

Yoga

The term "yoga" stands for methods of meditation, austerities, and related technologies of the self (in the Foucaultian sense) that were developed within ascetic milieus and religions of South Asia since around 500 BCE (Mallinson and Singleton 2017). Between the second half of the 19th century and the 1930s yoga was revitalised and radically transformed under the influence of foreign concepts and practices that had entered British India. These modern forms of yoga rapidly spread all over the globe and became increasingly independent from their historical origins.

Why should yoga – a booming sector of today's global culture – get an entry within a dictionary of contemporary esotericism? Everyone who knows the field would agree that only a small minority of yoga practitioners define their practice and worldview as "occult" or identify with Western, Eastern or whatever form of "esotericism".

Nevertheless, some ongoing discourses both inside and outside academia connect "esotericism/occultism" with modern yoga. One can differentiate between five socio-cultural contexts:

1. The historiography of modern yoga; 2. Contemporary yoga movements that call themselves esoteric and/or are connected to historical currents called esoteric; 3. The use of the terms esotericism and occultism in polemics against yoga; 4. Yoga within magical groups; 5. Yoga as part of late modern occulture.

This entry elaborates on these contact zones between the shifting semantics of esotericism/occultism and yoga.

1.

In her pioneering book on the historiography of modern yoga, Elisabeth De Michelis discussed the influence of western esotericism on one of the founding figures of modern yoga, Swami Vivekananda, and other members of the Hindu reform movement Brahmo Samaj (De Michelis 2004). Today it is beyond any doubt that the emergence and popularisation of modern yoga was influenced by currents that are usually subsumed under the notion of esotericism or occultism on one hand and modern physical culture (that in some cases had occult leanings) on the other hand.

Theosophy, itself a hybrid of diverse Euro-American currents and South Asian religions, was the first movement that popularised yoga on a worldwide scale. In 1881 the mastermind of the Theosophical Society, Helena P. Blavatsky (1831-1891), wrote:

For six years now, we have been publicly asserting that Indian Yoga was and is a true science, endorsed and confirmed by thousands of proofs; and that [...] the true Indian Yogis may still be found when the right person seeks in the right way. That these affirmations should be challenged by Europeans was only to be expected, inasmuch as neither modern Europe nor America had so much as heard of the one thing or the other until the Theosophists began to write and speak.
(Blavatsky 1982, 105)

Historians of modern yoga affirmed that this statement albeit somewhat exaggerated contains some historical truth (cf. Singleton 2013, 41). Not only the praise of yoga as an occult science, but also the theosophical interpretations of it as well as translations and

commentaries on Sanskrit yoga texts written by theosophical authors and printed by theosophical publishing companies gained influence all over the world and not least on the South Asian founders of modern yoga. Quite a few of these texts are still in print.

2.

A direct offspring of theosophy is Agni Yoga (literally "fire yoga", also called Living Ethics) – a still enduring movement founded by theosophist Helena Ivanovna Roerich (1879-1955) and her husband the painter Nicolas Roerich (1874-1947). The Roerichs claimed that Helena channeled the teachings of Agni Yoga from none other than the legendary Master Morya who was famously the teacher of Mdm. Blavatsky. Besides theosophical sources the Roerichs knew the writings of Vivekananda and of Ramacharaka/Atkinson (more about these authors below). It is difficult to reconstruct the yoga practice that they taught. Following Anita Stasulane it was comprised of purifying exercises for body and mind, the imaginative use of colour and sound to transform consciousness, and the fiery transmutation of the whole person by awakening the so-called *cakras* (see below) within the body (Cf. Stasulane 2017). Around 1925 this yoga was institutionalised through the foundation of an Agni Yoga Society. Agni Yoga groups are active today in the successor states of the USSR, Europe, and the USA.

The South Asian neo-Hindu yoga movements that triggered global modern yoga only rarely call their teachings and practices "esoteric" or "occult" although they were influenced by Mesmerism, theosophy and new thought (De Michelis 2004). Because of his famous speeches at the World Parliament of Religions in Chicago in 1893, Swami Vivekananda (1863-1902) became the most famous representative of Hinduism in the

USA. His successful Hindu missionary work was based on proclaiming yoga as being key to anything occult and mystical, the rational base of all religion, a science of the inner world that leads to paranormal powers, and the realisation of the divine ground of all being through empirically proven methods. With his influential *Raja Yoga* (1896) and other works, he mirrored a widespread occultist concept of religion.

Subsequently, many new thought authors became very interested in yoga (Jackson 1975). One of them, William Walker Atkinson (1863-1832), wrote internationally successful yoga books under the pseudonym of Swami Ramacharaka. His orientalising mixture of new thought concepts (partly influenced by Vivekananda), mesmerism, and modern American physical culture were often read as traditional South Asian wisdom.

The aforementioned Euro-American currents also had an impact on the next generation of South Asian leaders of neo-Hindu yoga movements, e. g. Paramahansa Yogananda (1893-1952) who founded the Self-Realization Fellowship in 1920 in the USA. This organisation is active to the present day in several parts of the world. Yogananda's *Autobiography of a Yogi* (1946) became one of the most read yoga books of the 20th century. In line with Vivekananda and his own guru Sri Yukteswar (1855-1936), he propagated yoga as a scientific method leading to a direct encounter with ultimate reality. Sri Yukteswar's *Kaivalya Darsanam: The Holy Science* (1894) is influenced by Western astrology and fringe science speculations about electricity and magnetism. His interpretation of traditional South Asian religion uses the concepts of occult sciences and the astral body. Yogananda continued these lines of thought.

Several aspects of the worldview propagated by the Self-Realisation Fellowship resemble the Theosophical Society, e.g. the fact that the founder of their line of yoga is considered to be Mahavatar Babaji, a legendary yogi who is said to live in the Himalayas since several hundred years and to have achieved the power to materialise himself wherever he chooses. Through these and other qualities, Babaji would fit very well into the White Brotherhood of theosophical masters. In all likelihood, this figure manifests a confluence of theosophical ideas and related South Asian traditions.

Yogananda emphasises a positive relationship between his yoga and Christianity and tries to substantiate this relation through what he calls an "esoteric interpretation" of the bible that reveals an immutable divine truth that lies hidden beyond the literal meaning of the biblical texts. In a similar way he speaks of the immutable science of uniting the soul and the Divine spirit as the "esoteric essence of yoga" (Yogananda 2002, 424).

The Romanian yoga teacher Gregorian Bivolaru (1952-) was initially inspired by the writings of Mircea Eliade as well as Romanian translations of Yogananda and other South Asian gurus of modern yoga. He began practicing and teaching yoga within the communist regime due to which he was subject to suffer from severe repression. After the revolution, in 1990, Bivolaru founded M.I.S.A. (Mișcarea de Integrare Spirituală în Absolut, „Movement of Spiritual Integration into the Absolute”), a kind of neo-tantric cult. M.I.S.A was very successful in the post-Ceauscescu period and eventually became an international movement (cf. Thejls 2015). Its Danish branch is called Natha Yoga School. In 2016 Bivolaru was arrested in France and then imprisoned in Romania as a result of sexual abuse charges.

In his teachings, Bivolaru mixes elements from tantric Shivaism and the 1960s sexual revolution, exercises from modern postural yoga, and initiation into a number of cosmic forces through meditation. They also comprise elements of orthodox Christianity and UFO speculations as well as the conspiratorial idea that Freemasonry is the source of all the evils of the modern world. The internet address of M.I.S.A. (www.yogaesoteric.net) shows that the movement conceives itself as a kind of esoteric yoga. According to the homepage of the US branch (<http://usyoga.net/>), the term "esoteric yoga" signifies that Bivolaru's yoga is not just stretching, but a spiritual science that covers the development of all dimensions of human life.

Another kind of contemporary yoga with roots in the theosophical current is Esoteric Yoga, a method based on gentle body movements and the experience of stillness in silent meditation. Esoteric Yoga is part of Universal Medicine, a holistic healing system and religious organisation that was founded in 2000 by Australia-based Serge Benhayon (1964-). Benhayon is influenced by Mdm. Blavatsky and by theosophical dissident Alice Bailey. He claims to offer an updated version of their work and older esoteric teachings for the present time.

3.

Conservative and Evangelical Christian writers tend to criticise yoga as a form of "Hindu occultism", "esotericism", or "New Age religion". Esotericism and occultism in this case indicate a deviance from the true Christian religion or even a fatal connection with the forces of evil that threaten humanity (cf. Lawson 2013). Although this discourse is more or less limited to certain Christian milieus it may be one of the reasons why members of

the recent yoga community do not like to be associated with esotericism. Especially since the "Take back Yoga" campaign launched by the Hindu American Foundation (HAF) in 2008, the question of whether yoga is necessarily linked to Hinduism or more generally to religion and spirituality became an oft-discussed topic within the anglophone yoga world (Ferretti 2012). Many followers of yoga (and especially long-term practitioners and teachers) tend toward the kind of individualistic, experiential, and syncretistic "mystical religion" that sociologist Colin Campbell once called "the secret religion of the educated class" (Campbell 1978). They do not or only occasionally participate in an organised religion, but share a widespread attitude that considers the experience of union with god or the divine as the highest goal of every religion and prefer the non-duality between the world and the divine over against types of religious thought that emphasise the separation of the two (cf. Hasselle-Newcombe 2005). Sometimes, e. g. in the Christian circles mentioned above or in the writings of Yogananda, the term "esotericism" is used as a signifier for this widespread attitude, but contemporary yoga practitioners prefer to call it "mysticism" or "spirituality".

4.

In the early history of modern yoga, yoga was often understood as part of "Eastern magic". No wonder that representatives of modern magic studied it. Although he practiced yoga only during a short period of his life, Aleister Crowley's views are of paramount importance for the reception of yoga in magical groups (cf. Djurdjevic 2012, 2014). He refers to yoga practices in several of his writings and recommends their use (cf. Pasi 2012). Moreover, yoga literature was on the required reading list for students of his system. Crowley's magick even influenced the South Asian "Order of Krishna" that mixed yoga with Western occult practices and ideas (Bogdan 2013). Contemporary

magical groups and literature still deal with yoga. As Suzanne Newcombe pointed out, many of the Crowley influenced magical orders that are familiar with his views on yoga are interested in magickal empowerment through yogic practices. (Newcombe 2013, 74) Sexual techniques attributed to tantric yoga are particularly important as they are often mentioned as sources of modern sex magic. But there is surely a broader scale of interests that magicians connect with yoga (cf. Wasserman 2007). On the other hand, affinities from the yoga side also exist. Newcombe argued that despite all obvious differences, even mainstream, wellness-centred yoga classes resemble contemporary magical practice in various ways (cf. Newcombe 2013, 65-74).

5.

After World War II postural yoga gained increasing importance. This kind of modern yoga first developed in South Asia in the 1920s under the influence of gymnastics from Europe and the USA and other systems of modern physical culture. Postural yoga focuses on postural exercises, breathing- and relaxation techniques. In line with the rise of this form of yoga the status of yoga within society dramatically changed. From the late 1970s onward, yoga went mainstream and conquered the middle classes of late modern societies. It ceased to be a countercultural or elitist occult movement and was reinvented as a transnational pop cultural phenomenon (cf. Jain 2015, 70-71). Within a short time yoga became an essential part of the rapidly growing holistic milieu that Christopher Partridge described as "wellbeing occulture" (Partridge 2005, 20).

The new majority of the yoga clientele is not particularly interested in esotericism and the occult, at least not explicitly. Nevertheless, elements of the occult strands of earlier modern yoga survived. Contemporary yoga is a fluid phenomenon in which processes of

secularisation and occultisation are closely interwoven. A good example of this is the topic of the *cakras* (lit. "wheels" or "circles") (cf. Baier 2016; Leland 2016). Within traditional tantrism and tantra-influenced forms of yoga they function as focal points of life force (*prāṇa*) the most important of which are placed along the central axis of the human body. The yogic journey to the divine was conceived of as an ascent through these centres. The first generation of theosophists reinterpreted these concept with the help of Mesmerism and integrated them into what they thought to be the body of ultimate esoteric truths that defines the ancient wisdom religion. Theosophy emphasised that the *cakras* have to be mastered by subsequently relinquishing all earthly wishes and desires, so that, step by step, the astral body is separated from the physical body and one is able to enter the higher spiritual realms. Furthermore, the *cakras* were connected to the complex net of occult cosmic correspondences that were fundamental for theosophical esotericism.

Within the contemporary yoga culture the *cakras* are still an important topic, but they have lost the aura of secrecy and occult science that once surrounded them. One can find depictions of them on yoga mats, shirts, and trousers. They decorate the walls of yoga studios and the envelopes of yogi tea bags. The *cakras* do not symbolise the stations of liberation of the astral body any more, nor are they connected to ascetic discipline. They are understood as a map of the psychological dimensions that should all be cultivated for the sake of holistic self-development. But nets of correspondences albeit in simplified versions still shape the conceptualisations of the *cakras* just as the topic of the ascent to mystical union.

To sum up, yoga in contemporary society still contains some ingredients of the mixture of occultism and traditional South Asian concepts that had a powerful impact on the emergence of modern yoga. In the process of popularisation and integration into the mainstream of society these elements underwent deep transformations. Today, forms of yoga that maintain closer ties to 19th century occultism or function as part of self-declared esoteric movements are only of marginal importance.

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