Filming fire rituals in Nepal

Nepal — until recently the only remaining Hindu kingdom in the world — has witnessed profound social and cultural change over the past few decades and political turmoil over the last few years. While the impact of the war between Maoist rebels and the government has been felt in every sphere of Nepalese society, religious rituals modestly and silently continue at the Agni Mahâ Fire Temple, informing by the idea that they guarantee the continuation of the cycle of the sun and the moon, thereby securing human existence on earth.

Bel Gopal Shrestha and
Wendy van Wilgenburg

I n view of the political situation, we were very fortunate to witness and record the installation rituals performed at the Agni Mahâ Fire Temple from 20-26 November 2004, just before the borders were closed due to the state of emergency.

Our filming complemented earlier recordings at the Agni Mahâ Fire Temple in November 1992 when ethnographic filmmaker Dirk Nijland, together with van den Hoek and Shrestha, - following on the work of the late anthropologist Bert van den Hoek (1951-2001) and Bel Gopal Shrestha - filmed the Agni Mahâ ritual, covering all details of the daily morning and evening rituals, the fortnightly darâapûrñamâsa fire sacrifices and the anniversary rituals. It was forecasted that the 1992 footage would be completed with the filming of another important ritual, the installation of new fires and a new priest (yajamâna) following the death of the presiding yajamâna or his wife. Priest Vishnu Jwalananda’s death at the age of 94 on 27 March 2004 was a very unfortunate event for all the experiences and surprises during these recordings.

Fire rituals

Agni (fire) is an important god in the Hindu religion. Especially in the Vedic tradition, fire is considered to be a manifestation of the human world and heaven. Establishing fire implies ‘life, wealth, procreation and continuation of family, clan and lineage’ (Heresterman 1987:26).

In Nepal, Rajopadhyay Brahmins have maintained the cult of fire at the Agni Mahâ Fire Temple for centuries. It is told that a long time ago an old Brahmin couple arrived at the present location of the Agni Mahâ to spend the night. They carried a walking stick which they laid down on the ground before going to sleep. When they woke up the next morning, they saw the stick rooted in the ground sprouting at its top. Witnessing this miracle, the couple thought this was the right place for them to set- tle for the rest of their lives. They started to perform daily fire sacrifices and installed the patâgvis (fire five fires), and it is believed that the Agni Mahâ has existed here ever since. The Rajopadhyay Brahmins in Patan, claiming descent from the couple, assume that the Agni Mahâ in Patan has been there for at least 4,500 years, as researchers found a holy Varuña tree of that age in the temple courtyard.

The daily sacrifices performed in honour of Agni are most commonly known as Agnihotra, and have been preserved until today at the Agni Mahâ in Patan. It is the oldest fire temple in Nepal and one of the most important religious sites in the Kathmandu Valley. The Agni Mahâ temple contains five fires, one burning permanently. The priests in charge of the Agni Mahâ fire temple believe that if the tradition is discontinued the world will come to an end, as would be the case if the sun were to stop shining.

The most important participants in the fire rituals are the agnihotri, or yajamâna, and his wife. Once chosen, they are responsible for keeping the fire burning at the Agni Mahâ and taking care of all daily and fortnightly (darâapûrñamâsa) offerings until one of them dies. Only at the death of the yajamâna, or his wife, are the Agni Mahâ fires discontinued and all five fire hearths broken down.

The new yajamâna is chosen among the elders of each of the six Rajopadhyay lineages in Patan. The elaborate initiation ceremony of the new agnihotri must be completed on the first full moon after the turn of the Nepali New Year in November.

Filming the rituals

In the two weeks before the rituals began, we visited the fire temple in Patan and interviewed the main Brahmin priest. Until the new fire was installed, this temporary fireplace was used for offering fire sacrifices while the newly formed Agni Mahâ Management Committee (AMC) looked after the continuation of the fire rituals at the temple.

As the most senior member of his clan, 88 years old Pandit Kabijananda Rajopadhyay was chosen to be the new priest (agnihotri). Since his physical condition was vulnerable, the Agni Mahâ Management Committee made arrangements permitting him to attend the temple only occasionally, while a representative performed his daily duties.

The first day’s rituals started on 20 November in the morning. On this day the god of architecture Vârakarma was worshipped. During one of the AMC meetings the priests decided to replace the prescribed goat sacrifice with an egg sacrifice. The change was made partly to avoid blood sacrifice and partly to avoid excessive expenses. The priests would have had to organise a feast in which the head of the sacrificed goat was shared among members of the gahi, a socio-religious association of Brahmins associated with the Agni Mahâ.

On the second day of the rituals, 22 November, we recorded the worship of Paõcagabya or the consecration of the five substances of a cow (milk, yoghurt, ghee, urine, and dung). Their mixture is considered holy and is used for ritual purifications.

On 23 November the divine serpent Varuña nágâ was invoked from the river Bagmati at the Samkalâmi confluence. At the riverside, the priests performed a two-hour worship to call upon the divine serpent. An unexpected and heavy shower complicated the flexing, but was interpreted by the priests and audience as a visitable divine visit of the divine serpent. They believe that nágâ, the god of water, brings rain.

25 November, the fourth day of the rituals, was the day of consecrating (o hubkâ) the new priest and his wife. This day is also called Parasanga. Surprisingly, the new priest and his wife did not attend. They were excused because of their old age and were represented by two small wooden statues. On this day, the priests also obtained fire from the sun using an eyeglass – to be safe in case the sun did not appear the next day.

The final day’s rituals (26 November) were the most important as it was the day to churn fire and install a new fire in all five fire altars in the temple, as prescribed in the scriptures. Although it had been announced in preliminary plans, no symbolic churning was carried out. The priests used the lamp they lit from the sunlight the previous day to transmit fire into the fire altar and then to the other altars. The fire in the aha- unosya was so enormous that the paint started to drip from the ceiling and the camera equipment began to melt. ‘Agni is fierce,’ the priests stated. They had to interrupt their worship to let the fire calm down, as they were hit by falling paint and had a hard time breathing due to the thick smoke. This day was called the day of Agi Shadpan, the installation of the deaust fires, and concluded the five days of rituals.

Results and prospects

This was the first time that the installation of a new fire and a new priest at the Agni Mahâ Fire Temple in Patan was recorded completely, together with interviews and footage providing their context. It was also the last time in this form, as the temple management committee decided that with the demise of the present priest, they will only install the new priest without the lengthy and costly procedure of re-establishing the fires.

The recorded footage is about 46 hours in length. Editing the film in the Netherlands took about four months after the 2004 recordings complement the earlier footage from 1994. The latter material will result in three films: parts one and two will deal with two versions of the full moon and new moon (darâapûrñamâsa) rituals; part three is to cover the morning ritual (nûja pûjâ homa), the evening ritual (shat homa) and the anniversary rituals (dusî homa) at the Agni Mahâ while the 2005 film deals with the installation of the new fire, the new priest and his wife at the Agni Mahâ. Together they will give a comprehensive view of a set of Vedic rituals that have been transmitted, adapted and added to over the centuries. The most recent filming, in particular, has captured creative change – change that should ensure continuation of the ritual tradition in a society in profound transition.

References

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