

Stills from the footage, left to right: reciting Sanskrit texts; 'Agni is fierce'; the new priest and his wife.

Wendy van Wilgenburg



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 Agnimaøha, the Vedic fire temple in Patan, informed by the idea that they guarantee the continuation of the cycle of the sun and the moon, thereby securing human existence on earth.

Bal Gopal Shrestha and
Wendy van Wilgenburg

In view of the political situation, we were very fortunate to witness and record the installation rituals performed at the Agnimaøha 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 Agnimaøha 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 Bal Gopal Shrestha – filmed the Agnimaøha rituals, covering all details of the daily morning and evening rituals, the fortnightly *darâapûrñamâsa* fire sacrifices and the anniversary rituals. It was foreseen 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 died at the age of 94 on 27 March 2004.

The team of Bal Gopal Shrestha and visual anthropologist Wendy van Wilgenburg departed for Nepal on 7 November 2004. The following is a short report of our 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 means to link the human world and heaven. Establishing fire implies 'life, wealth, procreation and continuation of family, clan and lineage' (Heesterman 1983: 76).

In Nepal, Rajopadhyay Brahmins have maintained the cult of fire at the Agnimaøha fire temple for centuries. It is told that a long time ago an old Brahmin couple arrived at the present location of the Agnimaøha 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 settle for the rest of their lives. They started to perform daily fire sacrifices and installed the *paðcâgni* or the five fires, and it is believed that the Agnimaøha has existed here ever since. The Rajopadhyay Brahmins in Patan, claiming descent from the couple, assume that the Agnimaøha 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 Agnimaøha in Patan. It is the oldest fire temple in Nepal and one of the most important religious sites in the Kathmandu Valley. The Agnimaøha temple contains five fires, one burning permanently. The priests in charge of the Agnimaøha 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 ritual are the *agnihotrin*, or *yajamâna*, and his wife. Once chosen, they are responsible for keeping the fire burning at the Agnimaøha 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 Agnimaøha fires discontinued and all five fire hearths broken down. The new *yajamâna* is chosen among the elders of each of the six Rajopadhyaya lineages in Patan. The elaborate initiation ceremony of the new *agnihotrin* 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 priests. Until the new fire was installed, this temporary fireplace was used for offering fire sacrifices while the newly formed Agnimaøha 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 Pundit Kabijananda Rajopadhyay was chosen to be the new

priest (*agnihotrin*). Since his physical condition was vulnerable, the Agnimaøha 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 Viâvakarman 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 *guthi*, a socio-religious association of Brahmins associated with the Agnimaøha.

On the second day of the rituals, 22 November, we recorded the worship of *Paðcagabya* 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 nâga was invoked from the river Bagmati at the Samkhamul confluence. At the riverbank, the priests performed a two-hour worship to call upon the divine serpent. An unexpected and heavy shower complicated the filming, but was interpreted by the priests and audience as a veritable visit of the divine serpent. They believe that *nâga*, the god of water, brings rain.

25 November, the fourth day of the rituals, was the day of consecrating (*abhicæka*) the new priest and his wife. This day is also called *Purvânga*. 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 *âhavanîya* 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 *Agni sthâpanâ*, the installation of the *ârauta* 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 Agnimaøha 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 *yajamâna*, they will only install the new priest without the lengthy and costly procedure of re-installing the fires.

The recorded footage is about 46 hours in length. Editing the film in the Netherlands is the next step. Recited texts in Sanskrit and Newar are being translated into English and the footage will be cut back to 90 minutes. If all goes well, the film will be finished by the end of 2007.

As stated earlier, the 2004 recordings complement the earlier footage from 1992. 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 (*nîtya pûjâ homa*), the evening ritual (*ârati homa*) and the anniversary rituals (*busâ daà*) at the Agnimaøha, while the 2004 film deals with the installation of the new fire, the new priest and his wife at the Agnimaøha. 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. ◀

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