

March 2009

Blind Faith



Dwarfed by the multiple arms of Shiva, sixteen year old, Babu clambered up the wobbly bamboo scaffolding with consummate ease and began to mould clay into the beautiful effigy of Saraswati. This was the largest manifestation of the Hindu Goddess of Learning I had seen yet as I wandered through the frenetic, narrow streets of Barabazar. As another of India's devotional festivals reached its climax, row upon row of the Goddess lined the streets and courtyards of Calcutta.

Some were so large and ornate they had to be mounted on truck beds, bound for wealthy suburban homes, private schools and corporate head offices. Others were commercially moulded, barely a foot tall and tucked under the arms of Hindu pilgrims running to catch the bus home.

The day of the festival itself was a peaceful family affair right up until dusk when raucous processions took Saraswati for immersion in the river where her clay and straw body was returned to nature. It was a beautiful and hypnotic visual story of religious faith, which never fails to capture the imagination and spirit of Indian culture.

Photographing such faith would prove to be a task of several lifetimes given the number of Gods in Hinduism alone. Momentous religious gatherings in the Indian subcontinent, Tibet, Mexico and Japan have all left an indelible mark on my consciousness, but however inspiring or heady they proved to be, I have found the personal celebration of faith or Puja, a much more enduring and intriguing visual adventure. Across the world, people of all faiths quietly go about the business of fervent prayer and spirit invocation in public and private while the cacophony of life continues all around them.



Often, I have been invited to participate or photograph such activities knowing that I may not be a Muslim, Hindu Christian or Buddhist. I suppose that I shouldn't have been surprised at this acceptance given the common link between all faiths, which is not always at the forefront of peoples' agenda. Being judgemental or voyeuristic in your approach to photographing such events will almost certainly lead to closed doors and illustrates the antagonism we see on so many occasions when photography, travel and religion come together.

Some would say that Japanese photographer, Kazuyoshi Nomachi took his passions to the extreme in such a pursuit; After spending the early part of his career in advertising, he embarked on a series of photographic journeys to the Sahara, Ethiopia and Tibet, all of which became inextricably linked with religion. So much so that, to understand and gain access to Islam, he became a Muslim and spent the next five years photographing the great annual 'Hajj' pilgrimage to Mecca & Medina. His images reflect this devotion to his craft and that of the pilgrims.



Devotion to any cause takes on a life of its own and the belief is tantamount to religious - just look at photographers themselves !. This was supremely demonstrated by the photography and subjects of Zed Nelson's seminal project, Gun Nation, an absorbing portrayal of gun owners in America, which took three years to complete. It also highlighted the relationship between faith and conflict on a wider scale, which has always existed and despite the inherent dangers, continues to attract photographers like moths to light.

Considerably more light hearted but no less serious are Caribbean carnivals, the worship of Robbie Burns in Russia, and the Laughing Clubs of India, which promote the cure of all ills, including Asthma, Frozen Shoulder and Prolapsed

Uterus, through Yogic laughter. Faith is first and foremost a celebration of the inner spirit and a sense of belonging, and consequently lends itself to a more positive approach in travel photography.

I remember a small group of photographers arriving early morning some years ago at the beautiful ancient city temples of Polonnarurawa in Sri Lanka only to find one particularly important series of carved stone Buddhist statues completely covered in scaffolding. They stayed only a few minutes muttering under their tripods then left. In their wake came a line of thirty pilgrims in orange robes deep in prayer and oblivious to the practicalities of preservation. That was worth photographing.

In 2007, I was asked to compile an exhibition of images for my local arts centre as part of a national project on Art & Islam. I had never set out to photograph Islamic subject matter, but soon realised that I had numerous images on file to choose from. The exhibition and subsequent feedback conjured up many memorable encounters from playing football with theology students and visiting the graves of martyrs in Iran to sharing mint tea and the silence of the desert with tribal Tuareg in North Africa.

It is not surprising to discover that these kind of stories have appeared frequently in my previous columns, so ingrained is religion into societies and cultures, that by simply documenting everyday life, I had invisibly captured a little piece of complex and invigorating belief systems. Faith and religion will always be topical and frequently controversial subjects in life and photography. Even for those of us who remain agnostic or atheist, taking the time to communicate some of the simple truths and realities of religion will go along way in helping us all understand just a little bit more.

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Pilgrimage by Kazuhoshi Nomachi

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