

Exhibition at the OCHS: 17 Jun—21 Jun 2019

# Śākta TRADITIONS



A RECOGNISED INDEPENDENT CENTRE OF THE UNIVERSITY OF OXFORD



## *The Path of Śakti*

Photographic portraits by Prema Goet.

*The Path of Śakti –  
India and Nepal*

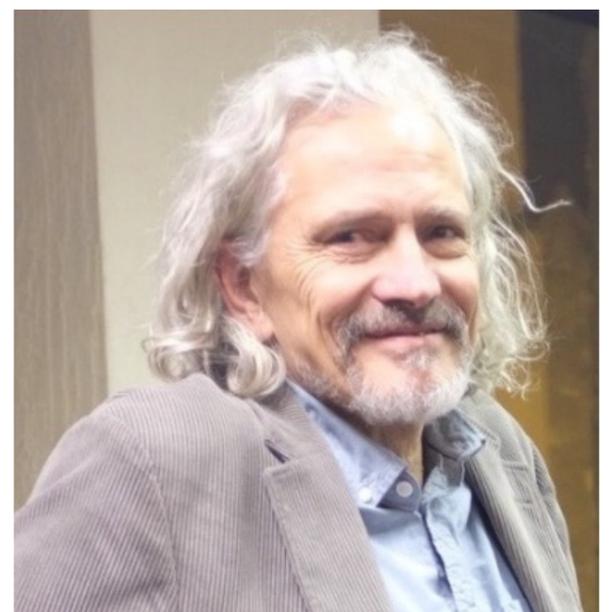
A Visual Story-Telling

Prema Goet is a multi-disciplinary researcher whose main interest lies in the culture and languages of South Asia. He holds a Bachelor's degree in South Asian Studies and Sanskrit from SOAS, University of London where he also obtained his Master's degree in Philosophy and Religion (Traditions of Yoga and Meditation). His interests focus mainly, though not exclusively, on performative ritual practices from across different traditions of South Asia. Prema has worked with various practitioners from the region (India, Nepal and Bangladesh), documenting and producing various ethnographic works on tantric rituals, the worship of Goddess(es), yogic practices etc. ([www.premagoet.com](http://www.premagoet.com)). Prema has also produced various audio documentaries for music and songs performed by the practitioners he worked with. He is currently a documentary researcher for the Sākta Traditions project at the OCHS and soon to embark on yet another field-research trip to India and Nepal.



Chris Dorsett, Professor of Fine Art, Northumbria University.

The exhibition is supervised by Professor Chris Dorsett. Chris Dorsett is an artist whose career has been built on curatorial partnerships with collection-holding institutions. In the UK, he is best known for a sequence of exhibitions held at the Pitt Rivers Museum between 1985 and 1994. His many overseas projects include museum 'interventions' across the Nordic region and fieldwork residencies in the Amazon and at the walled village of Kat Hing Wai in the New Territories of Hong Kong. He has also published extensively on the interface between experimental art practices and the museum/heritage sector.



## The Path of Śakti – India and Nepal

### A Visual Story-Telling

The Path of Śakti exhibition was born out of the desideratum to create a visual story-telling document for the Śākta Traditions Project at the OCHS. This small exhibition is part of a larger documentary film project about the worship of the Goddess(es) and its various manifestations. These 23 photographs were shot in India and Nepal between 2018 and 2019. The photographs taken in Nepal depict the Ajimā Jatra festivities at the Naradevī temple in Kathmandu while the rest of the exhibition is about a particular group of aghorīs in Kāmākhyā and at Allahabad. The Ajimā Jatra photographs presented in this exhibition shows the faces of four of the ajimās – ancestral female deities of the Newarī people. Some of the photographs you are about to see were made at the cremation grounds in the hills of Kāmākhyā temple during the Ambubachi Mela in Northeastern state of Assam – India. They are about one particular group of 30 or so Aghorīs whom had taken a 72 hour journey (each way) by train from Chennai to Kāmākhyā in order to attend the annual celebration of the menstrual-period of the Goddess. The group (which included, women, transgenders – male to female and one child) were led by Manikandan Aghorī or “Guruji” as they called him. The cremation grounds where they camped and performed their rituals were shared with other groups of aghorīs from a different lineages – one of these were the aghorīs descending from Gorakhnāth of the Nāth Saṃpradāya. Although they “shared” the grounds with the Nāth aghorīs, they rarely mixed with each other and at times I was told, by this group, that they are the *true* Aghorīs. Unfortunately I could not establish their paramparā or lineage and was only given the information that they were “the true Aghorīs” (this is, as in opposite to the Nāth aghorīs, pejoratively speaking). Manikandan Aghorī kindly gave me full permission to film, photograph and record their rituals in any shape or form I wanted. Some of these photographs is about the sequence of rituals that took place over a period of four nights. Here is a short description of the rituals and its environment:

Each and every ritual took place at night time, never during the day, hence why all photographs are either too dark or too grainy – I never use flash. In one occasion (second day) there were two rituals, one at 8:00pm and the usual one at midnight, this was because a human corpse was brought in. All the other rituals were performed at midnight of each subsequent day. The first and second night consisted in silent mantra japa recitation for one hour or so. The men sat in cross legged position next to each other and around the triangular shape sacrificial fire or dhuni. I was informed that although the triangular shape around the sacrificial fire represented Brahmā, Viṣṇu and Śiva (in this particular order) it also represented the yoni – female genital of the Goddess and simultaneously a Kālī yantra. This triangle was layered with three different triangles, one inside the other. The smaller triangle on the top represented Brahmā, the middle layer between the small and the larger triangle represented Viṣṇu and the outer and larger triangle represented Śiva. A triśūl (Śiva's trident) was placed on each angle of the three layered triangle. During the yajña a small metal Kālī deity was placed on the top layer of the triangle, facing South and in front of a larger triśūl which hung a necklace of human skulls (eleven in total). A small metal liṅgam was placed facing East and various items such as grains and flowers were placed on the other angles of the triangles. The necklace of human skulls rested on a larger triśūl which was placed opposite to where Manikandan Aghorī sat. Manikandan only participates in parts of the yajña. First the men muttered mantras using japa-mālā(s) and various mudrās and only then, after one hour or so, Manikandan Aghorī would come in and take a seat and perform the offerings. The human skull necklace was placed on his neck before the recitation of mantras and was taken off him and placed back on the triśūl after he had finish his part of the yajña. This very process was repeated every night and to each subsequent night an additional act was added. The third and fourth night animals were slaughtered. First, two chickens and one small goat were sacrificed and then a pig. The conclusion of the yajña would always end with the 30 men or so playing a double-sided drum (damru) all together. On the third night charity was also given to the poor and widows. Manikandan and his group (mainly Kinnaras at this stage) distributed packs with brand new saris, each containing notes of 100 Rupees and a few other items to each women who came forward. A long-ish queue was formed to collect the gifts and all of the women were given blessings by Manikandan and his Kinnara disciple – Rowdi Mā, as they collected their packs of goodies. In one of the photos a sword can be seen, I decided to photograph it as I did not shoot the actual killing of the goat or the chickens, I turned my face away as I heard the crying of the goat. Its head was left on the ground for a while but the body was placed in the space inside the yoni and fire was lit as Manikandan Aghorī poured oblations onto it – alcoholic beverage, flowers, grains and other items. This lasted for about two hours or so and in the midst of it one could see occasional fights between the drunken crowd, people being possessed by spirits and other unknown practices, such as the one with the aid of a syringe and needle. Included in this exhibition is also a photograph of slaughtered cockerels at Dakṣinkālī in Nepal.

As small as it may be, *The Path of Śakti* exhibition aims to give its viewers a visual glimpse into the universe of the Goddess-worshipping rituals and practices of these two particular Śākta groups – in Nepal and India. The varieties in which the worship of the Goddess takes shape are far too many for the scope of this small exhibition but we are aiming to broaden visual scholarship in this field with the forthcoming feature film documentary under the same topic and name. We hope you enjoy the exhibition.

I would like to express my gratitude to everyone at the OCHS who supported and encouraged me in doing this work. A special thank you to Prof. Chris Dorsett who kindly and laboriously worked in setting up this exhibition.



*Siṃhinī*

*The lioness—siṃhinī—is one of the Ajimā(s) of the Newarī culture. The ajimās (meaning great grandmother) are the mythical female ancestors of the Newarī people. During the Ajimā Jatra, the Goddesses and their attendants enter the bodies of the dancers in order to be worshiped and to bestow blessings on the devotees. Prior to the rituals of possession, the possessed-to-be imbibes alcoholic beverages of the strongest kind. During the procession of the ajimās, each of the Goddesses have body-guards and are often restrained by Nepali strongmen. Kathmandu 2019.*



*Simhini touched by a devotee as a sign of reverence and devotion. Kathmandu 2019.*



Rudrāyaṅī  
The person possessed by Rudrāyaṅī being held by four men during the Ajimā Jatra. Kathmandu 2019.



*Indrāyaṇī*  
*Indrāyaṇī making her way through the procession during the Ajimā Jatra. Kathmandu 2019..*



*Cockerels*

*Slaughtered cockerels and un-castrated male goats are the main animals sacrificed at the Dakṣinkālī temple in Nepal. These ready to be de-feathered fowls, contrary to the Aghorī practices, are then prepared and consumed by the devotees. Dakṣinkālī, Nepal 2019..*



Vyāghriṇī  
The tigress Ajimā is often accompanied by the Lioness. Kathmandu 2019.



*Animal Heads*

*The head of animals offered to Naradevi at the very end of the Ajimā Jatra. Nepal 2019*



*Goddess Kālī And Her Gang*

*Street performers enacting the goddess Kālī as she stands atop Mahādeva. During the Ambubachi Mela, street performers and pilgrims intermingle with each other in an exchange somewhere between deep devotion and cheesy entertainment. The festivities at Kāmākhyā during this time of the year are also a great opportunity for performers, peddlers and beggars to make some extra cash. A photo opportunity with the Goddess herself, in flesh and bone, and her male counterpart is not an everyday event – that is, provided you throw in some cash to the all-possessing Lady-ship. Kāmākhyā, Assam 2018.*



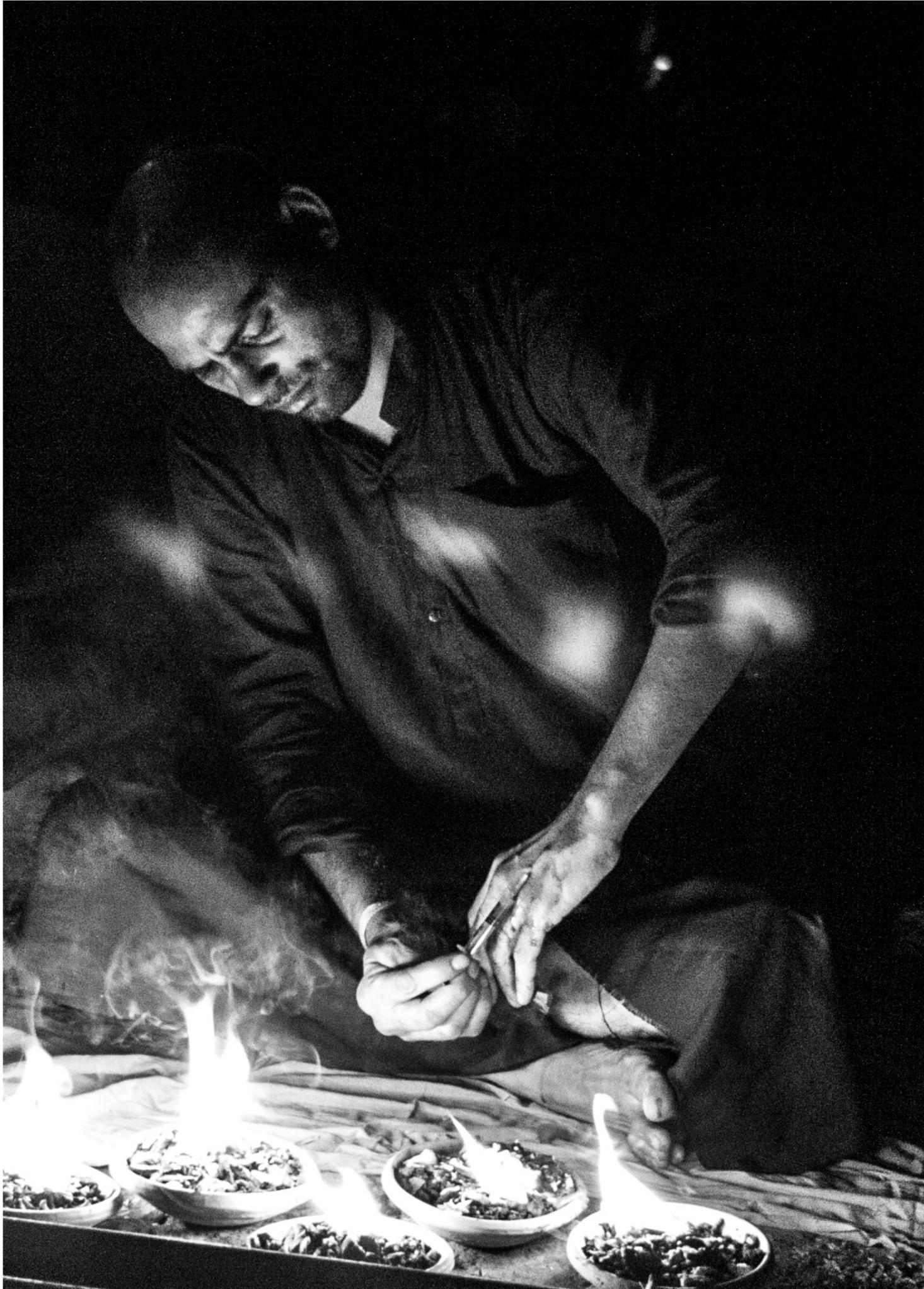
*The Guardian*

*Prior to and after the ritual, a sort of guardian would generally sit by the kapāla necklace. During this time the neck-lace of human heads rests on a trident on the southern part of the threefold yoni. Sometimes the curious would innocently attempt to go near it – only to be shouted at by a bunch of angry aghorīs. Kāmākhya, Assam 2018.*



*Fire on the Head*

*On the third night of the Ambubachi Mela I saw this individual sitting nearby a corpse. This was about two to three meters away from where Manikandan Aghorī and his followers had their rituals. He had five small clay pots aflame resting on his body. I observed him for a while before taking these photos. I asked the aghorīs I was with about what this person was doing and no one seemed to know (at least they weren't willing to make anything up on the spot, although this usually seems to be a common practice). Kāmākhya, Assam 2018.*



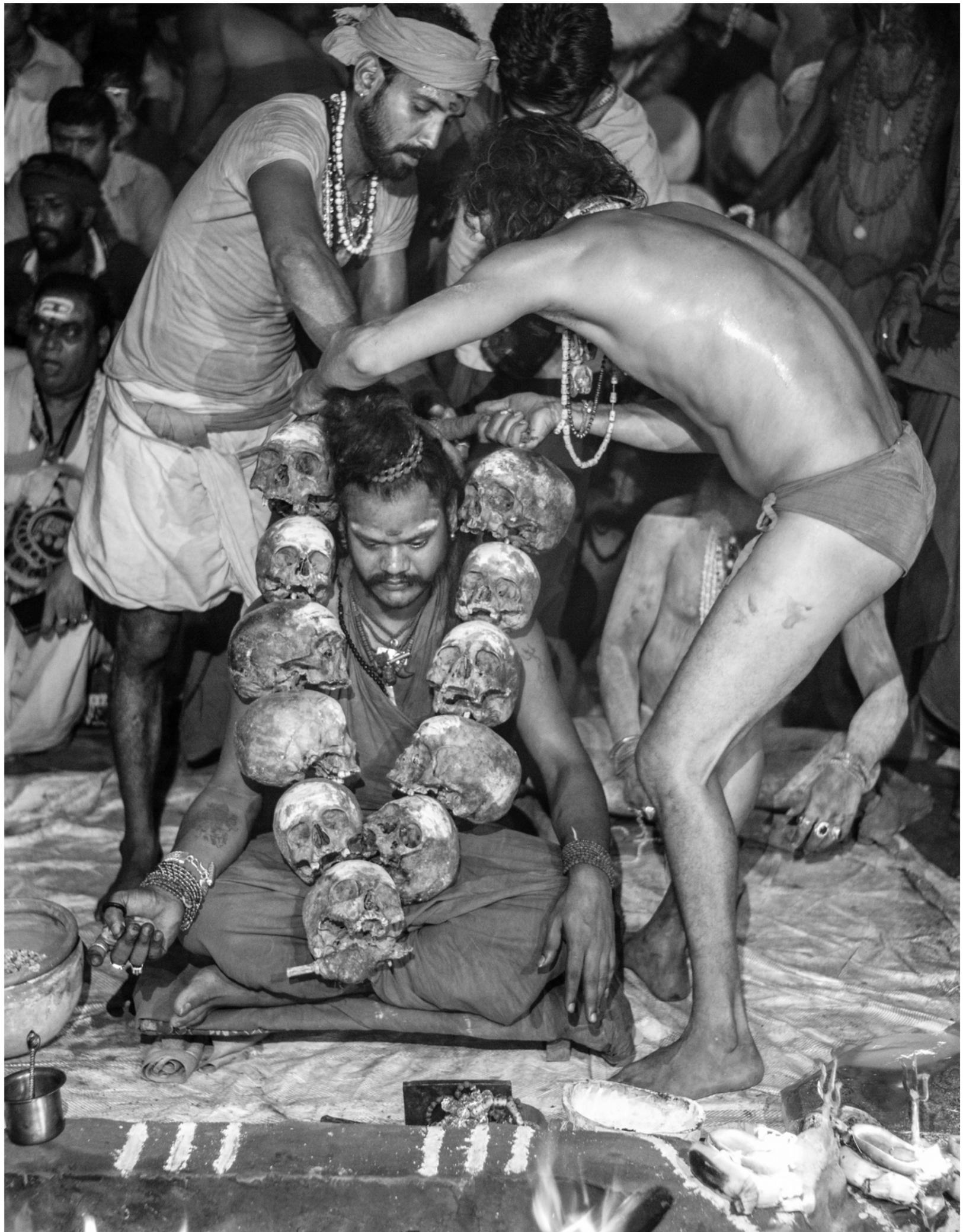
*Blood in the Fire*

*The aghorīs themselves seemed quite perplexed with what was going on before their eyes, so for a while we observed this man. It was only when he grabbed a syringe from his pocket and stuck its needle into his hand that I began taking some photos. The blood that dripped from his hand was carefully poured onto the fire of the clay pots and then placed back on his body. No one in Kāmākhya seemed to know what this was about and since he seemed quite angry with the people around him, I decided not to interact. At the end of his practice, he took the needle out and threw it just one of two meters away from where he was sitting. Kāmākhya, Assam 2018.*



*Obsession and Devotion*

*Manikandan Aghorī, here seen holding a pack of tobacco with his well-adorned hand, is like any other spiritual master in India—affectionately referred to as “guruji” by his disciples and friends. This photograph was taken at around 2:30am at the very end of a Kālī pūjā that had started at midnight. The almost pitch-dark environment made it extremely difficult to shoot. The only source of light available then was the fire used for the sacrificial oblations. Half kneeling on the ground, Pradeep Aghorī, offers his respects to guruji with great awe and reverence while his fellow aghorī peers end the pūjā by blowing the conch-shell and playing the drums. Kāmākhya, Assam 2018.*

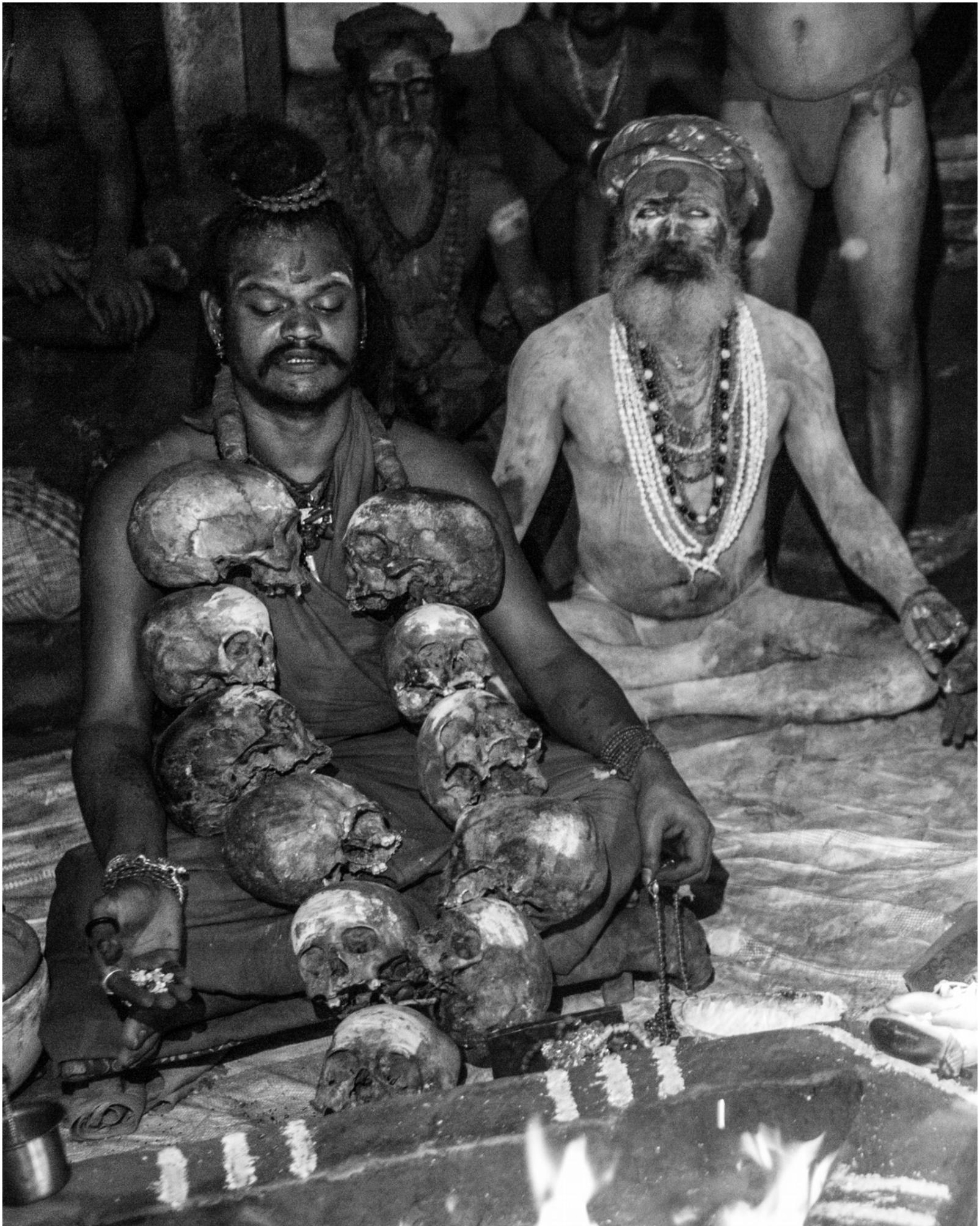


In the Beginning  
Manikandan Aghorī bedecked with a kapāla necklace by his disciples at the very beginning of the ritual.  
Kāmākhya, Assam 2018.



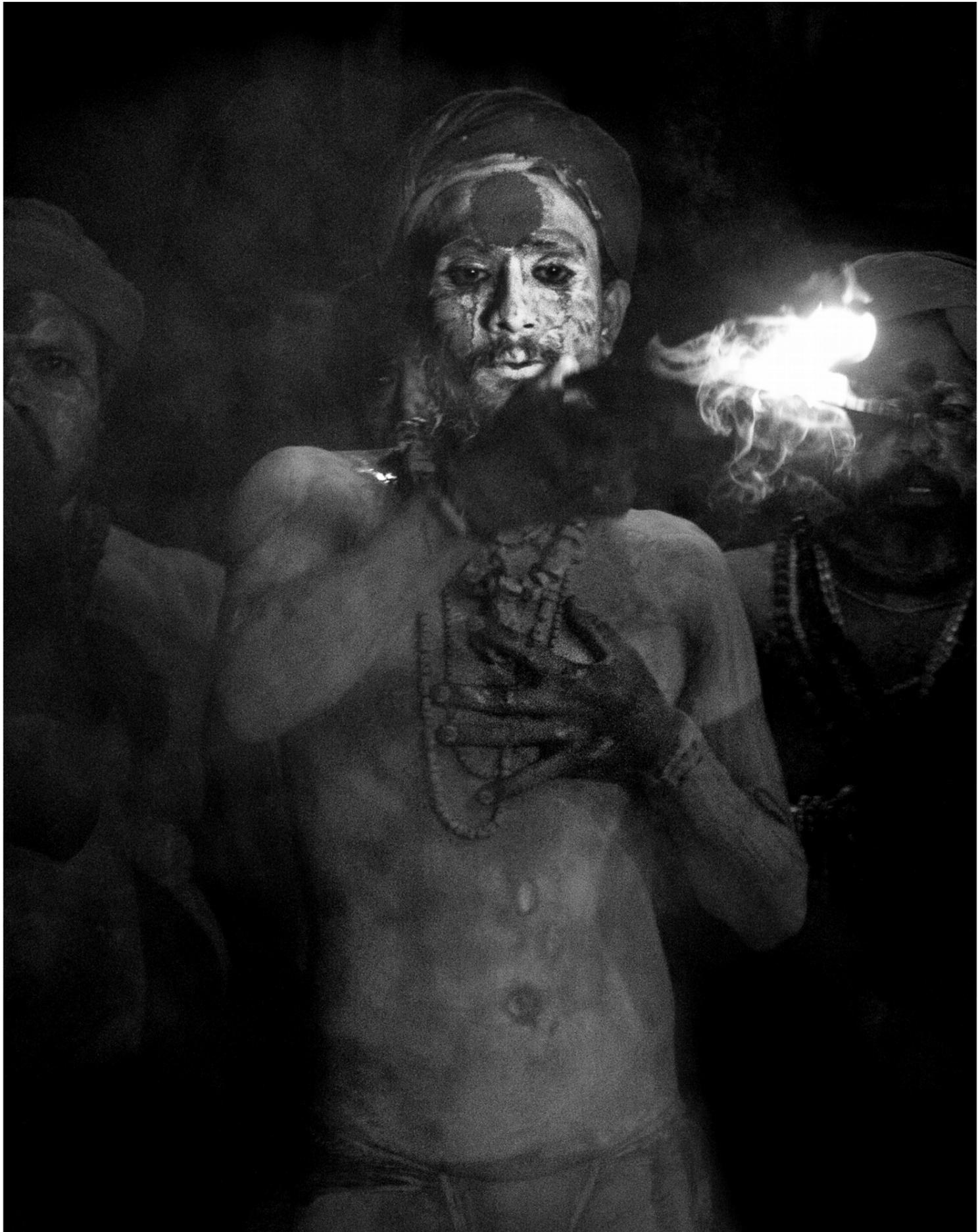
#### The Ritual

The aghorī ritual begins soon after the kapāla is placed on Manikandan Aghorī's neck. Mantras, mudrā(s), prāṇāyāma(s) and oblations are performed in order to invoke the presence of the Goddess. Manikandan's disciple, sitting on his left (from Manikandan's perspective) then becomes possessed. Manikandan then serves as the intermedium between the possessed man and the ritual officiant, Ṛṣi. Kāmākhya 2018.



The Possessed

Parakāya-praveśa—spirit possession—is an important part of this ritual. Without the possession and the possessed, the ritual cannot happen as it implies that the Goddess is herself present in the body of the possessed. Kāmākhya 2018.



*The Ritual Officiant*

*R̥ṣi, the ritual officiant, is one of Manikandan's closest disciples, and is here seen offering a diipa to the Goddess. Kāmākhyā 2018.*



*The Sword*  
*Ṛṣi, the ritual officiant and his recently used sword. Kāmākhya 2018.*



*The Offerings*

*Goats, especially the single-coloured ones, are most favoured by the Goddess. After the goat is killed by a sword, its head is placed in front of the yoni and its whole body placed inside it, whereby it is then consumed by the fire. Kāmākhya 2018.*



*Manikandan Aghorī*  
*Manikandan Aghorī performing Kālī pūjā. Allahabad 2019..*



*Manikandan Aghorī One*  
Manikandan Aghorī performing Kālī pūjā. Allahabad 2019.



*Rowdi Mā*

*Rowdi Mā, Manikandan's "right-hand" person, commands a sub-sect of the aghorīs in the Kinnara Akhāra. Here she stands next to him offering her prayers to the Goddess. Allahabad 2019.*



*The Kinnara Devotee Receiving Blessings  
Bhavanī Mā, the head of the Kinnara Akhāra from Mahā Mandaleśvara, receives the aghora pūjā remnants from one of Manikandan's disciples. Allahabad 2019.*



Jay Kālī Mātā, Jay Kāmākhya Māī  
The Aghora ritual ends with chants and loud drums. Kāmākhya 2019..



