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THE SCHOLAR-PRACTITIONER OF YOGA IN THE WESTERN ACADEMY

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Mark Singleton and Borayin Larios

Introduction

This chapter takes as its focus ‘scholar-practitioners’ of yoga in the western academy; that is to say scholars who research, teach or write about yoga in accredited modern universities, but who also do and/or teach yoga as a practice.² It does not consider the category of ‘scholar-practitioner’ in premodern South Asia nor, except in passing, religious institutions that teach yoga and publish yoga literature. The theoretical notion of the ‘scholar-practitioner’ is heterogeneous and wide-ranging, and may cover a large variety of positions and approaches to academic work and yoga practice, and to negotiating their relationship. The study arises partly from long consideration of this relationship on the part of the authors – both of whom are in some sense ‘scholar-practitioners’ of yoga, i.e. professional academics who do and have sometimes even instructed yoga in practice – and from our observation of a renewed and expanded interest in yoga as a subject of academic inquiry in Europe and North America over recent years.³ It is in one sense therefore itself a work of autoethnographic observation, and while our presentation is necessarily general and schematic, it is rooted in a close knowledge of the various milieux in which yoga is taught and researched as an academic discipline, across departments, disciplines, countries and continents.

The scholar-practitioner of yoga in the western academy is an intriguing historical phenomenon that has arisen from the globalisation of yoga over the past two hundred or so years. Many of the scholars considered in this chapter do not come from traditional yoga-practicing communities, nor from the traditions of knowledge transmission of South Asia (although there are notable exceptions to this). Their position with regard to yoga is therefore, historically speaking, already a complex, multifaceted and evolving one. The category of scholar-practitioner can help us to reflect on the identity, beliefs, agendas, and disciplinary convictions of these scholars, and thus bring into relief one of the most striking outcomes of modern transnational yoga’s progress. It can also help to reflect on what constitutes scholarship and what does not, insofar as it is seen to lie beyond the bounds of academic orthopraxis. And finally it can help us to explore the sometimes dynamic relationship between academic methodologies (such as ethnography, religious studies, or philology) and spiritual practice, and the social or professional tensions between academic expectations and spiritual practice in the workplace.

The insider/outsider binary and the allied question of identity and self-representation within the academic community (as well as vis-à-vis one's object of study) have been at the centre of scholarship for several decades now, perhaps especially within anthropology and in religious studies, but also across other disciplines.⁴ While the 'academic study of yoga' may imply different theories and methods for different scholars and academic departments, the adjective 'academic' has historically tended to imply (at least in dominant academic discourse) that the topic is based on 'scientific' inquiry and secular reason, and thus that the methods of analysis are neutral, impartial and objective.⁵ However, debates around whether such objectivity and critical distance are possible (or indeed desirable) have been going on for many decades now within academia, leading to a variety of new methodological approaches.⁶ In recent decades, especially with the emergence of disciplines such as postcolonial studies and 'engaged anthropology',⁷ the classical paradigm of objectivity has been openly challenged and claims to neutrality have been treated as naïve and untenable. Also of note in this regard is autoethnography which, rather than claiming objective or 'scientific' knowledge of its subject, emphasises the necessarily un-scientific, messy experience of the researcher-as-subject in particular social settings (Chang 2008; Adams, Holman Jones and Ellis 2015).

While the thorny problem of the 'participant-observer/experiencer' is a fascinating one that may well be relevant for many scholars of yoga – especially for those who conduct ethnographic fieldwork among yoga-practising communities – this problem is not directly the focus of our study, which examines solely how participant or insider status is negotiated within academia. In this regard, the scholars in question are often more closely aligned to the position that Elizabeth Puttick (1997) terms 'insider going outsider, going native in reverse' (Puttick 1997; see also Pearson 2001), that is to say a prior practitioner of yoga who subsequently joins the academy and subjects yoga to academic scrutiny, rather than an ethnographer or social scientist who develops a professional interest in the topic. As we shall see, it is also increasingly the case, particularly perhaps in North America, that these same scholars then take the knowledge and insights from their research back into their practice communities. Such dynamic positionalities are by no means exclusive to scholars of yoga,⁸ but they are sufficiently widespread to make the scholar-practitioner of yoga an intriguing object of study. A further complication is that many scholar-practitioners of yoga do not come from a culture that has traditionally practised yoga, having adopted it as a somatic and spiritual practice later in life, often in social and cultural contexts quite different from those of 'traditional' yoga.⁹ One of the purposes of this study, therefore, is to begin to examine how scholars who take yoga as a subject of their academic work situate themselves with regard to its practice and, conversely, to examine the degree to which their practice of yoga informs their scholarly work, if at all. This necessarily compressed chapter constitutes a kind of prolegomenon to ongoing research on this topic by the authors.

The varied academic cultures of the study of yoga have been shaped by different agendas, funding structures and disciplinary proclivities within the modern university, and have produced a significant variety in the ways yoga has been approached as an academic subject. There can therefore be distinct regional and disciplinary divides today in the way that yoga practice and yoga scholarship are integrated (or not). German indological traditions, for example, with their roots in nineteenth-century notions of the 'scientific' study of texts, may be uninterested in and even hostile towards scholars who foreground their practitioner status within the academy. Conversely, some scholars may wear their practitioner status more or less on their sleeve, and may derive some level of kudos or prestige from this within their communities. Their practice of yoga (and the philosophico-religious beliefs that go along with it) may even provide the public motive and *raison d'être* of their academic research. A similar situation can occur in 'contemplative studies' and 'mindfulness' programmes in universities where it may simply be assumed

(and/or implicitly required) that professors practise what they teach. In such cases, their work may also comprise elements of pastoral or spiritual guidance.

In other cases, scholars may be practitioners but may prefer to conceal their practice from their peers for a variety of reasons. Still others, who we might think of as ‘practitioner-scholars’, may operate only marginally within academia and instead assume the role of ‘scholar’ in public yoga courses and teacher trainings. The category of ‘scholar-practitioner’ (and of the ‘practitioner-scholar’), in its very plurality, thus provides a useful tool for investigating variations in the perceived role of the academic scholar (and its limits) with particular reference to yoga practice. This article seeks to make a first beginning in examining the various modalities of the ‘scholar-practitioner of yoga’, as well as the political, social and economic forces which act upon them.

Partly as a heuristic exercise for this chapter, we conducted a small survey asking the contributors to this volume to answer a few questions regarding their relationship as scholars to the practice of yoga and meditation.¹⁰ We received a total of eighteen answers out of thirty-four scholars to whom we sent our questionnaire. While this preliminary survey certainly is in no way intended to be representative of the international community of yoga scholars as a whole, it does offer a somewhat representative cross-section of scholars of yoga and meditation. All respondents but two practise (or have in the past practised) some form of yoga or meditation regularly as part of their personal daily routines.¹¹ The survey was also revealing of how the diversity of academic cultures and disciplines influences a scholar’s professional stance regarding the compatibility of yoga as a practice within academia, with some respondents reporting considerable tensions between their lives as practitioners and their lives as scholars, while others reported a seamless, non-differentiated position where practice and research were effectively felt to be the same endeavour.

The ‘scholar-practitioner’ of yoga is certainly not a recent phenomenon. Some early commentators on the *Pātāñjalayogaśāstra*, for example, were clearly practitioners as well as scholars, while others were not; and the eminently practical and philosophy-free *haṭha* tradition (Mallinson 2014) has its own later scholarly tradition, sometimes apparently divorced from actual yoga practice (Birch 2018). In general, however, one could argue that yoga as an academic subject in South Asia belonged to the traditional Sanskrit training in the classical *śāstras* (sciences) of Hinduism. This type of scholarship was based on the apprentice model of the *gurukula*, in which male Brahmin students learned to first memorize by heart and then to interpret or ritually apply the Sanskrit texts they studied. While this type of education has undergone a deep transformation with the introduction of British forms of education in India, Indian universities still rely on what could be called the ‘pandit model’ of Sanskrit education to study yoga as a *darśana* i.e. philosophical ‘point of view’.¹²

In recent years however, and particularly through the establishment of the Ministry of AYUSH¹³ in 2014 under Prime Minister Narendra Modi, yoga as a physical practice and an applied discipline has become part of the curriculum of not only higher education institutions¹⁴ but even in public schools.¹⁵ This training is comparable to non-academic teacher trainings in the west, which are often based on yoga styles modelled after charismatic Indian yoga pioneers such as Iyengar, Jois, Sivananda and more recently Baba Ramdev, and is focused on health benefits and wellness rather than on traditional Sanskritic education. As far as yoga is concerned, the ‘western’ social scientific/religious studies model (which engages with religious and spiritual practice as a sociocultural product) is far less prevalent in Indian universities than its study as a theological or philosophical topic – or more recently as a subject of medical research and as practical training for a yoga teaching qualification. In some respects, this situation is comparable to theology and divinity departments in European universities, in which academic study is often

presumed to be vocational. While this is not the place to examine traditional Indian models of education in depth, it will be helpful to keep in mind their divergence from methods such as European indology, social sciences and anthropology, especially in light of certain socio-political tensions that arise from this divergence (see below).

A history of the scholar-practitioner of yoga in the western academy must begin with the early 'Orientalist' scholars of India's religious and philosophical texts. The first studies of yoga by western scholars were produced in the broader context of the colonial use of Sanskrit texts, which were intended to help rule the subjects according to their own laws. This 'constructive orientalism' (Dodson 2002; Singleton 2008) sought to understand Indian religion and philosophy through the philological study of *śāstric* texts (or 'Shaster' in the colonial idiom). In collaboration with local pandits (first in Bengal and later elsewhere) British Orientalists translated a number of texts pertaining to yoga, beginning with Charles Wilkins's *Bhagavadgītā* in 1785. Henry Thomas Colebrooke's 1824 essay 'On the Philosophy of the Hindus' was the first to provide a (partial) English translation of Patañjali's yoga *darśana*. White argues that this 'effectively cut the *Yoga Sutra* free from its Indian moorings' by reading it through a distinctly philosophy-oriented, European classicist's gaze (2014: 60). Shastri-deva and Ballantyne's edition of the *Yoga Sūtras* (1885) was explicitly conceived as a pedagogical method to demonstrate the superiority of European philosophy and science to learned Hindus (Dodson 2002). The separation of 'practical yoga' from yoga as a philosophical system allied to Sāṃkhya, as well as an emphasis on textual sources has, arguably, continued to dominate the academic study of yoga until recently.

Concomitantly, in the hands of later Indian and 'western' indologists, the elevation of the *Yogasūtras* as a text of philosophy often went along with the denigration of actual practising yogis in India – usually meaning *hathayogis* – insofar as they were seen to be degenerate, corrupt practitioners of this supposedly original philosophical system of yoga's ancient golden age (Singleton 2008). One can trace these attitudes in some of the luminaries of early indology such as Max Müller and M. Monier-Williams, as well as in some early Indian scholars of yoga (Singleton 2010: 41–44).

Initially, '[i]t was Germany's classical philologists who grappled with issues of transmission, corruption, and temporality, and who set the techniques for dealing with them as the methodological core of their science' (Turner 2007: 370). Institutions like the Royal Asiatic Society¹⁶ were founded during this time and soon thereafter influential figures such as Max Müller¹⁷ defined what came to be known as indology. Although yoga was a rather neglected topic among indologists of the time,¹⁸ indological methods shaped the subsequent study of yoga texts, in particular the *Pātañjalayogaśāstra*. The ideals and methodology of this emergent academic discipline, however, were deeply embedded in the Humboldtian principles of the 'university' as an educational system based on unbiased knowledge and analysis, and reflected a deep suspicion of the privileging of revelation over science found in theology faculties.¹⁹ Inden, however, building upon the seminal work of Said (1978), argues that orientalist and indologist in particular assumed that there is a single external reality to which western science has privileged access (what he calls 'Indology's episteme'); that 'rational, scientific thought and the institutions of liberal capitalism and democracy' stem from the nature of Euro-American civilization, and that 'the essence of Indian civilization is just the opposite of the West's' (1990: 402).

Within the category of early scholar-practitioners of yoga we must include scholars affiliated with spiritual and religious organisations producing translations and commentaries on yoga texts in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Probably the most significant of these organisations is the Theosophical Society, founded by H. P. Blavatsky and Henry Olcott in 1875, which published many early translations and commentaries on Patañjali's *Yogasūtras* as well as some

of the earliest translations of *haṭhayoga* texts. Notable Theosophical authors here include M. N. Dvivedi, Ram Prasad, Annie Besant, William Quan Judge, Judith Tyberg, Walter Evans-Wentz, Paul Brunton, I. K. Taimni, Nilakantha Sri Ram, Charles J. Ryan and Constant Kerneiz. Such authors tend to present themselves openly as practitioners, and often their writings are markedly less academic in terms of scholarly rigour (perhaps because their primary readership was not academic, because they themselves had not been trained in the stricter scholarly environment of the university, and because they were not held to high scholarly standards by their Theosophical peers). Other religious or spiritual organisations producing translations and commentaries on yoga include the Ramakrishna Mission, the Aurobindo Ashram, Kaivalyadhama, the Divine Life Society, the Yoga Publications Trust and the Himalayan Institute.

Somewhere between the category of early textual scholars who spurn practical yoga, and avowed practitioners of yoga who also translate or write studies of yoga texts fall those who lead consciously partitioned, double lives as (public) scholars on the one hand and (secret) practitioners on the other. One of the most striking examples of this is Sir John Woodroffe (1865–1936), who was a High Court judge and scholar of British–Indian law, but also an adept and student of Hindu tantra who, together with a group of Indian pandits, published books on this topic under the pseudonym Arthur Avalon (Urban 2003: 134–147; Taylor 2012 [2001]; see Strube, Chapter 10 for further discussion). Also noteworthy in this regard is the twentieth century’s best known non-Indian scholar of yoga, Mircea Eliade, who omitted his own practical knowledge of yoga from his ‘scientific’ work, but evoked it in his fiction and his journals (Guggenbühl 2008). A similar splitting-off of scholarship and yogic practice is also evident in Eliade’s teacher, the great Indian scholar S. N. Dasgupta, who kept his mystical practice a closely guarded ‘sacred secret’ (ibid.). Of course, scholars may obfuscate or keep secret their own personal experience with yoga or other mystical techniques for many different reasons (such as considerations of scholarly respectability or the conviction that spiritual experience should remain private) but these examples nonetheless point us to an intriguing historical nexus of tension between scholarship and practice.

Varieties of scholar-practitioner

In discussing varieties of scholar-practitioner, we are well aware that such categories are merely ideal-typical and may not describe any one particular ‘scholar-practitioner’ of yoga. Scholar-practitioners may straddle two or more categories. They may occupy more than one position over the course of their lives and careers, moving for example from a serious daily yoga practice to no practice at all, or vice versa. And they may be averse (with some justification) to defining themselves as ‘types’ or particular ‘varieties’, or consider that the characteristics we describe are too general to be meaningful. Furthermore, what is meant by ‘scholar’ and ‘practitioner’ cannot be taken for granted: both are polyvalent terms, resistant to simple definition, and implicated in complex nexuses of power and authority. For example, scholars may not necessarily work, or even have ever worked, in a university (viz. independent scholars, or those working within non- or semi-academic institutions), and some ‘practitioners’ may do very little by way of formal ‘practice’, while still considering themselves yoga practitioners by dint of their practice history or spiritual orientation. Furthermore, scholars who are privately funded may come under pressure implicitly or explicitly from their funders to follow particular directions or agendas.²⁰

Attitudes among scholars (and indeed across groups of scholars) may also be revealing: one scholar may consider another not to be a ‘real’ scholar because his or her research methods do not fit their standard of what scholarship means, or because she or he is not accredited by a university, etc. In a similar way, one practitioner may consider that another’s practice is not ‘real’

yoga, and so on. We have tried to take some account of these factors in our description of the varieties of scholar-practitioner of yoga, but it remains a heuristic and provisional model, rather than a description of fixed types that exist in reality.

Nevertheless, these varieties represent identifiable positions that scholars who practise yoga (or yoga practitioners who engage in scholarship) may occupy, and help to illuminate the tensions that can inhere in the way they navigate their relationship between scholarship and the practice of yoga. Broadly speaking, we can divide scholar-practitioners of yoga into two main categories: those who work in formal university settings and those who teach in non-university settings. Of course, this is not a hard and fast distinction: as the academic job market becomes increasingly precarious and as temporary teaching contracts and short-term research scholarships become the norm in higher education, especially for early-career academics, scholars may supplement their income or bridge gaps in university employment with teaching in other, non-academic settings (some of which will be examined below).

University-employed scholar-practitioners of yoga occupy a variety of positions with regard to practical yoga. Some may keep the fact that they practise yoga hidden from their colleagues, perhaps because they consider that if this were openly known it could damage their academic respectability or suggest a lack of detachment and objectivity towards their object of study.²¹ This position has some similarities with ‘partitioned’ scholar-practitioners of previous generations like Woodroffe and Eliade. Or scholars may simply consider their spiritual practice a private affair that need not be discussed in the work environment (as opposed to something that would compromise their professional status), and/or espouse a range of theoretical positions that encourage the separation of personal faith, belief and spiritual practice from academic praxis.²²

Others, on the other hand, may be overt, active advocates for the practice of yoga, and their teaching may blend ‘objective’ scholarly work (such as the critical editing of Sanskrit texts) with yoga teaching within the classroom, and even spiritual guidance to students.²³ This latter is perhaps more likely to be the case in faith-based institutions or ‘theological’ universities, whose institutional remit may even encourage this approach, and in university programmes whose students mainly self-identify as yoga practitioners, such as Loyola Marymount University in Los Angeles, where an MA in Yoga has been running since 2013 (and on which more below).

The blending of normative, mainstream scholarship with spiritual practices is also a key feature of ‘contemplative studies’ programmes, particularly in the United States, which foreground yoga and meditation techniques as a complement to academic study.²⁴ In some respects such programmes represent an orientation to practice and scholarship diametrically opposed to that of traditional and present-day European indology, insofar as practice (of yoga or meditation) is no longer simply the object of scholarly attention but also the method, i.e. yoga and meditation are utilised as tools with which to enhance one’s experience of reading texts, while reading texts themselves is expected to reinforce one’s contemplative practice. Thus Brown University’s Contemplative Studies programme offers ‘Integrative Contemplative Pedagogy’, combining ‘traditional’ academic methods with contemplative experience in order to create ‘a new generation of contemplative humanists, scientists and artists’.²⁵ Similarly, the University of Virginia’s Contemplative Sciences Center offers programmes focused on the exploration of ‘contemplative practices, values, ideas, and institutions historically and in contemporary times’,²⁶ as well as practical instruction in yoga.²⁷ As a final example, the Yoga Studies programmes (up to and including an MA course) offered at the Center for Religion & Spirituality at Loyola Marymount University in Los Angeles, combine the pastoral mission of the broader institution with practical yoga instruction and the academic study of yoga, and are designed with yoga practitioners, rather than academics, in mind. The programmes are intended to ‘meet the needs of Yoga students and teachers seeking to enhance their knowledge of the Yoga tradition’.²⁸

In these contexts, ‘spiritual formation’ goes hand in hand with academic formation.²⁹ As Douglas (2012) remarks, in such environments it becomes very difficult to tell the difference between teaching yoga and teaching about yoga.³⁰ These programmes stand in marked contrast to some (particularly European) university programmes of study in which blending practical yoga with the academic study of yoga is unusual and may be frowned upon. This may be a reflection of the differing academic histories of Europe and North America particularly, perhaps, in terms of the legacy of ‘German’ indology (which has had less influence in North America than it does in Europe) and the predominance of religious studies as a discipline in North America. For example, practical yoga is not a formal component of either of the two established European MA yoga programmes, the Masters in Yoga Studies at the University Ca’ Foscari in Venice,³¹ and the Traditions of Yoga and Meditation MA at SOAS University of London,³² even though a majority of students may themselves be yoga practitioners.³³

In other cases, scholars may move between academic environments into which the introduction of practical yoga would be inadmissible (i.e. certain universities), and those in which yoga practice may form an integral part of their teaching (e.g. urban yoga centres), as is the case with some of the contributors to this volume.³⁴ In such environments, practitioner credentials may be not just tolerated but presumed or solicited alongside one’s academic credentials. How such ‘interlopers’ (or ‘multitaskers’) manage these roles is a fascinating topic, that is beyond the scope of this short chapter.

Although clearly not ‘practitioners’, and thus strictly speaking outside the purview of this study, we include here university scholars who write and/or teach about yoga but who are not, never have been and do not intend to be practitioners of it.³⁵ Related to these, but more complex in terms of their orientation towards practice, are university scholars who used to practise yoga but no longer do, and for whom an initial practical interest in yoga may indeed have led to an academic career in the first place. Similarly, we also include here scholar-practitioners who teach or write in non-university settings. Such scholars may have gained their degrees in universities and then migrated into other milieux, or they may have had a training in non-university institutions, or be self-educated.³⁶ We include in this category scholars who carry out their scholarship independently of any institution, those who work in non-university institutions that support scholarship and those who teach full-time on the commercial ‘yoga circuit’.

Also of note in this regard are ‘public yoga intellectuals’, who may or may not be professional scholars (i.e. work or have worked in university settings) who are or have been themselves practitioners, and who regularly participate in mostly online public debates. Recent topics have included the ‘take back yoga’ movement,³⁷ the introduction of yoga classes in public schools in California,³⁸ issues of sexual and psychological abuse within yoga communities,³⁹ the standardisation and the commercialisation of yoga⁴⁰ and keeping yoga free from government and corporate interference.⁴¹ Some of these public yoga intellectuals/activists have often actively foregrounded the political within yoga, working on social issues such as power dynamics, trauma and abuse within cults and yoga communities, misogyny, homo- and transphobia, spiritual consumerism, body acceptance, racism, diversity and other related matters.⁴² These issues have gained prominence through the use of social media platforms, blogs and other online forums, and have sometimes provoked furious responses by other (most often western) yoga advocates who may see themselves as defending the Indian tradition against the usurpation of a (white) western liberal intellectual elite.⁴³

The political engagement of the kind exemplified by such public yoga intellectuals is rarer from academic scholars of yoga, who often prefer to preserve academic objectivity, or simply their precious time.⁴⁴ Scholars can and do enter the public sphere in varying degrees, of course. A notable example is the recent Standards Review Project of the US’s largest yoga organisation,

Yoga Alliance, in which scholars (including one of the authors of this chapter) participated alongside yoga teachers to reflect on topics such as scope of practice, code of conduct, inclusion, core curricula and teacher qualifications in the context of Yoga Alliance's services to its members.⁴⁵ A more troubling example comes from scholars who have been personally attacked or have had their work plagiarised.⁴⁶ Indeed, in recent years, academics who study yoga (and indeed Indianist scholars more generally) have increasingly come under attack by right-wing Hindutva critics in India, Europe and the United States, who present these scholars as neo-colonialists trespassing on sacred ground. Commonly in such discourses, scholars who are not born Indian are considered not to have the authority/right (*adhikāra*) to research yoga (a right which is seen to derive from cultural, religious and racial inheritance), and their methods (historical, social scientific, philological, etc.) may be viewed with deep suspicion, or as incompatible with and antithetical to sanctioned, traditional ways of knowing.⁴⁷ Indeed, such scholars are often presented in Hindutva discourse as enemies of Hinduism, neo-colonialists or plain 'hinduphobes' whose covert purpose is to destroy Hindu *dharma*.⁴⁸ Such attacks often take the form of anti-intellectualism and anti-liberalism. Although yoga is currently a high-profile academic topic, such attacks are not limited to scholars of yoga, but to any scholar of India whose endeavours are seen as antipathetic. It is important to understand that this is not a merely racial or geographical narrative, but an ideological and political one. Indeed, Indian scholars who do not conform to the Hindutva ideological agenda, or who are seen to be adopting 'western' methods, also frequently come under attack.⁴⁹ In addition, some non-Indian yoga practitioners have in recent years adopted similar lines of argument against both scholars and their fellow western practitioners of yoga, thus further complicating any simple perceived dichotomy between liberal scholars and Hindutva. Although scholars may brush off these critiques as simplistic, irrelevant to the work at hand, or even delusional, it is important to be aware of them in order to understand the political contexts of yoga scholarship in the academy today, and to consider the possible effects that an increasingly aggressive and widespread critique of yoga scholars from certain quarters may have on research and teaching.⁵⁰

Conclusion

The category of 'scholar-practitioner of yoga' can provide a useful frame for examining the rapidly expanding field of yoga studies and the variety of disciplinary and personal positions that are deployed within it. Framing the academic study of yoga over the course of the past two centuries as a history which includes scholar-practitioners brings into focus some of the scholarly and individual biases and predilections that have shaped understandings of yoga up to the present. Yoga is not unique in drawing a high proportion of insiders and practitioners to its study, but it is a particularly complex and revealing case which speaks to the varying agendas and disciplinary and (sometimes) religious convictions of those who research and teach about yoga in the modern university. The phenomenon of the contemporary scholar-practitioner is in some respects an outcome of a specific modern, global history of yoga over the past two centuries, in which yoga has been adopted and adapted in a variety of ways and far from its place of birth, along with other 'eastern' physical and metaphysical practices such as Tai Chi. The scholar-practitioner of yoga thus finds him or herself in an intriguing historical position, one in which knowledge of yoga comes not (or not only) from older customary forms of transmission, but also from evidence-based scholarship whose first commitment is to the advancement of knowledge in the professional scholarly community, rather than to cultural or religious traditions.

The category of scholar-practitioner should also encourage us to reflect on what constitutes 'scholarship' and what does not. For example, should we consider writers who do not engage

in peer review, do not cite verifiable (nor falsifiable) evidence and do not engage in wider scholarly conversations as ‘scholars’ (even if they are popularly known or self-identify as such) to be practising scholarship? To what extent is it possible, indeed, to move between evidence-based scholarship and one’s faith/practice communities, and what tensions and contradictions are inherent in such manoeuvres? What, moreover, of those popular and influential writers on yoga whose ideological commitments or politico-religious views, combined with creative interpretations of ancient textual or archaeological data, result in the kind of ‘desire-driven invention’ that Lincoln identifies in certain ‘scholars’ of myth (1999: 215)? If this ‘myth + footnotes’ (ibid.) approach cannot be qualified as ‘scholarship’ in any generally recognised sense (recognised that is, within mainstream western universities), it remains true that many such authors enjoy a reputation as learned, trustworthy scholars among their readership. Indeed, such figures may claim for themselves an intrinsic authority (*adhikāra*) to write on yoga etc. while maintaining a concomitant antipathy towards scholars (Indian or not) who conduct their work according to the norms of academia – itself often judged as intrinsically exclusionary, elitist, colonialist and oppressive. Conversely, scholars may simply disregard such work for not meeting the minimum standards of academic practice. From this situation arises an inherent tension between certain academic and non-academic interpretations of yoga that may in certain respects mirror and amplify tensions already experienced by the scholar-practitioner.

Notes

- 1 This chapter was partially financially supported by the European Union’s Horizon 2020 research and innovation programme under grant agreement No. 647963 (Haṭha Yoga Project).
- 2 We would like to thank Suzanne Newcombe, Ann Gleig, Ville Husgafvel and the Routledge anonymous reviewer for their reflections on this chapter.
- 3 Several international yoga conferences have taken place in the recent past (a few notable examples are: ‘Yoga in Transformation, Historical and Contemporary Perspectives on a Global Phenomenon’, University of Vienna, 19–21 September 2013; ‘Yoga Darśana, Yoga Sādhana: Traditions, Transmissions, Transformations’, Jagiellonian University, Krakow 2016; and ‘Yoga, Movement, and Space’, University of Kyoto, 2–3 November 2018). Between 2015–2020 there were two five-year ERC-funded research projects on yoga: the *Entangled Histories of Yoga, Ayurveda and Alchemy in South Asia* (www.ayuryog.org/) and the *Haṭha Yoga Project* (<http://hyp.soas.ac.uk/>). There is also a ‘Yoga in Theory and Practice Unit’ at the American Academy of Religion which has at least one large panel each year at the AAR Annual Meeting. In recent years, other international academic conferences (notably of the European Conference on South Asian Studies, (ECSAS) the European Association for the Study of Religions (EASR) and the Association of Social Anthropologists (ASA)) have often included a panel on yoga as part of their programme.
- 4 See, for example, McCutcheon (1999); Spickard, Landres and McGuire (2002); Knott (2005); Chryssides and Gregg (2019).
- 5 In fact, as we write this chapter in late 2018, members of the Yggdrasil German-speaking listserv for scholars of religion have been vigorously revisiting the question of the role of scholars in the production of knowledge, and what our relationship to reality and facts might be. The following article by Kocku von Stuckrad arose from that discussion: www.counterpointknowledge.org/accountability-or-objectivity-being-a-scholar-in-an-age-of-crisis/ Accessed 30 November 2018.
- 6 See for instance, Knott 2005; the ‘Participatory Turn’ as proposed by Ferrer and Sherman 2008, or *The Insider/Outsider Debate, New Perspectives in the Study of Religion* edited by George Chryssides and Stephen E. Gregg (2019), who suggest that, ‘it has become clear that binary notions of religious belonging, based upon narrow views of religion as a monolithic category of participation, are no longer tenable within the Study of Religion [...] and suggest a new relational continuum approach to the inside/outside issue in the Study of Religion which is reflective of contemporary developments in methodology, focusing in particular on issues of lived religion’, www.equinoxpub.com/home/view-chapter/?id=27422. Accessed 30 November 2018.

- 7 Postcolonial studies has grown to a large field of study. Since Said's critique and coinage of the term 'Orientalism' (1978), other scholars have critically engaged with the relationship between India and the West such as Halbfass (1990), Inden (1990), King (1999), Chakrabarty (2000) to name just a few. For an overview of the approach known as 'engaged anthropology' see Low and Merry (2010).
- 8 For example, an unpublished study by Michael Aktor and Suzanne Newcombe, based on a non-representative survey of scholars of the religious traditions of Asia, suggests that at least half of professional scholars of Hinduism and Buddhism have 'some kind of personal practice related to the religion they professionally study' (Aktor and Newcombe, unpublished).
- 9 By 'traditional yoga' we mean yoga as practised in ascetic, monastic and householder settings in South Asia, handed down through a religious lineage and relatively free from the innovations of globalised modern yoga. The term is problematic in that it suggests a kind of hermetic purity that rarely exists in living religious traditions, and a simple binary with 'non-traditional' or 'modern' yoga. We employ the term here simply to highlight the distinct case of the scholar-practitioner in the modern university.
- 10 We asked the following four questions: (1) Do you practise yoga/meditation regularly and/or have you practised yoga/meditation regularly in the past? What kind(s)? (2) Have you ever taught practical yoga/meditation? (3) Have you ever taught about yoga/meditation in non-academic settings (e.g. centres, studios, teacher trainings etc.)? If so, what is the difference in your experience of teaching in academic and non-academic settings? (4) Do you experience any tension between your academic life and your life as a practitioner of yoga/meditation and do you consciously keep these separate in any way?
- 11 One of the two respondents who does not currently practise but has tried out some yoga classes feels 'anxiety about his lack of practical experience' and would like to 'delve more deeply into the practice in the future'.
- 12 In Sanskrit universities and Sanskrit departments all across India, yoga continues to be taught as a *śāstra* in which, typically, students study the *Pātāñjalayogaśāstra* along with its commentaries. Yoga is thus part of the curriculum of what would be the equivalent of higher education in 'philosophy'. A list of sixteen Sanskrit universities in India compiled on Wikipedia show that in all of these universities yoga is taught as a subject within the degree of 'Acharya' or 'Shastri' https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_Sanskrit_universities_in_India. Accessed on 29 November 2018. As an illustration of this, the Rashtriya Sanskrit Vidyapeetha, Tirupati has its own 'Department of Sankhya Yoga' within the Faculty of Darshanas, <http://rsvidyapeetha.ac.in/fd.htm>. Accessed on 29 November 2018.
- 13 An acronym of 'Ayurveda, Yoga and Naturopathy, Unani, Siddha and Homoeopathy'.
- 14 For example, until fairly recently, yoga was studied at Benares Hindu University as a Sanskrit subject within the philosophy programme. Since 2006, one can also study 'Preventive & Social Medicine and Yoga' within the independently established Department of Swasthavritta and Yoga'. www.bhu.ac.in/ims/swasthayoga/dep_index.html. Accessed on 22 November 2018.
- 15 Though the Supreme Court of India ruled against making yoga compulsory in public schools, the Human Resource Development Ministry declared that 'Yoga is an integral part of the curriculum of "Health and Physical Education", which is a compulsory subject for Classes 1 to 10. To that extent, yoga has not been neglected'. http://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/articleshow/59967483.cms?utm_source=contentofinterest&utm_medium=text&utm_campaign=cppst. Accessed on 22 November 2018.
- 16 The Royal Asiatic Society was founded by Colebrooke in 1824. Its academic journal is still being published, with occasional articles on yoga. Currently, this journal has at least one eminent yoga scholar on their editorial board (Carl Ernst). Similarly, other academic journals and institutions that publish research on yoga have an undeniable colonial history, e.g. Société Asiatique, Deutsche Morgenländische Gesellschaft, Brill.
- 17 Max Müller too, towards the end of his life, published his notes on the 'Six Systems of Indian Philosophy' in which he deals with 'Yoga and Sāmkhya' in Chapter Seven. Not surprisingly, he views yoga as an intellectual exercise mostly devoid of physical exercise. Seated *āsanas* are discussed by him as aids in his subchapter, 'Yogāṅgas, Helps to Yoga' (Müller 1899: 402–473). On Müller's disregard for practical yoga see Singleton 2010: 43.
- 18 On the lack of interest for yoga within indology and on the history of indological research on the *Pātāñjalayogaśāstra* see Maas 2013.
- 19 'In the Humboldtian ideal the university existed solely to serve truth, science and learning. Reformers looked with suspicion on the "upper" faculties (law, medicine and theology), which ultimately served not *Wissenschaft* but the utilitarian needs of society and state for professional practitioners. Their suspicion fell especially heavily on the faculty of theology. They insisted that if the faculty was to continue to exist

- at all as a part of the university, it must abandon its claim to revelatory knowledge transcending science, must treat theology entirely as a branch of *Wissenschaft*, and must abandon or radically de-emphasise the educational task of preparing clergymen for the pulpit and pastoral duties' (Turner 2007: 371).
- 20 The increased prevalence of private funding in British, European and American universities raises sensitive questions about academic neutrality, especially when funders are wedded to a particular ideology or vision of history, and/or to a particular outcome of the research they pay for. The erosion of public funding in universities increasingly puts pressure on scholars to find money from private sources and, arguably, to adapt their research to the goals of the funder. The privatised university also recreates students as consumers, further impacting teaching and research directions. See Collini 2018.
 - 21 Aktor and Newcombe found in their unpublished survey based on research conducted online in academic discussion groups on the religions of south asia and Buddhism (conducted 2007–8) that 'although many practitioner-scholars have no wish to hide their religious practices and identification, many members in both groups [Buddhist and Hindu 'scholar-practitioners'] voiced anxiety about being subject to discriminatory employment practices and more general negative assessments by colleagues if they identified with their religion of study publicly'.
 - 22 The theoretical work of Donald Weibe (1981) and Russell McCutcheon (1999) are in some respects representative of this position.
 - 23 See Douglas 2012.
 - 24 See Morgan 2012; Barbezat and Bush (eds.) 2014; Simmer-Brown and Grace (eds) 2011; Komjathy 2016.
 - 25 <https://brown.edu/academics/contemplative-studies/about>. Accessed 31 December 2019.
 - 26 <http://csc.virginia.edu/content/mission>. Accessed 31 December 2019.
 - 27 <https://csc.virginia.edu/activity/spring-2020-yoga>. Accessed 14 February 2020.
 - 28 <https://academics.lmu.edu/extension/crs/yoga/>. Accessed 31 December 2019.
 - 29 As the director of the programme, Christopher Key Chapple, writes: 'Since the 1960s, Loyola University (the name changed to Loyola Marymount University on the occasion of merger with Marymount College in 1974) has been deeply engaged in interfaith dialogue and in various modalities of spiritual formation. Our Yoga Studies offerings build on this long-standing tradition', <https://bellarmine.lmu.edu/yoga/people/meetthedirector/>. Accessed 31 December 2019.
 - 30 <http://yogainhighereducation.blogspot.com/2012/08/north-american-educators-and-use-of.html>. Accessed 31 December 2019.
 - 31 <https://unive.it/pag/4994/>. Accessed 14 February 2020.
 - 32 <https://soas.ac.uk/religions-and-philosophies/programmes/ma-traditions-of-yoga-and-meditation/>. Accessed 31 December 2020.
 - 33 A roundtable discussion of the convenors of the three extant yoga Master Programmes (Los Angeles, Venice, London) at an academic conference in Krakow in 2016, chaired by one of the authors of this paper (Singleton), made these differences in approach quite apparent, (https://academia.edu/16072001/yoga_dar%C5%9Bana_yoga_s%C4%81dhana_traditions_transmissions_transformations_-_conference_announcement_and_CFP). Accessed 14 February 2020.
 - 34 Fifteen of the respondents to our survey reported having taught or planning to teach at yoga teacher trainings or similar workshops in non-academic settings such as yoga studios or retreats. However, while many teach *about* yoga (i.e. history and philosophy), only about half of them actually teach meditation and/or postural yoga in both academic and non-academic settings.
 - 35 We personally know many scholars who fit this category. All of them are European.
 - 36 American scholars of Siddha Yoga such as Douglas Brooks, Paul Muller-Ortega, William Mahony, Carlos Pomedá, and Sally Kempton each provide interesting (and non-uniform) examples of this phenomenon.
 - 37 <https://hafsite.org/takeyogaback>. Accessed 5 January 2019.
 - 38 For a treatment of both the case in Encinitas school case and the Hindu American Foundation campaign 'Take Yoga Back', see Jain 2014; Powell 2014.
 - 39 For example, the Yoga Journal published the following article in February 2018, <https://yogajournal.com/lifestyle/timesup-metoo-ending-sexual-abuse-in-the-yoga-community>. Accessed 10 January 2019; Remski 2019.
 - 40 For example, in North America the Yoga Alliance, following severe critique over the years regarding their yoga teaching standards, decided in late 2017 to launch the 'Standard Review Project', <https://yastandards.com/>. Accessed 10 January 2019.
 - 41 For example in the UK the Keep Yoga Free movement, <http://keepyogafree.co.uk/>. Accessed 10 January 2019.

- 42 Some examples of ‘public yoga intellectuals’ are Matthew Remski, Carol Horton and Theodora Wildcroft.
- 43 For example, ‘Sri Louise’ a disciple of Swami Dayananda Sarasvati who critiques the yoga culture in North America, especially with regards to appropriation, both in her blog and on other social media platforms. An exemplary article published in Indiafacts.org is entitled: ‘Denying Yoga Its Roots – Classic Case of Hinduphobia’, <http://indiafacts.org/darth-yogabecky-hinduphobia-facebook-docu-drama/>. Accessed 10 January 2019. Unfortunately, such responses can quickly descend into mere aggressive trolling.
- 44 Several scholars have privately expressed to us their aversion to public debate of this kind (particularly online) by evoking what Alberto Brandolini, an Italian independent software development consultant, has termed ‘Bullshit Asymmetry Principle’, which states that the amount of time taken to refute bullshit is exponentially greater than the amount of time taken to produce it, <http://ordrespontane.blogspot.com/2014/07/brandolinis-law.html>. Accessed on 11 January 2019.
- 45 See <http://yastandards.com/>. Accessed on 11 January 2019.
- 46 Such was the case, for example, with the scholar (of yoga and Hinduism) Andrew Nicholson whose work was plagiarised by Rajiv Malhotra in his 2014 book *Indra’s Net*. Nicholson wrote and published this response to the incident in Scroll: <https://scroll.in/article/742022/upset-about-rajiv-malhotras-plagiarism-even-more-upset-about-distortions-of-my-work>. Accessed on 11 January 2019. Malhotra said in response, ‘This syndrome is a subject of my research – namely, the western Indologists plagiarizing from Indians and rewriting in new clever English to claim originality’. In retaliation, he then removed all references to Nicholson from his new edition of *Indra’s Net*, replacing them with ‘references to the original Indian sources’. As quoted in <https://insidehighered.com/news/2016/04/12/scholars-who-study-hinduism-and-india-face-hostile-climate>. Accessed on 11 January 2019.
- 47 See for instance Adluri and Bagchee’s critique of German indology in *The Nay-Science: A History of German Indology* (2014). For a critique of this work see Franco (2016 and 2018) and Hanneder 2018. See also the opinion piece ‘Claiming Yoga for India’ by scholar Andrea Jain (<http://religiondispatches.org/claiming-yoga-for-india/>). Accessed 11 January 19).
- 48 See, in particular, Rajiv Malhotra’s *Academic Hinduphobia: A Critique of Wendy Doniger’s Erotic School of Indology* (2016). For a discussion of the term Hinduphobia in academia see Long 2017. For a critique of Malhotra, see Nussbaum 2009, chapter 7.
- 49 For example, Malhotra and his allies term such Indian academics ‘*becharis* [‘poor losers’]’ and ‘*sepoys* [i.e. Indian recruits in the colonial army]’, arguing that their motivation is to ‘feel superior to ordinary Indians’, https://infinityfoundation.com/indic_colloq/papers/paper_malhotra2.pdf. Accessed on 14 December 2018.
- 50 The case of Patricia Sauthoff is an example of this. Dr. Sauthoff who taught a course entitled ‘History and Politics of Yoga’ at Nalanda University, was asked by the university to unconditionally apologise for ‘her critical comments to the media’ after her contract was not renewed without justification. Since the incident in 2017 she has received insults and threats of all kinds on social media, <https://thewire.in/education/nalanda-university-yoga-patricia-sauthoff-yoga>. Accessed 2 December 2018.

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