



Qualitative Sociology Review

Volume VII, Issue 3 – December 2011

Krzysztof T. Konecki
University of Lodz, Poland

Book Review:

Yoga Body. The Origins Of Modern Posture Practice by Marc Singleton. Oxford University Press, 2010

Contemporary interest in yoga in the West is for sure one of the reasons for Marc Singleton to write this book. This is a very important book because it fights the stereotype concerning origins of contemporary hatha-yoga practiced in the West.

The book is a marvelous historical analysis of contemporary hatha-yoga development, the one we know in the West from popular hatha-yoga schools, commercials, celebrity images (i.e., Madonna, Sting, Jennifer Aniston, Drew Barrymore, Matthew McConaughey, etc.). After reading this book, yoga will no longer be the same, as we have perceived it earlier on as being an original Indian spiritual or physical practice. It turns out, that the West had a strong influence on the development of contemporary yoga, also the same as practiced in India. Contemporary yoga is also our, western and modern, invention.

Yoga, especially the practice of asanas, has become a very popular activity in the western world. Yoga, focused on doing certain positions and physical exercises, has also become a huge business. Hatha-yoga styles and positions are often patented and protected by ownership and franchised. Equipment useful in yoga practice is sold and yoga positions are used in mobile phone commercials, yoghurt commercials and other commercials. According to Singleton, in 2008, only in the USA, practitioners spent 5.7 billion dollars on yoga lessons, holidays with yoga and products connected with practicing yoga, which is about half of Nepal's gross national income (p. 3). Also, in Poland, hatha-yoga businesses flourish; beginning with hatha-yoga schools, yoga retreats and on to the production and selling of accessories.

Marc Singleton is mostly interested in the problem: how does it happen that contemporary yoga, practiced in the western world, and the original one, from XIX century India (a British Colony), do not seem very alike. He is mostly interested in the period between the year 1896 (the year of publication of Swami Vivekananda's *Raja Yoga* – a book criticizing an asana focused yoga) and the year 1966 (the year B.K.S. Iyengar published *Light on Yoga* – in which there were presented asanas and the rules of practicing them). This has been the most creative period for the form of hatha-yoga, as we know it today in the western world. In the second half of the XIX century, yoga revives in India, thanks to Vivekananda (1883-1902). But, even then asanas (positions in yoga, the physical side of yoga practice) as we know it today, did not exist in Vivekananda's system. For him, yoga was mostly about obtaining

spiritual knowledge, self-awareness and practicing either knowledge and self-awareness in everyday life.

Generally, the physical side of yoga practice was rejected by Vivekananda and his followers. Where then does contemporary yoga come from? (Anglophone, transnational yoga; p. 4).

Singleton writes a rather provocative and controversial thesis. He states that in the West in the XIX century there had been established and developed an international movement of physical culture, which influenced Indian youth between the XIX and XX centuries. Europe has also developed quasi-religious forms of physical culture, which have influenced a reinterpretation of yoga.

Nationalistic Hinduism, which at that time started developing, had also influenced the understanding of hatha-yoga as a traditional form of physical and spiritual practice from Indian origins.¹ Western physical culture has developed well in India. It was also completed with the practice of asanas and then it returned to Europe and mixed with Western esotericism and “esoteric gymnastics,” which had developed in Europe and America without earlier contact with yoga tradition.

Posture-based yoga, as we know it today, is the result of a dialogical exchange between para-religious, modern body culture techniques developed in the West and the various discourses of «modern» Hindu yoga that emerged from the time of Vivekananda onward. Although it routinely appeals to the tradition of Indian hatha yoga, contemporary posture-based yoga cannot really be considered a direct successor of this tradition. (Singleton 2010:5)

Singleton’s important contributions are his very careful studies on yoga literature from the beginning of the XX century. In resources, from the Cambridge University Library and in the India Office of the British Library in London, asanas and hatha-yoga did not exist as a subject. The same conclusions emerged from the review of American literature up to 1930. It was not until after the Second World War that popular English yoga handbooks started to put a strong accent on yoga postures (p. 5-6).

Asanas in English handbooks were compared to gymnastics. Well-known schemes of interpretation enabled it to incorporate yoga into the Western physical culture. Yoga’s philosophical frames were repressed and replaced with a modernist discourse of health and fitness. The analysis of handbooks on gymnastics lets us suppose that English authors of yoga handbooks have inscribed achievements of physical culture of those times into the orthodoxy of yoga practice and rejected those parts which were difficult to combine with the uprising discourse of health and fitness (p. 7). One may agree with this thesis, even when referring to hatha-yoga popularizing handbooks by B.K.S. Iyengar, in which he rather avoids references to practices of organism purification (*satkarma*) and traditional ascetic yoga practices (*tapas*), where the notion of asceticism, in a classical sense, is not used even once

¹ We could observe similar uses of yoga practice in Poland, where the Hindu tradition was inspiring for a spirit of Polish patriotism: “...Słowacki stressed the Indian sources of his belief as being a part of a larger doctrine, which «presents a peculiar amalgamation of the Upanishadic doctrine of the psycho-cosmic salvation through evolution with the hetero-soteriological conception proper to Buddhism»... Some of his ideas were put into practice in the «Elusis» movement established in 1903 by Wincenty Lutosławski (1863-1954) who continued the Romantic tradition, believing that Poland was a cultural intermediary between oriental and Western spiritual traditions and for whom Hindu yoga exercises were to be an element in the physical and spiritual renewal of the Polish nation...” (Doktor 1997:349-350).

(see: Iyengar 1979:38). Especially influential were Scandinavian gymnastics deriving from P.H. Ling and E. Sandow's bodybuilding training and methods of teaching physical culture used by the YMCA (also in India). We should mention that Pehr Ling also learned martial arts and Chinese massage techniques from his friend "Ming." It becomes clear that the world of international physical culture is mixed with other traditions of both body culture and philosophical tradition. The combination of Indian yoga with western physical culture in Singleton's analyses is evident. There are many controversies concerning diverse plots of this combined tradition. An arena in the social world of yoga emerges when it comes to interpreting the inheritance of one of the main early gurus of contemporary yoga – T. Krishnamacharya (1888-1989). There is also a dispute about who represents a "pure" yoga practice system (*orthopraxy*). There are three main Krishnamacharya followers who used to take lessons in the Mysore Palace. They are: Śri K. Pattabhi Jois, B.N.S. Iyengar and T.R.S. Sharma.

His other famous follower, well-known in the West, the most popular propagator of hatha-yoga in Poland, is B.K.S. Iyengar (p. 9). Yoga, according to Singleton, is a cultural Anglophone phenomenon, created as a result of a dialogical relation between India and the West through the English language. That is why he calls this phenomenon "a transnational Anglophone yoga" (p. 10). The domination of the English language in the Western world caused this kind of yoga to become the most known type among western practitioners.

The phenomenon of yoga, as it is described by Singleton, should not be analyzed from a point of view, which concerns closeness or distance from so-called original roots of yoga. Searching for gymnastic positions in classical yoga books like *Yajur* or *Rg Vedas* is unjustified from a historical and philological point of view. Śri K. Pattabhi Jois, when describing a set of asanas called *surja namaskara*, looks for their roots in ancient India (2002:33-34). However, from historical and philological points of view, it is hard to find evidence for a description of a set of positions in the classical texts. Contemporary yoga, according to Singleton, should be analyzed in its own terms rather than through its resemblance of a traditional Indian practice (p. 14). Yoga originating from India has transformed many times just as it has in India itself for the last 150 years because of an influence of the Western world and a modernist philosophy.

In the world of hatha-yoga there also exists an arena, which concerns a controversy about the origins of positions in contemporary yoga. Singleton refers to Norman Sjoman's book *The Yoga Tradition of the Mysore Palace*, written in 1996, where its author suggests that the "godfather" of contemporary hatha-yoga, T. Krishnamacharya, has developed his system of asana based on a gymnastic tradition of the Mysore Palace where he used to live and teach. In the book, he compares yoga positions, taught by Krishnamacharya followers (B.K.S. Iyengar and Śri K. Pattabhi Jois), with the ones present in the Palace exercise handbook. They turned out to be similar. Sjoman's work was either ignored or strongly criticized by those who would rather look for origins of asanas in ancient India as it has probably ruined their system of beliefs about the origins of contemporary hatha-yoga.

Why do we pay so much attention to the practice of asanas today? Well, in the XX century fifty practical handbooks were published, they were a contemporary secularized and medicalized version of yoga. It has also been associated with sports and physical exercise. In the 60's, in the USA, there were popularized, together with the youth revolution, Indian philosophies including yoga. On TV, there were presented such shows as "Yoga for Health." Bringing yoga closer to the New Age movement was also important for its popularization. It was a rediscovery of a

relationship between yoga and the XIX century esotericism. In the 90's, yoga had become a commercial enterprise in many western cities and states. It has been commoditized and commercialized.

The search for asanas in ancient Hindu texts or images is quite controversial. There is no proof that postures, which we know today, were practiced in ancient India. According to Singleton, it is possible that reading ancient texts and images is inscribing our perspective of yoga practice into ancient texts.

The book presented is incredibly important for everyone interested in contemporary yoga, especially hatha-yoga. It undermines stereotypes concerning the origins of hatha-yoga practice (especially positions in yoga exercise). It shows an astonishing complication of mutual inspiration of West and East. The simple explanation of the origins of contemporary transnational yoga as deriving from old Indian tradition is no longer justified. The West has also created contemporary yoga and has influenced the physical culture of XIX and XX century India. So, the dialogical transmission of information, knowledge of physical and spiritual yoga practice has created contemporary hatha-yoga.

However, one might have some reservations to Singleton's story. He himself accuses others of including contemporary perspectives of hatha-yoga practice into the interpretation of texts and images of hatha-yoga in ancient documents. But, he does the same, for example, when introducing an interpretative context of physical culture on understanding contemporary hatha-yoga. Apart from this perspective, one may see more hatha-yoga in the context of Pantanjali's philosophy of hatha-yoga or in the context of Hindu religion.

Vivekananda in the beginning of the XX century did not associate the practice of asanas with physical culture. He'd rather write about a clear mind than about physical exercises, about immortality of the self, cognition and liberation. What Singleton does is a spectacular search for bonds between discourses and contexts of power production. It is visible especially when he compares K. Rammamurties's asanas, who rejects western ideas and accents, the "ancient tradition of ashram," but also the "competition and elegance" and masculinity. The last two features remind Singleton of a system of education focused on military discipline of public schools of XIX century England. However, it is only a similarity, which lacks grounding of those connections in the data, so that it could be stated as a deeper relation or influence. That's only a similarity. Despite the fact, the effects of this speculation were based on similarities that are incredibly interesting, and deriving conclusions may be controversial for some, however, for others they could be innovative and help to change a perspective of perceiving contemporary hatha-yoga.

References

- Doktór, Tadeusz. 1997. "Hinduism in Poland." Pp. 349-368 in *New Religious Phenomena in Central and Eastern Europe*, edited by I. Borowik, G. Babiński. Krakow: Nomos.
- Iyengar, B.K.S. 1979. *Light on Yoga*. New York: Shoken Books.
- Pattabhi Joise, Śri. 2002. *Joga Mala*. New York: North Point Press.
- Singleton, Marc. 2010. *Yoga Body. The Origins of Modern Posture Practice*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Citation

Konecki, Krzysztof T. 2011. "Book Review: Yoga Body. The Origins Of Modern Posture Practice by Marc Singleton. Oxford University Press, 2010." *Qualitative Sociology Review*, Vol. VII Issue 3. Retrieved Month, Year (http://www.qualitativesociologyreview.org/ENG/archive_eng.php).