


"YOGA HERE, YOGA THERE, YOGA EVERYWHERE". A CULTURAL STUDY OF YOGA IN CONTEMPORARY SOCIETY


YOGA AQUIÍ, YOGA ALLÁ, YOGA EN TODAS PARTES: UN ESTUDIO CULTURAL DEL YOGA EN LA SOCIEDAD CONTEMPORÁNEA

 Dr. Pamela Siegel gfusp@mpc.com.br

PhD. Member of the research lab LAPACIS, Faculty of Medical Sciences, State University of Campinas/São Paulo, Brasil

 Dr. Rui Ferreira Afonso ruiafonso@yahoo.com.br

PhD. Hospital Israelita Albert Einstein, São Paulo, Brasil

 Dr. Nelson Filice de Barros nelfel@uol.com.br

PhD. Coordinator of LAPACIS (Laboratory for research in alternative, complementary and integrative practices in health)/ Faculty of Medical Sciences, State University of Campinas/São Paulo, Brasil

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Abstract: Yoga is an ancient South Asian philosophical system associated with an extensive set of physical, mental, and religious practices. The purpose of this paper is to discuss the forms of yoga's production-consumption-identity and cultural regulation within the framework of Cultural Studies. This paper is based on the findings of an Evidence Map on Yoga and corroborates the fact that yoga is being consumed as a cultural symbol and has mushroomed into a heterogeneous and deregulated market, in which many competing organizations promote different yoga styles and levels of certifications. Yoga has become entangled with economic and political logics and the commodification/branding process has transformed it from an Asian soul-searching practice into an industry.

Keywords: Yoga, Complementary and Alternative Medicine, Integrative Health, Cultural Studies, New Age.

Resumen: El yoga es un antiguo sistema filosófico surasiático asociado con un amplio conjunto de prácticas físicas, mentales y religiosas. El propósito de este artículo es discutir las formas de producción-consumo-identidad y regulación cultural del yoga en el marco de los Estudios Culturales en la sociedad contemporánea. Este documento se basa en los hallazgos de un Mapa de Evidencia sobre Yoga y corrobora el hecho de que el yoga se consume como un símbolo cultural y se ha convertido rápidamente en un mercado heterogéneo y desregulado, y se ha enredado con lógicas económicas y políticas.

Palabras clave: Yoga, Medicina Complementaria y Alternativa, Salud Integrativa, Estudios Culturales, New Age.

Introduction

Yoga is an ancient South Asian philosophical system associated with an extensive set of physical, mental, and religious practices. In contemporary culture, major elements of continuity of the yogic philosophical system and its practices are identified, however some disruptions are also observed, particularly in relation to the forms of its production-consumption-identity and cultural regulation, as can be inferred from the results of the Evidence Map on Yoga (Virtual Health Library, 2020) and its clinical effectiveness, in which 40 different types of yoga emerged from the studies.

In the last decade, many studies on yoga have been published with the purpose of gaining in-depth knowledge on its meanings presented in pre-modern texts (Mallinson and Singleton, 2017). Originally transmitted through initiation, from master to disciple, from lip to ear (Siegel and Barros, 2016), yoga has been transformed according to the social, cultural, and religious contexts in which it thrives, however, broader materials that make up the yogic corpus are still unknown outside academic specialised environments.

Although Patañjali's Yogasūtra, probably composed in the third-to fourth century CE (White, 2011; Newcombe, 2017), are mentioned as a textual source for 'classical yoga' worldwide, the text only dedicates a few verses to breath control and postures. Notwithstanding, the earliest text to mention and teach hatha yoga, currently the most popular type of yoga, is the Dattatreya yogaśāstra, which was probably written in the 13th century CE (Mallinson and Singleton, 2017).

Yoga received many different cultural influences throughout its history. On the one hand, Wujastyk (2018) argues that it is necessary to understand how the Buddhist thought influenced yoga specifically in relation to meditation and liberation. On the other, D'Silva (2020) disputes the fact that yoga is quintessentially a Hindu cultural and religious product, and adds that, within Sufism, exercises linked to the breath are called dhikr and relate to the remembrance of God.

Basically, hatha yoga originated from the combination of two methods: the first dates back to the period before the common era, from the ascetics mentioned in the Mahābhārata and Rāmāyaṇa, and from the Buddhist canon in Pali. The second branched out from the Tantric schools that flourished between the years 1000 and 1500 CE in India (Mallinson, 2013). While the first method sought liberation, the second pursued the development of psychic powers (siddhis).

It bears noting that yoga cannot be labeled strictly as a Hindu practice, since the mingling of meditative and physical practices is linked to non-Hindu tribal ascetic traditions, including Buddhism, Saivism, Jainism, and Islamic influence in the Indian sub-continent (Lakshmi, 2020; Liberman, 2008; Singleton, 2008).

Siegel and Bastos (2020) argue that yoga can be viewed as a boundary object, since it forms multicultural contact zones, connecting fields of knowledge and professions, and displaying inter/crossdisciplinarity. As such, yoga has been influenced by different traditions and is currently being transformed by globalization, commodification, and cultural trends, all of which will be discussed in the next

sections.

Yoga and Health

In the West, in the 1990s and 2000s, especially in the US, there was a spike in research on alternative medicine in general, yoga included. In 1992 the Office of Alternative Medicine was established in Champaign, Illinois, United States of America, within the National Institutes of Health, to facilitate study and evaluation of complementary and alternative practices (Young, 1998). After 1998, the name was changed firstly to National Center for Complementary and Alternative Medicine and later to National Center for Complementary and Integrative Health. Important studies (Eisenberg et al, 1998; Saper et al, 2004; Birdee et al, 2008; Ospina et al, 2007) on yoga and meditation were produced in those decades, showing the profile of the American yoga practitioners at the time (mostly white, young, urban, feminine, middle-class, holding college degrees) and the reasons for resorting to these practices (wellness, mental health, asthma, musculoskeletal conditions, cervical and low back pain). A quick search in the Pubmed/Medline on October 20th 2022, using the search word yoga, yielded 7,161 results, and the outcomes by year show a steep curve rise in the graph from 2005 onwards.

Referring to the systems of medicine and the nationalist discourse in India, Khan (2006) discusses how the construction of a medical pluralist system was confronted with the hegemony of biomedicine, a process initiated by the colonial state. Gandhi's critique of the modern world and resistance towards the West created a quest for an alternative: the development of Nature Cure, a method of self-healing, emphasizing prevention over cure, without neglecting cure, and that flourished in the first half of the twentieth century in Europe and India.

Alter (2018) explores the correlations between yoga, perfect health, and Nature Cure, and provides insight into how key players in the Indian health scenario, such as Gandhi, Shri Yogendra, Swami Kuvalayananda and Swami Sivananda, among others, shaped the integrative health culture in India drawing on principles of spiritual and moral orientations from the Bhagavad Gītā, medicine, and a philosophy of yoga taken from Tantra and neo-Vedanta.

Newcombe (2020) further contributes to the analysis of how yoga and meditation were transformed into an international health intervention, with the help of emblematic figures such as Maharishi Mahesh Yogi (1918–2008), who was swept by a massive wave of popularity due to his short interactions with The Beatles, in the final years of the 1960s, when biomedicine was being challenged by the counter cultural movements, and yoga represented a break away from traditionalistic institutional churches (Newcombe, 2013).

Yoga made its way into the department of Ayurveda, Yoga and Naturopathy, Unani, Siddha, and Homoeopathy (AYUSH) in India, which was raised to the level of an independent ministry in 2014. In February 2019 the Ministry of AYUSH promoted the WHO Benchmarks for Training in Yoga, which took place in New Delhi and in which one of the authors of this paper participated (WHO, 2019). Among the many issues discussed at the meeting were: the regulatory approach to practice in WHO member countries; the subjects that will appear in the teaching grid of the different levels of training (basic, advanced, and postgraduate), possible side effects of yoga and issues of safety concerning the asanas and breathing practices, rarely admitted by gurus and their organizations until recently.

On Methods and Sources

In order to discuss the forms of yoga's production-consumption-identity and cultural regulation, this paper draws upon the framework of Cultural Studies, more specifically on du Gay's et al (1997) Circuit of Culture, according to which yoga is dealt with as an event in contemporary culture. The Circuit of Culture is an analytical tool of social research which explores the *modus operandi* of producing and disseminating meanings in contemporary societies.

Del Valle (2015) views Cultural Studies (CS) as a critical modality of theoretical practice, wherein the aim of knowledge is not to produce more abstract knowledge, but to perform interventions and transformations in the world. What she calls the critical modality of theoretical practice is what Stuart Hall calls the political will of cultural studies. Furthermore, CS involve the notion of culture, thought of in its constitutive intersection with the political sphere, power relations and their disputes. Therefore, they are studies of the concrete, specific contexts, and conjunctures, and are linked to radical contextualism,¹ always seeking their answers in relation to the study of that context. On the place of culture in society, Jesús Martín-Barbero (2005), an author of the Latin American approach of Cultural Studies, states:

The place of culture in society changes when the technological mediation of communication ceases to be merely instrumental to express itself, condense itself and become structural: technology today refers not to some devices, but to new modes of reception and language, to new and strict sensibilities (Martín-Barbero, 2005, p.54)

If culture can be studied as an array of practices inserted into forms of production and consumption, then yoga can be envisioned as a way for people to consume what they identify as wellness, beauty, fitness, and soul-searching. Within the viewpoint of Cultural Studies, du Gay and Madsen coined the critique and deconstruction of consumption as "the production of consumption perspective" (du Gay et al, 2013, p. 81)

Following the example of the Sony Walkman, in this text yoga is studied culturally, which means to explore how it is represented, produced, and consumed, what social identities are associated with it and what mechanisms regulate its distribution and use (du Gay et al, 1997). By applying the Circuit of Culture to yoga, it is possible to construct a critical examination of what yoga - perceived as a cultural event - means and how and why people identify with it collectively and consume it (Laberge, 2013), the representation of which is well understood by marketing experts.

Just like the Walkman created a new way for people to consume the music they liked, using headphones independently, modern mobile devices access yoga apps and people discuss yoga-related subjects on social media, and also, during the covid-19 pandemic people are practicing yoga through online classes. So, the dissemination of technology and the spreading of yoga go hand in hand. One example of this is the WHO mYoga app launched on 21st of June 2021 (WHO mYoga App, 2021), the review of which was conducted previously by a group of WHO yoga-collaborators, including one of the authors of this paper. This brings us to du Gay and Madsen's statement: "production chains, consumption patterns, and identity-work can be connected in ways that establish cultural practices" (du Gay et al, 2013, p. xxii), which, in the end, are dealing with the symbolic meanings of culture.

According to Hall, representation in the cultural circuit can only be adjusted in relation to the form of symbolic meaning; it can only be

properly analysed in relation to the true concrete forms assumed by the meaning, in the concrete exercise of signification, the act of reading and interpretation; and this requires analysis of the true signs, symbols, figures, images, narratives, words and sounds – the material forms – where the symbolic meaning circulates (Hall, 1997). Additionally, Hall (2011) conceives identity as something that is fragmenting, that does not have a single meaning. In this sense, yoga presents within its identity structure a variety of elements, sometimes contradicting the expectations of some practitioners in relation to its main appeals. The form of consumption of cultural content related to the culture circuit applied to yoga occurs during the exchange of information between practitioners/ students and gurus/entrepreneurs/teachers, beginning with different yoga training levels and the act of using materials (gear, mats) produced by and for yoga studios. The process of regulating the circuit of culture is the place where the senses circulate, where they are organized and regulate the social practices, through norms, rules and conventions that interfere with the structure of social life.

This paper makes use of the Clinical Effectiveness of Yoga Practice, an evidence map on yoga, which is part of the project Evidence Map on Integrative and Complementary Health Practices envisioned by the Brazilian Ministry of Health in partnership with the Latin American and Caribbean Center on Health Sciences Information (BIREME/PAHO/WHO) and the Brazilian Academic Integrative Health Consortium (Cabsin). It is available at the Virtual Health Library on Traditional, Complementary, and Integrative Medicine (Virtual Health Library, 2021).

Evidence maps consist of systematic searches in certain fields and may be presented as graphs or searchable databases associated with a descriptive report outlining the evidence. They are used for different purposes such as: research, to identify evidence gaps, to evaluate the need for funding and for policy decisions (Sara and White, 2018; Miake-Lye, 2016). The reason for referring to this database is that, so far, few evidence maps on yoga, and only ones on specific diseases, have been published. This essay focuses mainly on the fact that in the 140 studies (2005-2019) included in the map, 40 different interventions, or types of yoga, were applied.

It is quite telling that these 40 different types of yoga, which can be viewed in Table 1, corroborate the fact that yoga is being consumed as a cultural symbol and has mushroomed into a heterogeneous and deregulated market (Mccartney, 2017).

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Table 1
Seven intervention groups and 40 different yoga types extracted from the evidence map Clinical Effectiveness of Yoga Practice

Production-Consumption-Identity of Yoga Practices in Contemporary Society

Initially brought from the East by the gurus, still within the context of spirituality, yoga is quickly “corrupted,” serving the interests of the pragmatic Western mind. The holistic health and the New Age movements in San Francisco, in the 1960s, were criticised as stimulating individualistic behaviors of the free-market society, thereby depoliticizing the social determinants of health and neglecting the consciousness of social betterment (Baer et al, 1998).

Many different New Religious Movements (NMR), that promoted some type of yoga as a spiritual initiation, flourished or were rooted in India in the 20th century, and spread worldwide, to name but a few, the International Society for Krishna Consciousness, Brahma Kumaris, Self-Realization Fellowship, Bhagwan Shree Rajneesh’s movement, Sathya Sai Baba’s movement, Integral Yoga, Ananda Marga, 3HO Kundalini Yoga, Divine Life Society and Siddha-Yoga. An exception is the Universal Great Brotherhood, founded in Venezuela by the Frenchman Serge Raynaud de la Ferrière, in 1948. What these movements have in common is the mandate of perpetuating the spiritual teachings of their respective founding masters. Within these movements, the rationale is based on spiritual evolution and lifelong yogic practices, but they are not focused on training courses specifically for postural yoga, which became a trend in later years (Siegel and Barros, 2016).

Yoga was fastly disseminated globally in the period between 1950 and 1970 (Hoyez, 2007) and the 1980s saw the surfacing of many new yoga types detached from spiritual lineages. In the US alone, according to the Forbes website (Sangster, 2019), 36.7 million Americans spent \$ 16 billion on yoga classes and equipment in 2016. It is an easy entry career regulated by the wellness market of which the success also depends on marketing strategies (Ippoliti and Smith, 2016). In most countries, yoga is a self-regulated practice, however, non-governmental regulatory bodies offer certificates that ‘guarantee’ the quality of the work of their members.

It was not until 1978 that yoga was officially recognised as an element of indigenous medicine, in India, by the Central Council of Research for Yoga and Naturopathy, later incorporated under the AYUSH (Newcombe, 2020).

Jain (2012) analyses three yoga enterprises, Iyengar Yoga, Siddha Yoga and Anusara Yoga, illustrating how they were inserted into the contemporary consumer culture worldwide, in which branding has become systematic, and mass marketed postural yoga to huge audiences. Consumers construct a self-identity which they project onto the product or service they identify with, and learn to distinguish one type of yoga from another by interpreting the meaning of a yoga brand and its appeal of identity.

While Lucia (2018) highlights that yoga entrepreneurs in the US are exporting yoga worldwide through proselytism, marketing and seva tourism (impersonal service), Godrej (2016) admits that yoga runs the risk of reinforcing neoliberal constructions of selfhood, but indicates that interpreting the yogic philosophical elements in a specific way, and directing its practice inwards, may shift the practitioner’s consciousness away from consumer culture. Success in mass-marketing postural yoga to Western consumers is due to the de-emphasizing of its soteriological and ascetic features, packaging it as a scientific practice and sidestepping its religious connotations.

Concerning the connection between yoga, social classes, and race, Putcha (2020) examines the recent trend of museums offering yoga classes and how it effects the museum-goers. She argues that the museum yoga programmes are constructed upon emotions of performance, dominance, and eroticism in health. Additionally, she brings to the forefront the issue of the colonial theft of African and Asian art pieces displayed in some of the most important European and American museums, spotlighting that, in this context, the museum visitors learn about different parts of the world through the lens of Anglo-centrism, US-American cultural-capitalism and institutionalised forms of racism.

Experiments testing certain biomedical health parameters were underway in the Kuvalayananda’s Kaivalyadha Institute since 1924. However, since the 1960s the organizations founded by Mararishi Mahesh Yogi (1918-2008) invested in research and the promotion of ‘Vedic Science’ and Transcendental Meditation selling certified training courses worldwide.

The first nationally accredited Yoga University in India, the Swami Vivekananda Anusandhana Samstha, was founded in 1986 and sponsors the International Journal of Yoga.

B.K.S. Iyengar (Smith and White, 2014) created certifications for thirteen levels of yoga. The BKSlyengar (n/d) website informs that one needs to be a student of Iyengar Yoga for a minimum of three years in order to apply for the two-year teacher training.

It is not unusual to find that different yoga institutions were founded by the same person or that distinct organizations have similar names. Such is the case of the Yoga Alliance international (n/d) and the World Yoga federation, both founded by Swami Vidyanand. The first one accepts the registration of teachers of all traditions as long as the teacher training programmes have a duration of 200, 500 or more hours, and the latter's aim is to organize and support regional, national, and international yoga sports and exhibitions. In the US, the Yoga Alliance (2021), established in 1999 in Pennsylvania, is a nonprofit association that registers yoga schools and teachers, and one of their purposes is to 'provide yoga schools and yoga teachers with effective business practices to help achieve success'.

The International Yoga Teachers Association (n/d) was founded in Australia, in 1967, by Roma Blair. It is a nonprofit organization and has associates in 13 countries and independent affiliates in several more. Its main aim is to promote its teacher training course and offer the Continuing Professional Development programmes.

The International Association of Yoga Therapists (2020) was founded in 1989. It supports research and education in yoga and yoga therapy, healing, and science, but leaves out tradition, Patañjali and samadhi (the ultimate goal of yoga). For certification the candidate must meet the following criteria: complete 200 hours of yoga teacher training, 650 hours of yoga therapy education, 20 hours of mentored practice as a yoga therapist-in-training, 200 hours in the field of yoga therapy and 400 hours as a yoga therapist.

In 1963, Wilfred Clark (1898-1981) began teaching yoga in the Adult Education centers of Birmingham, UK, and later founded the British Wheel of Yoga (2021). Currently, the BWY provides a teacher training course approved at level 4 and also accredits yoga teacher training organizations.

The Yoga Federation of Europe (2016) provides yoga teacher training of 200 hours and it lasts 4 months. It offers some seminars: Corporate yoga - Yoga in the work environment, Yoga for Mothers and Children, Yoga for Healthy Aging, Art Yoga, Yoga for athletes' preparation, Yoga for Artists.

Yoga organizations have spread throughout the world either offering certified training as private institutions or as members of certifying associations. The European Yoga Federation (2016) was founded in 2005. Its graduation system is divided into 10 categories, starting with a Yoga Monitor (Yoga Pravesh) qualified as teacher assistant but not to form, and ending with Spiritual Master (Yogacharya). The Asian Yoga Federation (2010) was constituted in 2010. It promotes six different kinds of yoga competitions: yogasana sports; artistic yoga; artistic pair yoga; rhythmic yoga; free flow yoga dance and professional yogasana, including different age groups.

Furthermore, there exists the Unión Latinoamericana de Yoga (n/d) founded in 1987, which recognises three yoga teachers training systems: 1) Indian Traditional Gurukula System; 2) American System or Standards by hours; 3) European System by Programme and years; and three professions of yoga: a) Yoga Teacher (who learn with yogacharya); b) Teacher of Yoga Techniques (most of the teachers) and c) Yoga Therapists.

Many more yoga organizations can be mentioned and thousands of authoritative yoga schools continue to mushroom worldwide. All these organizations form a kaleidoscopic network of interdependent or competing groups and movements involved with the production, marketing, and social regulation of yoga, which promote different yoga styles and levels of certifications. This yoga-field, according to Bourdieu's perspective (Swartz, 1997), is structured upon the unequal distribution of a social quantum, defined as social or cultural capital, with two opposing poles: that of the dominant pole, in which the agents with the maximum social capital are located, and that of the dominated, characterised by the lack of this specific social capital.

Regulation of Yoga Practices in Contemporary Society: politics, diaspora, and decolonization

Yoga is one of the contemporary health practices selling beauty and morality and is, therefore, entangled with economic and political logics, a process in which thoughts, feelings and bodies are commodified, creating social distinctions, categorizations, and relations (Kuipers et al, 2019).

Nair and Singh (2020) and Lakshmi (2020) take the discussion of the entanglement of yoga with politics further in that they point out the massive protests in India against the Islamophobic Citizenship Amendment Act and the Hathras Rape Case which occurred in 2020, and argue that due to yoga's associations with health and spirituality, it is shielded as a benign practice, but has become a tool of marginalization used by the Hindu right. Furthermore, the International Yoga Day should be perceived cautiously as an endeavour by Modi to promote the Hinduization of India by marketing yoga disguised as a secular practice.

The Indian Prime Minister's move to build upon yoga as a geopolitical secular tool, or even as a culturalised religion, is no surprise and not new in history. Attempts to model religion as culture are frequent in national discourses and nation-building projects (Astor and Mayrl, 2020). Religious diversification, instead of being welcomed, is seen as a threat to the Indian nation's unity.

Ansari (2020) positions herself as an individual with a South Asian heritage and embeds her discussion on yoga into a racial frame, arguing that Western whiteness studies yoga with a so-called objectivity, overrunning especially the South Asian diasporic narratives. Sood (2020) voices her narrative in the same direction, and argues that, in the yoga world, South Asian Americans, South Asians and people belonging to the Desi diaspora are promoting campaigns to decolonise yoga. However, she warns, they run the risk of idealizing their pre-colonial past, since some Hindu fundamentalists and Brahmins contend that yoga's roots are descended from 'ancient India,' without ever mentioning other Indigenous and ancestral cultures that inhabited the South Asian region.

Discussion and Conclusions

Yoga's transformation has spanned several phases, starting out as a soul-searching spiritual practice, then becoming a relaxation technique, and currently being viewed as a rigorous physical practice held in fitness rooms with mirrors, in spite of the fact that many existing NMRs continue to teach yoga with its complete ethical, philosophical, and spiritual components. However, there are many

elements of disruptions enmeshed in the production-consumption-identity of yoga, too, especially due to the prevalence of postural yoga. Most post-modern branded yoga schools, especially in the West, no longer follow lineages of spiritual masters. Yoga brands such as Bikram, Power, Anusara and Jivanmukti have become unhinged from their Indian heritage and completely stripped from spirituality (Castaneda, 2014).

The commodification and branding process, that transformed yoga from an Asian spiritual practice into a very profitable business (Yoga Journal Editors, 2012) discloses a flagrant contradiction (The odd relationship, 2019), namely, the ethics of yoga (yamas and niyamas) teach, among others, austerity, non-possessiveness, restraint, and self-discipline, but yogic activities in the US represent a billion-dollar market, creating an odd relationship, to the point that yoga purists dubbed the yoga franchises McYoga (Miller, 2008).

Does the capitalist perspective make yoga less authentic? If we consider the New Age movement as a loose category in religion, in the final analysis it is a consumer market. Nonetheless, New Agers are seen as engaging in issues related to environmentalism, animal rights, peace culture, mind-body practices, and better lifestyles (Redden, 2016), all of which express elements of continuity related to the production-consumption-identity and cultural circuit of yoga.

Culture means “signifying practices, rather than a whole way of life” (Hallet al, 1997) and this relates directly to the extant yoga brands, how they were created and how they outline yoga practitioners’ identities, transforming an initiatic practice into a popular fitness craze, allowing it to be marketed to wide varieties of targeted consumers.

The manifestations of different minorities, who are becoming quite vocal and questioning their role in the yogic universe, can be pointed out as elements both of continuity and of constructive disruptions related to the cultural regulation of yoga. Indian women in the diaspora, in London, concentrate more freedom, assuming all the ritualistic tasks that in their country of origin would be performed by men and prohibited to women. Bhakti yoga (a devotional type) has presented opportunities for the path of salvation for these women (David, 2010). Nonetheless, in the West and especially in the US, mainstream yoga and the media are sending out a message that echoes postfeminist values, rather than feminist ones, such as empowerment and satisfaction achieved through entrepreneurship and consumerism, while not pointing out the cultural and systematic obstacles to personal achievement, such as poverty, racism, sexism, and homophobia (Balizet and Myers, 2016).

In the US, Christian conservative groups promote legal battles about teaching yoga in public schools, which could characterize an element of disruption, although yoga and meditation can reduce depression and anxiety and are officially recommended by the federal public health agency, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (Pilkington, 2021).

There are ongoing discussions in the US involving the cultural regulation of yoga and how its practice can reify social justice (Berila et al, 2016). Voices of yogic activists, belonging to different ethnicities and queer movements, are speaking out on topics in yoga such as inclusion and exclusion, body image and beauty, and individual and collective liberation. They are deconstructing the myths around yoga, such as the continuous posts in the media of thin, white, young, and flexible people, pushing for more diversity and making yoga attainable to different disregarded people, for curvy, round bodies and Afro-descendant communities (Berila, 2016).

The political influence on yoga may be considered the most flagrant element of disruption related to the cultural regulation. In this sense, one of the most emblematic events illustrates the episode of the wife of a North American politician attending a yoga exhibition at a public school in India, on February 25th 2020, joining the practitioners in the meditation exercise ‘Lesson on joy’, while a few miles away far-right groups, allied to the prime minister, were attacking opponents with stones and vandalizing Muslim communities. Yoga has become the ultimate symbol of India’s ‘soft power,’ or the benevolent face of Hinduism through which the government consolidates its role in foreign affairs (Giovanaz, 2020).

Coming back to the Evidence Map on Yoga, its clinical effectiveness and the 40 different types of yoga involved, as has been pointed out throughout this text, the extant yoga that is found nowadays has deviated considerably from the classic path of centuries ago.

In the map from which this text was derived, there is not even a single review on the topic of spirituality. In the only three articles that evaluated contributions of the practice to spirituality, once again yoga is an instrument for health. Just as an example, article 32, “Overview of systematic reviews: yoga as a therapeutic intervention for adults with acute and chronic health conditions”, assesses seven outcome groups: well-being and quality of life; metabolic and physiological indicators; mental disorders; mental indicators; chronic diseases; pain; socio-environmental and spirituality, the latter being an underrated appendix.

In the Evidence Map on Yoga, the vast majority of published articles apply yoga to patients with some type of disease or comorbidity, and only four articles have as inclusion criteria healthy individuals, making it clear how yoga is considered a health promotion and rehabilitation technique. Thus, there is more interest in outcomes such as blood pressure, quality of life or anxiety disorders than in the yogaś citta-vṛtti-nirodhaḥ phenomenon, the absence of mental fluctuations, which was how Patañjali defined yoga.

There are still other complications in the research: the excess of yoga schools and methodologies, the lack of standardization of techniques and of detailed description of the methods. This happens throughout the map and is exemplified in study #32, in the aforementioned paragraph, which compares classical methods such as Raja Yoga with contemporary Kripalu Yoga schools for various health outcomes, including also in the comparison techniques such as asana or pranayama or meditation, applied alone. Two outcomes of this research are the body mass index and waist circumference, both of which can be influenced by energy expenditure. Thus, a more intense practice, with greater energy expenditure, such as Ashtanga Vinyasa is compared with low-metabolism practices or isolated techniques such as meditation or pranayama. In this regard, reflecting a utilitarian trait, the outcome group with the highest number of results is Vitality, Well-Being, and Quality of Life, where outcomes such as quality of life and stress appear frequently because they are of great value to the contemporary human being, who seeks performance and greater productivity. Therefore, ancient traditions such as Raja Yoga receive less attention and interest from practitioners than Kripalu Yoga, a school established in the US roughly 50 years ago and mentioned more frequently in research and studies. Yoga, it seems, whether in the context of the fitness market or research, is equivalent to a Ratatouille, in which there is no distinction between the flavor of tomatoes or zucchini, but it is a palatable food for many tastes.

Still concerning the Evidence Map on Yoga, different authors have tried to compile the many types of yoga that circulate in contemporary society. For comparison, we mention Sovik’s et al article (2016), in which the authors distribute 56 yoga types into three categories, being

one of them 'Other Western styles and teachers', indicating how the West has been taking over the yoga practice, prompting an outcry of concern from Hindu leaders regarding the cultural appropriation and the 'taking-back' of yoga by the Indian nation. Nevertheless, lesser-known yoga schools, such as the Caucasian Yoga of Persian and Egyptian origin, transmitted by Murat Yagan (1915-2013), or Kemetic Yoga created by Elvrid Lawrence (aka Yirser Ra Hotep), are not mentioned in current yoga milieus.

Integrating traditional, complementary, and alternative medicine, yoga included, into government health services, in India, has not always been a smooth process from the onstart. AYUSH services have been viewed as complementing the allopathic practice, and work-sharing and interactions among AYUSH practitioners and the health system colleagues have sometimes been plagued by preconceived notions, mistrust, and power imbalances (Josyula et al, 2016). Yoga continues to be a polyvalent practice in contemporary India and is still viewed as a religious ideal, however, it is also perceived as a health activity.

Regarding the role of yoga in health, not everyone, anywhere, at any time, benefits from yoga in the same way. Disk injuries, soft-tissue and joint injuries, cartilage tears and ligament sprains have been reported, as well as sprains of shoulder, neck, back and knees (Dembner, 2003; Broad, 2012; Le Corroller et al, 2012; Dacci et al, 2013; García-Martín et al, 2014; An et al, 2019). However, even if many practitioners pursue yoga for the bodily flexibility and the therapeutic anti-stress benefits, these components of "gymnasticization" and "physiotherapeutization," devoid of any spiritual elements, seem to be still somewhat advantageous, since yoga reinforces the practice of awareness and diet-environmental-consciousness, besides strengthening social bonds.

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Notas

1 An Evidence Map was carried out with world-wide studies, performed by Brazilian authors. The mentioning of mostly Indian and North-American references is because most of the publications stem from these two countries. Regarding the Brazilian references, they bear the positionality of the authors.

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