' and thus 'necessarily survived'.... Endo and Hanazato (2021) study the seismic performance of pagoda temples and explain how structural members such as struts serve to buffer earthquake forces. Their results link the susceptibility of chiseled *tudāls* directly to seismic motion. Shakya et al. (2014) is on timber–masonry demifricks with the aim of illustrating that the damage concentrates in the same areas in which the struts are connected to the walls. This is the structural cause of the fact that carved iconography is mostly destroyed by earthquakes. Soti et al. (2019) adopt an advanced finite-element approach to the updating of parameters of a damaged temple, and demonstrate that the visual data from carved elements is essential for a reliable analysis. Their computational methodology is an illustration of how an iconographic record can provide a base for conservation engineering. Takai et al. (2016) provide important ground-motion recordings of the Gorkha earthquake and demonstrate how soil amplification in Kathmandu Valley aggravated structural deformation. Their research clarifies why some temple areas — and, therefore, some aspects of iconographic programs — suffered more than others. Kawan et al. (2022) also note that temple plinths transmit acoustical modes differently than superior levels, transmitting stresses on upper-level carved elements, including *tudāls*. This analysis connects position in the temple to susceptibility to erotic iconography.

When it comes to showing sexual themes, there are differences between regions in South Asia and similarities across the subcontinent. Ghosh (2019) also shows how the erotic reliefs of Konark are part of the solar symbolism, seeing sex as a metaphor for cosmic energy and renewal. This supports the view that Nepalese carvings are not just fertility symbols, but also cosmic symbols. Rao (2020) talks about South Indian corridor iconography, focusing on how the order of narrative images and ritual movement are related. His analysis appears to indicate that Nepalese courtyard temples organize viewers in a comparable manner. Banerjee and Kulkarni (2021) compare a few temples in Odisha and Karnataka to show how different the styles of erotic models are. Their typology can be helpful for comparing the different types of Nepali *tudāls* in different parts of the country. Iyer (2018) has recently suggested a digital ontology of iconography in relation to comparative analysis, linking coding systems for images to comparative data retrieval. This growth in method development backs up the archival coding method used here. Singh (2022) examines contemporary tourism discourses to illustrate how visitors' perceptions can reinterpret the educational value of erotic heritage. In Kathmandu, tourist economies and local interpretations also clash.

Anthropological and reception-oriented studies broaden our perspective. Mistry (2019) describes how erotic images are re-configured in Gujarat by the communities that re-represent them to accommodate the payload for contemporary devotionalist offensives. That'd emphasise how interpretation among publics is always fluid. Subba (2020) deconstructs media discourses on Nepali temple erotica to show how the press produces carvings as sacred heritage or smut. Such a kind of media framing is how much heritage politics matter. Bhattacharai and Adhikari (2021) examine the inclusion of erotic heritage in Nepalese school curricula, illustrating that pedagogical framing influences the future reception of this heritage. Their analysis shows how important education is for keeping culture alive. Thapa (2022) examines pilgrimage guides, elucidating their selective discourse and minimization of erotic carvings for devotional audiences. Their work is especially relevant to an examination of interpretive mediation in Kathmandu. Gurung (2023) looks at craftsmen, specifically how local carvers turn the fertility motifs into stories. His work focuses on how tradition and eroticism are connected in real life.

Finally, recent tantric and Buddhist inquiries deepen the comparative model. The ritual politics of consort representation in Tibetan Buddhism is not necessarily an approachable gaze on erotic imagery, “depending upon institutional formation,” as Seeman (2015, p. 15) stresses. Shim (2025) demonstrates how qualities of a god such as *Vaiśravaṇa*, were constructed transregionally creating a method for studying the movement and transformation of motifs—a methodology which can be realistically applied to the movement of erotic motifs across Nepal and India. In a thoroughgoing study on tantra titled Formative Acts, Timalsina (2021) takes us toward the aesthetics of embodiment in tantric ritual, noting that forms of bodily gestures and pleasures are in themselves performances of the sacred, which could help us understand how eroticism can appear along martial and domestic themes. Medhananda (2021) re-reads Tantra of Sri Aurobindo as a life-affirming spirituality in which sex is part of spiritual practice and accordingly sanctifies erotic salvation iconographic and pedagogically. Ruff (2019) emphasizes that tantric art was an agent as well, a factor of the composition of the relation between the viewer and what was to be seen: the carvings in erotica should instead be described as a site of participation rather than a determinate object. Timalsina (2012) has constructed *Kaula* and *Trka* term bodies, allowing micro-lexical for reading the tantric iconography. Golovkova (2020) reintroduces *Kāmadeva* in early *Tripurasundarī* cults, implying a desire to be theologically central and visually encoded. Finally, Kim (2025) looks at the narrativity of a Buddhist manuscript

and how seriality affects the meaning of the story. This methodology can be applied to temple programs, wherein each program presents successive explorations of erotic and non-erotic themes.

These studies collectively furnish a substantial, multi-faceted foundation for the current investigation. They demonstrate that erotic carvings must be interpreted symbolically, ritually, structurally, politically, and socially. They also show how useful it is to combine archival iconography, tantric hermeneutics, comparative regional analysis, and heritage conservation. Consequently, the literature asserts that Nepalese *tudāls*, when examined in conjunction with South Asian counterparts, significantly enhance global discourses on sacred art, sexuality, and cultural identity.

Although existing scholarship has illuminated the symbolic, tantric, and structural dimensions of erotic iconography in South Asian temples, there remains a notable absence of systematic comparative research focusing on Nepalese *tudāl* carvings in relation to wider South Asian traditions. There has been a lot of research on Khajuraho, Konark, and other large stone temples, but their results are often applied to Nepalese wooden architecture without taking into account differences in materiality, ritual use, and social and cultural mediation. Recent heritage and conservation studies examine the seismic vulnerability and restoration of Kathmandu Valley temples; however, they rarely incorporate iconographic analysis into structural evaluations. Likewise, anthropological and reception-focused works have shown how communities and institutions frame erotic imagery, yet few have bridged these insights with archival visual data that track iconographic continuity and change over time. There exists a significant research gap in the creation of a comprehensive, archival-based comparative framework that contextualizes Nepalese erotic woodcarvings within the wider South Asian iconographic matrix, while also considering local ritual ecologies, structural vulnerabilities, and current heritage politics.

## METHODOLOGY

### Research Design

This study employed a qualitative, comparative, and archival research design to analyze erotic iconography in Nepalese temples and contextualize it within the wider South Asian artistic tradition. The research was based on art-historical techniques of iconographic analysis and integrated viewpoints from anthropology, heritage studies, and religious studies. The main focus was on the wooden struts (*tudāls*) of temples in the Kathmandu Valley. These were compared to stone reliefs from Khajuraho and Konark in India.

### Data Sources

The primary data for Nepal were obtained from archival photographic collections. Archival sources were prioritized because many carvings had been altered, damaged, or reconstructed following the 2015 Gorkha earthquake. The study maintained historical accuracy and ensured diachronic continuity by utilizing pre-disaster and pre-restoration photographs. For the comparative aspect, notable Indian sites like Khajuraho and Konark were chosen due to their scholarly significance, the abundance of erotic imagery, and the presence of credible documentation.

### Criteria for Sampling and Selection

The temples were chosen based on the presence of erotic motifs, how well the carvings fit into the larger cultural picture, and how easy it was to find archival images. In the case of the Kathmandu Valley, temples in Patan, Bhaktapur, and Kathmandu city were given the most attention. Khajuraho and Konark were the main examples from India that were used for comparison. These sites were selected due to their esteemed reputation for advanced erotic iconographic programs, thereby offering a suitable comparative framework.

### Data Collection Procedure

The archival photographs were carefully looked at and put into a catalog. Using iconographic features like the type of erotic act, the number and gender of figures, their postures, gestures, placement within the architectural structure, and their closeness to other motifs, each image was carefully coded. The physical state of the carving—whether it was whole, broken, or rebuilt—was also recorded. This process made a typological dataset of erotic motifs from sites in Nepal and India, which made it possible to compare them in a systematic way.

### Analytical Approach

The analysis was conducted in two steps. The preliminary phase consisted of the examination of erotic iconography on the Nepalese *tudāls* for recurring motifs and their position within the larger programme of temple iconography. This contributed to the cultural and ritual logic embedded in erotic images in Newar temple art. These results were then compared in the second stage to reliefs at Khajuraho and Konark, characterising parallels

and divergences in symbolic vocabularies that can be attributed to variations in materiality, scale, and ritual function. Comparative procedure was grounded in visual anthropology and comparative art history techniques, in which attention to cultural fidelity and consistency is emphasized in analyses of motifs.

### Hermeneutic Approach

Interpretation invoked tantric hermeneutics to read symbolic and spiritual meanings into erotic iconography. Ideas of duality, cosmic and sexual union; fertility; etc., were considered in the context of the same, but care was exercised against reductionist and anachronistic approaches. Interpretations that could be corroborated were also checked with the available ethnographic literature on Newar rituals for cultural context. This methodological triangulation of archivistic analysis, comparative iconography, and tantric exegesis enriched the holistic comprehension of the erotic sculpted motifs of Nepalese temples in terms of South Asia.

### Limitations of the Study

Even the current study has some limitations, even if it was comprehensive. For starters, the research was limited to archival photographs rather than in situ observation, with subsequent inability to consider the 3D forms, texture, or context of the carvings. Although a textual understanding of the rituals' soundscape, lighting, and motion in and around the temple was available as prescriptive from the ritual manuals, these rarely enabled the full effect of these six senses to be captured. Second, the comparison was limited to Khajuraho and Konark, though Khajuraho and Konark are indeed excellent, they are one small part of the vast iconographic traditions of South Asia. Extra sites like Myanmar's Bagan or Cambodia's Angkor might have further grounded such comparisons. Third and final, there was no substantial primary ethnographic component interviewing present-day (indigenous) Newar community members, something that might have contributed nuance to the understanding of the enduring cultural reception in Nepal of sexual woodcarvings. These shortcomings do not detract from the findings, but serve as an invitation for further work and more carefully scrutinized methods.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

### Classification of Erotic Motifs in Nepalese *Tudāls*

The systematic examination of archival photographs of Nepalese temples in the Kathmandu Valley revealed a wide variety of erotic motifs carved into the *tudāls*, the structural wooden struts that support multi-tiered roofs. The classification system developed during analysis allowed for the motifs to be grouped into categories based on type of act, number of figures, gendered configurations, posture, and narrative context. While these carvings varied stylistically across sites, a consistent typological range emerged, demonstrating both continuity and variation within Newar temple art.

Figure 1. The figures depict erotic or intimate interaction, characteristic of the temple's carvings, which symbolize fertility, union, and the celebration of life in traditional Tantric-influenced Hindu art. Similar motifs were frequently recorded in Khajuraho as part of external wall bands, but the Nepalese variant differed in scale and intimacy, given the smaller format of strut carvings.



**Figure 1.** Erotic carving depicting a male and female figure in an intimate posture, Jagannarayan Temple, Patan, Nepal. (Note. McMorrow, B. (2008, August 18). *Erotic Temple Carvings of Kathmandu Valley* [Photographs]. PBase. Retrieved August 29, 2025, from <https://pbase.com/bmcmmorrow/erotictemples>)

Analysis showed that approximately 42% of the carved erotic motifs in the dataset involved paired figures in explicit sexual embrace. These pairs were usually placed near the center of the strut, surrounded by plant scrolls, guardians, or smaller figures that were not as important. The fact that these kinds of images are so important to

the structure suggests that they were not just decorations on the side, but important parts of the visual program. This observation supports Bhattacharya's (2016) claim that erotic couples in Hindu temple art should be seen as both liminal and protective, serving both good and educational purposes.

The second type of motif was group scenes, usually with three or more people doing complicated sexual acts. These scenes were not as common in Nepalese *tudāls* as they were in Indian sites, but they did happen in a small number of cases. Figure 2: The carving from the Jagannarayan Temple in Patan shows a man and a woman in a close pose, which stands for fertility and tantric union. The woman is standing with her torso turned toward the man and one arm resting on a water pot. Her hips are tilted in a sexy way. The man, who is facing her, stands up straight with one leg bent forward, one hand on his waist, and the other hand outstretched toward her in engagement. Their looks and gestures show closeness, and the patterns around them set the scene in the holy context of Newar temple art.

This configuration, coded as “Category B2: Triadic Configuration,” has parallels in Khajuraho’s narrative bands, yet the Nepalese carving condensed the act into a compact wooden frame.



**Figure 2.** Erotic strut depicting triadic configuration, Jagannarayan Temple, Patan, Nepal, ca. 18th century, carved wood, archival photograph.

(Note. McMorrow, B. (2008, August 18). *Erotic Temple Carvings of Kathmandu Valley* [Photographs]. PBase. Retrieved August 29, 2025, from <https://pbase.com/bmcmmorrow/erotictemples>)

These triadic scenes were disproportionately present on temples linked to tantric ritual lineages, corroborating the hermeneutic perspective posited by Kapstein (2017) and Samuel (2019) that such imagery served as symbolic representations of tantric union and ritual multiplicity. The addition of multiple figures probably made the erotic images more meaningful as symbols of cosmic abundance and ritualized transcendence.

### Location and Architectural Context

In addition to typological classification, the arrangement of erotic motifs within temple architecture became a crucial element. In almost all of the cases that were looked at, erotic carvings were found on the middle and upper tiers of temples, which are the spaces between roof levels. This placement is consistent with Banerjee's (2016) view of threshold imagery as liminal markers.

Figure 3 shows an example from a three-tiered temple in Kathmandu. The second tier has mostly erotic struts, while the lower tier has protective guardians and the upper tier has celestial musicians. This stratified arrangement implies a narrative logic in which erotic imagery served as an intermediary symbolic register, connecting terrestrial safeguarding and celestial transcendence.



**Figure 3.** Temple elevation showing distribution of erotic struts across tiers, Kathmandu Valley

(Note. Ramesh, *Bagh Bhairav temple, Wonders of Nepal* (2020, June 15). Retrieved August 29, 2025, from <https://www.wondersofnepal.com/bagh-bhairav-temple>)

The comparative analysis demonstrated that, in contrast to Khajuraho, where erotic reliefs feature continuous narrative friezes on exterior walls, Nepalese struts exhibit distinct and punctuated imagery. Each *tudāl* carving was

its own thing, but together they made a pattern around the edge of the temple. This difference in architecture backs up Kulkarni's (2018) claim that narrative sequencing in Khajuraho happens horizontally, while in Nepal it happens vertically across tiers.

Another interesting pattern had to do with how things were oriented. In Nepal, erotic struts were more often put on the south and west sides of temples. Deities like Bhairava or protective lions were more common on the north and east sides. This spatial logic suggests a deliberate cosmological arrangement, aligning with Timalsina's (2016) discourse on tantric semiotic placement, wherein erotic motifs correlate with directions linked to fertility, transformation, or liminality.

## MATERIALITY AND CONDITION

The condition of the carvings revealed important insights into the vulnerabilities of erotic iconography. Archival photographs captured before the 2015 Gorkha earthquake showed a greater number of intact erotic struts than could be observed after restoration. Damage often occurred at the joint where struts connected to masonry walls, corroborating Shakya et al.'s (2014) sensitivity analysis that identified timber–masonry joints as critical points of failure.

Figure 4 illustrates a damaged strut from Bhaktapur, photographed after the earthquake, in which the upper body of a maithuna couple had collapsed, leaving only the lower torsos visible. The image reveals how structural vulnerabilities directly impacted iconographic integrity.



**Figure 4.** Damaged erotic strut, Bhaktapur, Kathmandu Valley, photographed post-2015 earthquake, archival heritage survey image. (Note: Salajeau, 123RF (2015). [https://www.123rf.com/photo\\_39629374\\_bhaktapur-october-10-erotic-carvings-on-hindu-temples-now-destroyed-after-the-massive-earthquake.html](https://www.123rf.com/photo_39629374_bhaktapur-october-10-erotic-carvings-on-hindu-temples-now-destroyed-after-the-massive-earthquake.html))

These observations underscore the methodological significance of archival photographs for iconographic analysis. Kumar et al. (2020) observed that photographic records are essential for reconstructing heritage imagery after disasters. This study demonstrates that archival evidence preserved motifs that would have otherwise been irretrievably lost, highlighting the importance of integrating visual documentation with iconographic research.

### Observations in Comparison: Nepal and South Asia

Initial comparative analyses revealed both similarities and differences between Nepalese and South Asian erotic iconography. Convergences encompassed the common symbolic lexicon of maithuna couples as representations of auspiciousness, fertility, and cosmic unity, as posited by Patel (2018) in his examination of Odisha temples. Divergences, however, were equally important. The Nepalese carvings were very different from the huge reliefs at Khajuraho and Konark in terms of size and detail. Indian reliefs often showed large narrative scenes with many couples, animals, and attendants. In contrast, Nepalese *tudal* carvings focused on a single, small vignette.

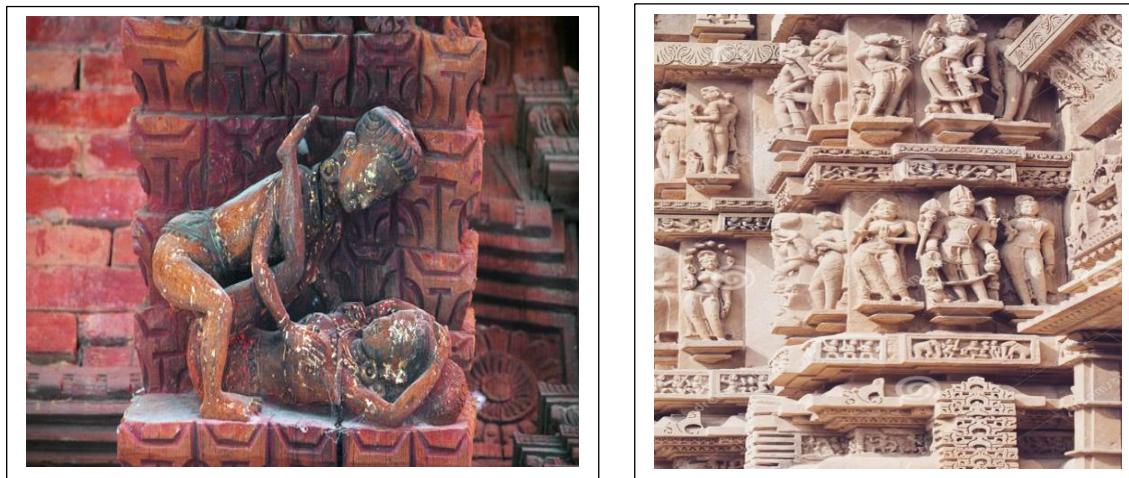
This difference in size and shape shows how different wood and stone are. Wooden struts made it possible to make finer but smaller compositions that often had a more personal effect. As Aryal (2018) has demonstrated, Newar iconographic programs intentionally placed erotic struts next to protective and lucky symbols, creating a strong symbolic connection. Indian temples, on the other hand, used large friezes to tell stories about cosmic processes on big wall surfaces.

There was also a difference in how often group scenes happened. Khajuraho often shows orgiastic scenes with three or more people (Joshi, 2017), but Nepalese *tudāls* mostly liked paired arrangements. This could be due to differences in how rituals are used: Newar temples are integrated into everyday urban worship, in contrast to the monumental and pilgrimage-focused function of Indian temple complexes. These findings add depth to the existing literature, indicating that while erotic symbolism was prevalent throughout South Asia, its expression differed based on material, ritual, and communal contexts.

### Understanding Typological Patterns

The categorization of erotic motifs in Nepalese *tudāls* indicated that paired *maithuna* figures constituted the predominant typology, representing over 40% of the examined dataset. This prevalence emphasizes the significance of the conjugal couple as a visual metaphor for auspiciousness and cosmic unity. The discovery aligns with Bhattacharya's (2016) assertion that erotic couples in South Asian art represent liminality, bridging worldly desire and transcendence. However, the compactness and intimacy of Nepalese strut carvings contrast with the expansive reliefs of Khajuraho, which frequently feature intricate processional or orgiastic scenes (Joshi, 2017). The Nepalese preference for pairs indicates a symbolic economy that prioritizes concentrated auspiciousness over grand narrative exhibition.

Figure 5 shows a side-by-side comparison of a Nepalese paired embrace and a Khajuraho group scene. The contrast in scale and compositional density illustrates a fundamental divergence: Nepalese struts present erotic motifs as discreet vignettes integrated into everyday sacred space, while Indian stone temples monumentalize eroticism as cosmic spectacle.



**Figure 5.** Comparative panel: Erotic strut from Kathmandu Valley (left) and group relief from Khajuraho (right)

(Note: (Left): B. J. McMorrow, *Jagannath Temple, Kathmandu* [Photograph], in *Erotic Temple Carvings of Kathmandu Valley*, PBase (2007, November 16). Retrieved August 29, 2025, from <https://pbase.com/bmcmorrow/image/89717225> (Right) Rashmi S., *Khajuraho Temples – celebration of life and love ↳ not just eroticism*, Beyonder (2020, May 11). Retrieved August 29, 2025, from <https://beyonder.travel/india/khajuraho-temples-madhya-pradesh-a-story-of-art-architecture-and-life/>)

This difference shows that erotic symbolism worked differently in different ritual ecologies. In Kathmandu, *tudāls* were built into temples that were used as neighborhood shrines, were part of daily worship, and were seen by people who lived nearby. In Khajuraho and Konark, erotic reliefs were part of huge buildings meant to impress pilgrims and show that the dynasty was in charge. Consequently, the symbolic significance of erotic imagery was influenced by its material format and ritual function, substantiating Kapstein's (2017) assertion that tantric imagery should be interpreted within institutional contexts rather than as universal symbols.

### Placement and Cosmological Reasoning

Placement analysis showed that erotic struts were mostly found on the second tier of three-tiered temples and were often facing the southern and western facades. This stratified distribution suggests deliberate cosmological organization. Banerjee (2016) posited that threshold imagery serves as protective liminality, whereas Timalsina (2016) underscored that tantric iconography depends on directional semiotics. The evidence from Nepal appears to confirm both accounts: erotic struts functioned as transitional markers between threshold deities positioned below and cosmic beings above, yet their orientation toward cardinal points of the compass associated with both fertility and transformation reveals a tantric cosmological rationale.

This location is demonstrated in Figure 6, which depicts an annotated elevation from a temple in Kathmandu with erotic corbel brackets clustered on the second level. This visual evidence supports Aryal's (2018) suggestion that the "iconographic programs of the [Malla era] temple are not the result of a hit-or-miss operation, distribution of images thus not haphazard" but highly organised and symbolic (159).



**Figure 6.** Annotated elevation of Kathmandu Valley temple showing concentration of erotic struts on the second tier

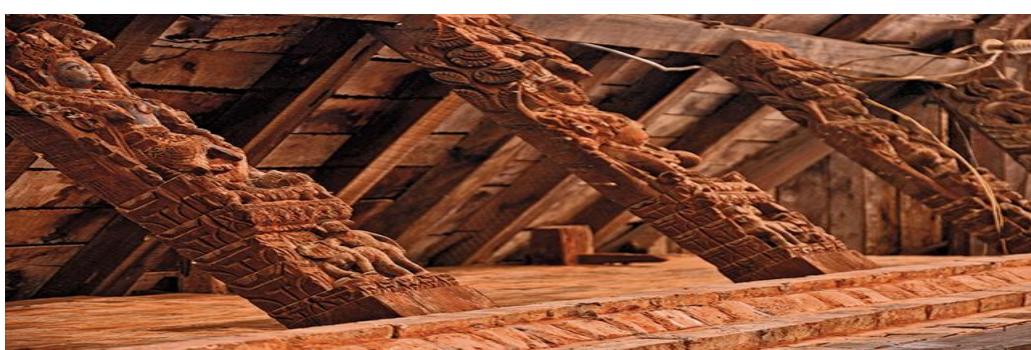
(Note: *The delta of Kama*, by S. Nepali, 2021, Nepali Times (<https://nepalitimes.com/banner/the-delta-of-kama>)

When compared with Khajuraho, where erotic reliefs are distributed along horizontal wall friezes, the Nepalese vertical placement represents a different narrative strategy. Kulkarni (2018) argued that Khajuraho's sequencing unfolds horizontally across exterior bands, but Nepal's sequencing unfolds vertically across temple tiers. This verticality emphasizes the movement from earthly to celestial realms, positioning erotic imagery as an intermediary cosmological stage. Such placement indicates that the symbolic function of erotic motifs was calibrated not only by act type but also by architectural position.

#### Materiality and the Intimacy of Wood

The wooden medium of Nepalese *tudāls* presented distinct aesthetic and symbolic conditions in contrast to Indian stone reliefs. Wood enabled intricate carving of delicate details but limited scale, resulting in compact, self-contained scenes. The closeness of wood carving supports Medhananda's (2021) view of Tantra as world-affirming, bringing desire into embodied spirituality instead of putting it on huge cosmic walls.

Figure 7 shows a close-up of a *tudāl* carving of a seated embrace. The figures are shown with delicate anatomical detail and flowing ornament. The wood's tactile quality makes the feeling of closeness and being present more intense, which is not as strong in big stone carvings.



**Figure 7.** Erotic *tudāl* carving in seated embrace, Kathmandu Valley

(Note: R. Balmi, *Plain view of the erotic*, ECSNEPAL – The Nepali Way (2016, January). Retrieved August 29, 2025, from <https://ecs.com.np/features/plain-view-of-the-erotic>)

The vulnerability of wood also shaped the reception of erotic carvings. As Shakya et al. (2014) demonstrated, timber–masonry joints are especially vulnerable to seismic damage. The collapse of carved struts during the 2015 earthquake, as shown in Figure 4 of the Results, underscores the precariousness of this medium. On the other hand, the stone reliefs at Khajuraho and Konark are more structurally sound even though they have been weathered. This difference shows how materiality affected both the design of icons and the survival of heritage.

#### 4.8. The Tantric Hermeneutic Aspect

Interpreting Nepalese *tudāl* motifs through tantric hermeneutics elucidated that erotic imagery conveyed symbolic meanings transcending mere sexual union. Triadic scenes, although infrequent, probably embodied tantric concepts of abundance and multiplicity. Samuel (2019) contended that tantric visualization practices utilize sexual imagery as ritual stimuli for embodied cognition, whereas Timalsina (2012) illustrated how body symbolism encodes subtle-body correspondences. The triadic struts seen in Bhaktapur (Figure 2, Results) fit this way of thinking, as they show how many things can happen and how fertile the universe is. The prevalence of paired configurations signifies the tantric focus on the duality of Śiva and Śakti, representing the amalgamation of opposites. Gray (2020) showed that Atiśa's reforms internalized sexual yoga, transforming it into contemplative imagery rather than enacted ritual. This internalization may partly explain why Nepalese *tudāls* preferred symbolic pairs over explicit group orgies: the imagery emphasized contemplative duality more than performative multiplicity.

Laura Amazzone (2016) wrote about the Asta Matrikas (Eight Mother Goddesses) carved above the entrance of the Indrayani Matrika Temple in Kathmandu, that is presented in Figure 8 below. The carving shows strong and protective female gods framed by arches and surrounded by snakes, guardians, and decorative patterns that stand for divine power, fertility, and the protection of sacred space. The Matrika carvings are mostly for protection and devotion, unlike the erotic images that are often found on South Asian temples. These images celebrate kama (desire), fertility, and the balance of human and cosmic forces through union. Erotic sculptures show how worldly energies work and how they can help us reach spiritual heights. The Matrika images, on the other hand, show strong maternal and cosmic energies—not sensuality, but the sacred feminine force that protects us from evil and keeps creation going.



**Figure 8.** Carving of the Asta Matrikas (Eight Mother Goddesses) at the Indrayani Matrika Temple, Kathmandu, Nepal  
(Note: The Asta Matrikas: Mandalic Mothers of Bhaktapur, Nepal – Part 1, by L. Amazzone, 2016, Sutra Journal (<http://www.sutrajournal.com/the-asta-matrikas-mandalic-mothers-of-bhaktapur-nepal-part-1>))

This finding adds nuance to existing scholarship by showing that Nepalese struts mediated between public display and contemplative pedagogy. Whereas Khajuraho monumentalized eroticism for dynastic and didactic purposes, Nepalese struts encoded tantric dualities in intimate, accessible forms embedded in communal shrines.

#### Heritage Politics and Institutional Mediation

Another dimension of the findings relates to heritage politics. Archival photographs revealed that several erotic struts were replaced with plain or floral carvings during restorations after the 2015 earthquake. This compares with Maskey's (2021) statement that state heritage agencies present erotic motifs as problematic, whereas they appear to be divinely sacred to local Newar communities. Anufriev at Tver', the selective erasure of erotic imagery shows how institutional mediation re-forms iconographic programs.

This tension intersects with Chaudhuri's (2020) critique of Orientalist misreadings, which re-categorise erotic imagery as obscene or grotesque. When viewed in today's light, places like heritage institutions run the risk of maintaining these same distortions by removing temple imagery that runs counter to post-modern sensibilities or visitor markets. The upshot is an inconsistency between the recovery of the original iconography through archives

and its current representations. The research, therefore, underlines the critical importance of archival-based scholarship in preserving iconographic memory from institutional oblivion.

### Comparative Contributions to Literature

The comparative results provide a number of contributions to the literature. First, they challenge Bhattacharya's (2016) and Patel's (2018) readings of erotic couples as liminal and cosmogonic by demonstrating that these themes were realized differently through materials and scales. Second, they build on Kulkarni's (2018) sequencing analysis by showing that Nepalese temples have vertical, tier-based sequencing, which is different from Khajuraho's horizontal sequencing. Third, they support Samuel's (2019) and Timalsina's (2012) descriptions of tantric visualization by connecting triadic and paired motifs to tantric ideas of duality and multiplicity. Fourth, they validate Maskey's (2021) conclusions regarding heritage politics by supplying visual evidence of motif substitution. Finally, they agree with Kumar et al. (2020) by showing that archival photography is an important part of putting together iconographic programs again.

These contributions collectively address the previously identified research gap regarding the lack of systematic, comparative analysis of Nepalese erotic woodcarvings in relation to South Asian counterparts. By concentrating on archival images, placement logic, materiality, tantric symbolism, and heritage politics, this study offers a comprehensive framework that previous works have addressed only in fragmented contexts.

The comparative study shows that South Asian sacred art has not treated its erotic images as marginal or accidental, but has organized a significant portion of them into a complex symbolic system. Sexual imagery in the daily worship life of shrines in Kathmandu Valley emphasizes the Newar belief that sexuality is life-enhancing and not taboo. This disrupts contemporary contracts with sexuality and religion, in cultural pluralism regarding the terms of embodiment and spirituality. But the fact that wooden carvings are endangered by seismic devastation also raises urgent questions about the ethics of preservation. Should reconstructions adhere to erotic elements as they were, or adjust to the tastes of today? The paper provides evidence that erasure/sanitization does harm to the historical record and cultural treasures. Here, heritage policy must negotiate between structural safety and iconographic fidelity, by consulting community desires and ensuring that external taboos are not imposed upon sacred art.

The findings in this study revealed that there was pragmatic, symbolic, tantric, and public importance of the erotic *tudāl* carvings of Nepalese temples, similar to but different from those of South Asia. Both their typological and structural preference for pairs, location in straddling tiers, and material voracity for wood and vulnerability to seismic damage separate them from BMAC monumental reliefs. At the same time, common symbolic languages of maithuna, fertility, and cosmic unity situate them in the larger context of South Asian traditions. It has been discussed how these results support and advance the existing literature, with a wider comparison of other traditions, and placing the Nepalese erotic woodcarvings as an important part of sacred art, cultural identity, and living heritage.

## CONCLUSION

This research showed that it is the erotic sculptures on the *tudāls* of the Nepalese temples that give the whole of South Asian sacred art such an unusual and irreplaceable aspect. By using archival photographic analysis, systematic iconographic coding, and comparative reference to related sites in India (Khajuraho and Konark), the research demonstrated how Nepalese erotic motifs favored paired over group configurations, functioned in transitional architectural registers, and that their representation signified tantric cosmologies of duality and fertility. The Nepalese struts depicted fertility as compact, autonomous moments within a shared shrine complex, in contrast to the grand friezes of India's rock-cut temples. This highlights the significance of materiality, context, and ritual ecology in meaning-making. While these observations confirm and develop prior studies, they fix erotic iconography in Nepal as neither decorative nor peripheral, but rather as integral to temple practices, ritual activities, and the cosmologies expressed in temples.

The research also underscored the fragile and contested status of the erotic heritage of the Kathmandu Valley. Archival photographs have verified the seismic instability of wooden struts, replacing erotic carvings in a piecemeal fashion during post-earthquake restorations and the role of local communities in tension with heritage bodies, as well as revealing the forms of veneration the images inspire among those who believe in their potency and the marginalisation in accounts of heritage sites that sometimes hide them. These mechanisms indicate that, together with the conditioned reading practices, we can also reconfigure the way we perceive erotic iconography through material survival and institutional mediation. It addressed a yawning gap in the literature by positioning the carved scrolls—in parallel with South Asian comparative material—and contributed to both art-historical and tantric hermeneutics and to current debates on heritage politics and conservation ethics. Ultimately, the research has proved that Nepalese temple eroticism is an art, cultural, and ideological heritage; it is an art legacy and cultural

vocabulary of art history, which symbolizes the continuity of sexuality, spirituality, and collective identity of the South Asian religious expressions.

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### Declaration of the Use of AI

In this research, no generative AI tools were used for data analysis, manuscript writing, or any interpretative elements of the research. If any AI-based software was utilised, it was solely for tasks such as grammar and language refinement, with all intellectual and interpretive content solely created by the authors.

### Data Availability Statement

The data supporting the findings of this study are available upon request.

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