

Is Yoga Cultural Appropriation?

Danielle Thompson-Ochoa

Ph.D. Assistant Professor in Department of Counseling at Gallaudet University,
Washington, DC. 20002

Contact: Danielle.thompson-ochoa@gallaudet.edu

Abstract

Yoga was originally founded in South Asia and it was practiced by various South Asian individuals. It is a spiritual practice about the mind and body, as well as the meaning of life and the nature of the universe. The intended belief was yoga assist with self-development believed to reduce stress, increase beauty, strength, and muscle flexibility. Today, modern yoga systems have transformed into controversial, elite, counter cultural and pop culture varieties with undertones of cultural appropriation. At the same time the case of yoga and its appropriation by the Western culture creates a paradoxical situation. In this situation, approval and adoption of yoga in the West has made the practice more trendy and popular among middle- class urban Indian consumers and helped re- brand the practice. Such re-marketing allowed to make yoga more appealing to the modern consumer and more concerned with the aspects related to physical performance, health and scientific explanation. Although the notion of cultural appropriation can be discussed in the negative light, within the discussed case appropriation of the cultural element by global consumers allowed to make the element (yoga) more popular and successful, both globally and domestically.

Keywords: yoga, cultural appropriation.

Introduction

Yoga was first introduced by Vedic priests in northern India approximately five thousand years ago. It became popular during colonialism when Indian yogis in India wanted to show the colonializers that their spiritual connections were healthy and scientific. However now yoga has gradually found its way into Western mainstream culture and became widely popular among different segments of population.¹ While some practice yoga for spiritual reasons, others focus more on the physical aspects the practice contributes to human well- being. According to some researchers, popularity of Yoga and its place in modern culture raises some concerns related to whether such phenomenon can be described as a case of

cultural appropriation.² In addition to that focus on the physical aspect of Yoga within modern culture may compromise the original spirituality and philosophical aspect of the practice.³ This report will therefore explore whether non- Indian Yoga practice can be viewed as a cultural appropriation phenomenon, and attempt to understand whether contemporary adopters of this practice commit to spirituality and Yoga philosophy in the classroom or at home.

Critical analysis - Teaching Yoga

In order to understand whether the Hindu practice and philosophy known as yoga has indeed been culturally appropriate within the non- Indian setting it is important to correctly define what yoga is.

¹Askegaard, Søren, and Giana M. Eckhardt. "Glocal yoga: Re-appropriation in the Indian consumptionscape." *Marketing Theory* 12, no. 1 (2012): 45.

²Young, James O., and Conrad G. Brunk, eds. *The ethics of cultural appropriation*, 56.

³Antony, Mary Grace. "" It's Not Religious, But It's Spiritual." Appropriation and the Universal Spirituality of Yoga." *Journal of Communication & Religion* 37, no. 4 (2014).

Askegaard and Eckhardt define yoga as "... a set of physical and mental practice which originated in India between 200 BC and AD 200".⁴ Furthermore, originally yoga was created to enhance and help achieve spiritual enlighten. The practice has been developed on the intersect of India's three main religious traditions: Buddhism, Jainism and Hinduism. Yoga, in its original essence, is practiced in order to train mind to experience the complex world around us. The practice is deeply intertwined with the religious spirituality and has been rather dynamic in terms of its individual schools and mode of practice. The latter means that there exists a tremendous various in how classical yoga is practiced and teacher in India.⁵

During the last century the practice has become spreading quickly in the West. One specific moment of time which has made yoga significantly more popular within non- Indian communities was Vivekananda's demonstrate of yoga practice which has taken place during the 1893 Chicago World Fair. This demonstration had an important impact on how yoga was perceived and marketed ever since: from a spiritual predominantly male exercise it has become a health intervention, available to both men and women.⁶

According to Merry⁷, within the context of modern Western culture most focus is on one specific type of yoga practice – *asana yoga*. It has been further simplified and modified to become a highly physical practice. Few practitioners acknowledge the origin and essence of yoga and pay attention to different aspects of the practice, such as breathing. Within the context of Western world yoga is

perceived as an approach to combine physical exercise with reconnecting with one's spirituality, strengthening health and coping with stress.

Cultural Appropriation, Hinduism and Harms of Cultural Appropriation

Global "consumption space" is being transformed as a large number of international economic, cultural and technological flows connect consumers and businesses from all over the world. Such flows facilitate cultural exchange and connect cultures of consumers from very distant places. According to Merry⁸, such transformation also concerns how is yoga perceived and practiced out of its original context. The increasing popularity of yoga practice in the Western world has arisen a question of whether such practice has indeed been culturally appropriated.⁹

According to Tupper¹⁰, cultural appropriation can be defined as "...the taking – from a culture that is not one's own – of intellectual property, cultural expressions or artifacts, history and ways of knowledge". The issue with the problem of cultural appropriation is that non- native peoples may not have ethical and moral right to appropriate elements of culture developed and practiced by a specific ethnicity or group of individuals. Moreover, such elements of culture which are being appropriated usually cannot be protected by laws and regulations, leaving indigenous cultures unprotected against cultural appropriation and domination.

However, cultural appropriation is not limited to simple borrowing of the practices. Instead cultural appropriation commonly involves taking (borrowing) certain elements of culture and then modifying them depending on the

⁴Askegaard, Søren, and Giana M. Eckhardt.

"Glocal yoga: Re-appropriation in the Indian consumptionscape.", 47

⁵Ibid, 47.

⁶Merry, Sally Engle. "Law, culture, and cultural appropriation." *Yale JL & Human*. 10 (1998): 575.

⁷Ibid, 576.

⁸Ibid, 578.

⁹Askegaard, Søren, and Giana M. Eckhardt. "Glocal yoga: Re-appropriation in the Indian consumptionscape." , 47.

¹⁰Tupper, Kenneth W. "Ayahuasca healing beyond the Amazon: The globalization of a traditional indigenous entheogenic practice." , 34.

demands and expectations of the specific consumer segment. And this is specifically what is happening to non- Indian yoga practice. Askegaard and Eckhardt point towards the connection between the process of globalization and yoga.¹¹ According to the researchers, it is not only geographical dissemination that transforms the practice. Instead, it is influenced by other cultural trends relevant within Western world – for example, the so-called trend of healthism. Healthism is concerned with different practices and lifestyle changes that allow consumers to strengthen their physical and psychological health. In addition to that, cult of body performance and image is another Western trend that impacts how yoga is being presented, marketed and practiced.¹²

Thus yoga is currently branded as a set of techniques which can help individuals increase and optimize their health and physical performance. Interestingly, Askegaard and Eckhardt develop an argument according to which such re-marketing makes yoga appealing not only to Westerners but also to Indian people as well. Modern day yoga is associated with de- mystifying old paradigms and views and instead offering pragmatic and science- based solutions to solve health-related problems. Therefore, even within the context of modern day India, a number of local yogi present the teaching to their contemporaries as a scientific method, and thus are heavily influenced by the Western world.

Discussion

A number of researchers debate whether, practice of yoga within non- Indian modern setting can be regarded as cultural

appropriation or appreciation. One of the arguments against yoga being culturally appropriate concerns the fact that classical yoga also has tremendous variation in how different schools teach and present it in India.¹³ Such variability emerges from the fact that there is no central (religious) authority which would establish specific guidance for practicing yoga. Therefore, the practice has been actively evolving during centuries in India. Such variation and evolution of yoga serves as a basis for an argument that the practice simply continues to develop and change within a different context – Western countries, and therefore the case cannot be considered cultural appropriation.¹⁴

Another argument against raising concerns in relation to yoga being culturally appropriated. The researcher discusses modern attitudes towards cultural appropriation as a crusade against the very meaning of what culture is. In line with such argument it is only necessary to address the problem of appropriation in relation to the elements of culture which are highly important and have some deeper spiritual meaning.¹⁵ Therefore, as yoga, for instance, cannot be regarded as religion, its appropriation cannot truly offend Indian people. The argument against such position is that although yoga, indeed, is not a religion, it is still deeply rooted in spirituality of Indian people, and therefore should be regarded as an important element of their culture and religious heritage.

Some researchers believe that modern day non- Indian yoga practice is a clear case of cultural appropriation, which raises a number of ethical concerns. First of all, modern day yoga is practice in a way

¹¹Askegaard, Søren, and Giana M. Eckhardt. "Glocal yoga: Re-appropriation in the Indian consumptionscape." , 47.

¹²Orzech, Charles D. "The" Great Teaching of Yoga," the Chinese Appropriation of the Tantras, and the Question of Esoteric Buddhism." ,78.

¹³Jain, Andrea. *Selling yoga: From counterculture to pop culture*, 47.

¹⁴Fish, Allison. "Authorizing yoga: the pragmatics of cultural stewardship in the digital era." , 439.

¹⁵ibid, 440.

which completely takes this set of practices out of their original spiritual context. Instead, such practice currently mostly focuses on fitness and health as the key motivators to practice yoga in the West. Secondly, modern day approach appears to use science to explain yoga and how this practice works, meaning how it can contribute to the healthy well-being and lifestyle. It is important to remember, that yoga was never created as a rigid scientific approach, but instead was a philosophical stance that allowed adopters to focus not only on physical aspects of the practice, but also engage into psychological and mental training.

According to Jain, a transformation in meaning and philosophy can be observed in relation to yoga practices.¹⁶ As yoga is evolving and changing not only in the West, but also in India, it is becoming more and more influenced by the Western paradigms, body image, physical performance and science. Thus in this case, the phenomenon of cultural appropriation leads not only to borrowing the yoga practice and adopting it within the new settings, but also to transforming the very essence of the teaching and re-introducing it to the native consumers. Such notion makes the debate about yoga and cultural appropriation even more complex, as it appears that many of the native adopters of yoga appear to be accepting and embracing the changes to the practices that have occurred in the West.

The discussed issue of transformation of the practice and cultural appropriation has another important dimension that has to be considered. It is important to point out that within the period of the last decades yoga can be discussed as a declining practice, perceived as old-fashioned by many of Indians. In particular, young Indians started to reject the practice as it became

more difficult for them to reconnect with its philosophical and spiritual components. The practice has been described as “grandmother’s teaching” and was rapidly losing its popularity in India. However, by the end of the 20th century an opposite trend emerged, in which urban middle class population of India, mainly consisting of young and middle age people, has suddenly embraced the teaching of yoga and began practicing it again. This re-invention of yoga is attributed to the growing popularity of the practice in the West, and the associated focus on health- and performance- related aspect of the teaching, as opposed to purely spiritual and philosophical ones. The fact that Western culture has appropriated the practice of yoga has given the latter “as stamp of approval” and allowed it to “become a trendy activity for the nouveau riche in Asia to take part in “. Such cultural appropriation has made yoga more trendy back at home, and has also transformed the practice making it more modern and suitable for urban context.

The next question that is important to ask now is how to address the issue of yoga being culturally appropriated within the context of Western countries.¹⁷ One possible approach is for the practitioners to spend more time acknowledging the origin of the practice and emphasizing its important spiritual components. Another way is to move beyond *asana* yoga practice by most practitioners and use other teachings as well: *pranayama*, *viniyoga*, etc. However, the question is whether modern consumers will be willing to change their perception of yoga and be interested to explore its unique historical leaning and deep philosophical and spiritual essence.¹⁸

¹⁶Jain, Andrea. *Selling yoga: From counterculture to pop culture*, 47.

¹⁷York, Michael. "New Age commodification and appropriation of spirituality.", 372.

¹⁸Askegaard, Søren, and Giana M. Eckhardt. "Glocal yoga: Re-appropriation in the Indian consumptionscape.", 49.

Conclusions

According to a number of researchers yoga is currently detached from its philosophical and religious origins. Individuals who practice yoga mostly attach to and focus on some abstract spiritualism. More specifically, physical practice is expected to help initiate spiritual engagement from students. Overall, it can be concluded that the case of modern day non- Indian yoga practice can indeed be viewed as an example of cultural appropriation. Moreover, the modern practice has a number of hybrid elements: originating from the traditional yoga teachings and derived from modern evolution of the practice. At the same time the case of yoga and its appropriation by

the Western culture creates a paradoxical situation. In this situation, approval and adoption of yoga in the West has made the practice more trendy and popular among middle- class urban Indian consumers and helped re- brand the practice. Such re- marketing allowed to make yoga more appealing to the modern consumer and more concerned with the aspects related to physical performance, health and scientific explanation. Although the notion of cultural appropriation can be discussed in the negative light, within the discussed case appropriation of the cultural element by global consumers allowed to make the element (yoga) more popular and successful, both globally and domestically.

Bibliography:

1. Askegaard, Søren, and Giana M. Eckhardt. "Glocal yoga: Re-appropriation in the Indian consumptionscape." *Marketing Theory* 12, no. 1 (2012): 45-60.
2. Antony, Mary Grace. "" It's Not Religious, But It's Spiritual:" Appropriation and the Universal Spirituality of Yoga." *Journal of Communication & Religion* 37, no. 4 (2014).
3. Merry, Sally Engle. "Law, culture, and cultural appropriation." *Yale JL & Human*. 10 (1998): 575.
4. Fish, Allison Elizabeth. *Laying claim to yoga: Intellectual property, cultural rights, and the digital archive in India*. University of California, Irvine, 2010.
5. Tupper, Kenneth W. "Ayahuasca healing beyond the Amazon: The globalization of a traditional indigenous entheogenic practice." *Global Networks* 9, no. 1 (2009): 117-136.
6. Orzech, Charles D. "The" Great Teaching of Yoga," the Chinese Appropriation of the Tantras, and the Question of Esoteric Buddhism." *Journal of Chinese Religions* 34, no. 1 (2006): 29-78.
7. Young, James O., and Conrad G. Brunk, eds. *The ethics of cultural appropriation*. John Wiley & Sons, 2012.
8. Jain, Andrea. *Selling yoga: From counterculture to pop culture*. Oxford University Press, 2014.
9. Fish, Allison. "Authorizing yoga: the pragmatics of cultural stewardship in the digital era." *East Asian Science, Technology and Society: An International Journal* 8, no. 4 (2014): 439-460.

*** **