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**Yoga heritage in Brazil: History and culture in the
Development of a Brazilian Yoga**

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Abstract

This article contains a brief analysis of the trajectory of Yoga within the Brazilian cultural universe – a context in which the ancient practice developed in India starts to create new identities. Yoga tradition has acquired its own features in Brazil due to peculiarities of our cultural heritage. Although many Brazilian teachers insist on the need to value certain practices because of their "purity", "originality" and "fidelity to Indian tradition", we consider the reverse process to be more important from a historical point of view: the constitution of a "Brazilian Yoga" which is the result of a particular interpretation of Indian Yoga tradition in Brazil based on our historical specificities. It is precisely the sum of these specificities – which, since the beginning of our colonization, acted in the shaping our bodies, our beliefs and the way we relate to the world – that will be analyzed in our article. Our central argument will be that through the lenses of some constitutive elements of Brazilian identity, Yoga has been, since the mid-twentieth century, "reinvented" by Brazilian culture. We consider Brazilian Yoga to be a rich product of our

socio-cultural context, being also a contribution to the story of an ancient Indian tradition that is still alive and which is continuously reinvented by many cultures around the globe. Throughout the text, we will approach some questions related to this topic: is it possible to identify, in Brazil, a relationship with spirituality and the body that could be considered distinct from the one developed in the United States, territory where Yoga first landed in the West? Which elements of our nationality would actually be relevant to understand whether "corporeality" is linked to a Brazilian spirituality? How do these elements relate to the construction process of Brazilian Yoga? In order to provide input for these considerations, we will start with a discussion of the arrival of Yoga in the West, and then proceed to observe how this process occurred in Brazil.

Keywords: Yoga, History, Culture, India, Brazil,

Identities

Introduction: Background and Methods: Yoga and the body dialogues

Nowadays, the Yoga tradition can be understood as an open channel for dialogues between Indian culture and other cultures around the globe. Such dialogues have taken into consideration different conceptions of body,

mind and religiousness. Historically, this channel has been opened in a systematic way since the late nineteenth century and early twentieth century, when the British presence in India made it possible for the "West" to make contact with Yoga tradition. This contact has been established either through the classical texts (that have been translated from Sanskrit into other Western languages), or through the yogis themselves who, having been educated in English schools and universities, became acquainted with the language of the colonizer and started to migrate to Europe and the United States. The knowledge of Yoga thus reaches the "Western world" in the first decades of the twentieth century, both as a living and as an experiential tradition.

In this article, we will briefly analyze the arrival and development of Yoga in Brazil during the last

century, observing which Brazilian culture features Yoga has been incorporating and how this practice has become a dialogue channel between Indian and Brazilian cultures. We must emphasize that the human body has been the main element of expression for this dialogue. Several contemporary academics, especially from the fields of History and Sociology, consider the body to be a social and cultural construct. It is, therefore, through a corporeality which is expressed in the postures (*asanas*) and gestures (*mudras*) that Yoga has spread from the core of Indian culture to the "Western" world, and also to Brazil. (Gnerre, 2010: 252)

In order to understand the elements that are involved in this process, it is important to make some brief considerations about the history of Yoga in India, and about some characteristics of Brazilian history and

culture. We will focus, here, in one specific Yoga tradition – Hatha Yoga – in order to understand its history, and the reasons for the success of this branch of Yoga in Brazil. Concerning “Brazilian identity”, we will analyze some aspects that relate to the way this identity is connected to the body in our culture. It is relevant, in this context, to point out that Brazilian culture has its own rich cultural body expressions, such as dance and “capoeira”, in which the body incorporates sacred elements inherited from African-Brazilian religions¹, as well as flexibility and body empowerment techniques. Besides, native Brazilian Indians have a tradition of using their bodies for sacred rituals, and have always had

¹ Capoeira is a practice that involves learning not only arm and leg movements, but also playing instruments, listening and singing songs, and a body behavior driven by non rational actions. The conception of a sacredness that comes from the body which originates from the Afro-Brazilian religions is always present in the capoeira circle (Zica, 2012: 23).

the habit of sitting on the floor (Ribeiro, 1995). These and other body expressions are rooted in the process that led to the formation of a cultural imaginary related to the body in Brazil, and such body expressions were already present when Yoga arrived in our culture.

In order to develop the central topics of this article, we resorted to a historical perspective based on written documentary sources composed of a selection of books published by Brazilian Yoga masters during the last five decades. Other texts from authors considered references for academic research about Yoga will also be incorporated into the theoretical and conceptual discussions about the nature and the history of this tradition in India and other places.

Results and discussion: The Yoga tradition takes roots in Brazil

The diversity of Yoga tradition and Hatha Yoga

Before we start discussing Yoga tradition, it is important to emphasize that, for centuries, different forms of Yoga have developed in India. It can be considered a huge system, which involves many kinds of practices and philosophical perspectives (Gnerre, 2011; 95). However, the majority of Yoga practitioners in the West became familiarized with this practice through Hatha Yoga and its vast universe of physical postures. Thus, it is through the postures and breathing exercises of Yoga (the *Prāṇāyāma*) that many people in countries like USA, Italy or Brazil have opened the door to a great trove of knowledge and religions originating in India. Some recent academic studies have focused precisely on this topic, analyzing the fascination that the postures of

Yoga exercise in the contemporary world (Feuerstein, 2005: 11).

We will focus, therefore, on this specific Yoga tradition, in an attempt to understand the reasons of the success of this branch of Yoga. Our hypothesis is that this fascination arises from the fact that, in the long journey from India to the West, the postures brought along a corporeal knowledge: a body language and a body dialogue without words that is transmitted through teachers and practitioners around the word, associated with elements from an ancient tradition. According to this perspective, the human body is a communication vehicle of ideas and human aspirations. Thus, even with so many historical changes, Hatha Yoga preserves a millenary body language and a millenary knowledge about the human body that, although originated in Indian

culture, can certainly be considered a worldwide heritage.

For example, the simple act of sitting on the floor, ignoring the chair and crossing the legs, has an important cultural message for the Western tradition, where the chair has become a fundamental symbol of the civilizational process, in Norbert Elias' (1994) terms. Significant messages are, therefore, associated with the Yoga Body. If we want to understand such messages, we must first understand some internal concepts of the Yoga tradition.

In order to understand the roots of Hatha Yoga, we will briefly develop some considerations about the definition of Yoga. Etymologically, the word Yoga, in Sanskrit, derived from the root *yuj*, which means to "connect", "tow", and "yoke". In the Vedic period, Yoga

may also have meant the act of yoking the bullocks or keeping the animals together. But, as noted by a Brazilian Sanskrit scholar in his translation of *Bhagavadgītā*, "a yoked bullock has no desire...". That could therefore have been a literal sense of the word Yoga, still used in the oldest texts of the Hindu tradition. However, this same literal meaning is also related to the metaphorical meaning that the term subsequently acquired, since Yoga can also be understood as a form of "yoking" the mind to control the thoughts, and of yoking the individual self – the ego – in order to allow the experience of the supreme self, the atman. (Fonseca, 2009: 13)

The original purpose of Yoga, therefore, has always been directly connected to the spiritual aspect of the human existence – the process of realization of the

transcendent reality itself, i.e., the supreme goal of Yoga. This goal is reflected in the constant search of the practitioner's own transcendence of the ego which, according to the philosophical principles of Yoga, is one aspect of consciousness which leads to the belief that we are unique subjects separated from all other beings. Without this egoistic conception, we would be completely immersed in a supreme reality (called *brahman* or *Isvara*).

According to Mircea Eliade (2004), the history of Yoga is directly linked to the history of India, precisely because of this ideal of liberation. In his words, Yoga can be defined as:

“A set of techniques that enable man to realize himself, blowing his egoist individual consciousness, and merging with the universal mind. Since its origin,

the central problem of Indian philosophy is the search for the truth, but not a truth that exalts the ego of the philosopher, but the truth as a means to attain liberation from illusion. The supreme aim of the wise is, in India, the conquest of freedom: to free oneself amounts to impose oneself another plane of existence, appropriating another way of being, transcending the human condition." (Eliade, 2004: 20)

This set of techniques or disciplines that seek the transcendence of the ego and of the individual human condition is what we call Yoga. This is a term that comprises different techniques (including body techniques) and spiritual practices that have been developed in different historical moments, with the same purpose. While this goal of Yoga remains more or less the same at different times in history, we can identify

some important changes in the way that this ideal of liberation is translated into spiritual practices. It is exactly because of these different features acquired by the practice in different historical moments, that scholars of Yoga in the West established some temporal categories for the history of Yoga.

According to this periodization, there was, first, the pre-classical period which, as the name implies, precedes the formation of a Yoga system as a philosophical and spiritual discipline separated from other Indian philosophical systems. This is the period that coincides with the time of production of the *Upaniṣads*, written in the period subsequent to the end of *Veda* scriptures, based on which the main body of the Hindu tradition is founded. Therefore, in the *Upaniṣads*, we have the first effective references to Yoga as a

spiritual practice. Also in the pre-classical period, Yoga constituted itself as a discipline, and, as such, it was recognized in the sacred scripture of the *Bhagavadgītā* – where Krishna recommends a path of Yoga to the hero Arjuna. (Gnerre, 2011: 104).

The Classical Yoga period begins when the sage *Patañjali* produces a compilation of the already existing techniques of Yoga in his famous *Yogasūtra* (produced around the second century B.C.). From this period on, Yoga was recognized as a philosophical system and was established as one of the six orthodox systems of Indian philosophy (i.e., unlike Jainism and Buddhism, it was accepted by Brahmanism). Several authors, despite emphasizing the importance of *Patañjali* Yoga for the insertion of this system in Indian philosophy, also call attention to the fact that he is not the creator of this

philosophy, nor the inventor of its techniques (Feuerstein, 2005)

The text attributed to *Patañjali* is composed in the form of a systematic treatise with 196 short aphorisms that identify the most important elements of the theory and practice of Yoga. In the second aphorism, we have the famous definition: “Yoga is the restriction of the fluctuations of mind-stuff” (*Yogasūtra*, in: Woods, 1914: 8).

A major contribution to the *Yogasūtra* system can be found in the second chapter, called *samādhipada*, the famous eightfold path of Yoga. However, in order to understand this path, it is important to realize that the Yoga of *Patañjali* is based on a dualistic principle also present in the *Sāṃkhya* system. According to this principle, there is the divine monad *Puruṣa*, that

observes but does not participate in the dance of nature – *Prakṛti*. According to this dual logic, we can understand the first principle as the unconditioned being and the second as the phenomenal matrix from which all nature derives.

On the basis of these principles, the task of the yogi in the text of *Patañjali* becomes the purification of the mind from affliction and its causes – all of them related to the non identification of the self with the being itself (*Puruṣa*). To make such identification possible, discernment is an essential quality to be attained by the practitioner. For the achievement of such discernment and the extinction of suffering, *Patañjali* offers the famous eightfold path of Yoga, based on: ethics (*Yama*), observances (*Niyamā*), posture (*Āsana*), control of *prāṇā* (*Prāṇāyāma*), blockage of interactions (*Pratyāhāra*),

concentration (*Dhāraṇā*), meditation (*Dhyāna*) and integration (*Samādhi*).

Among the yogic approaches developed after Patanjali, many do not adopt his dualistic metaphysics, giving rise to the so-called Post-Classical Yoga Period. This historic step covers the period between the seventh and seventeenth centuries A.D. Based on this extended temporal cut, we observe a great diversity among the texts of the post-classical Yoga, which are produced at different times and different geographical regions, and represent different points of view regarding yogic tradition, although most of them are enthusiast of *Patañjali*'s dualism (Feuerstein, 2005: 322).

The post-classical tradition is plural, and it covers the Shaiva sects from northern and southern India (which produce the Shiva Sutras), the worshipers of Vishnu with

their Vedantic vision of God as universal love; the Yoga Puranics (popular encyclopedias created in the early centuries of the first millennium A.D.) and other schools that appear in India during this period (Feuerstein, 2005: 323). One of the most important post-classical Yoga schools is represented by Hatha Yoga, connected to the Tantric tradition, whose inscriptions can be found in the *Śaiva* Tantras. With respect to this topic, Mark Singleton (2010) offers some important considerations:

“The techniques and philosophical framework of the *Śaiva* Tantras form the basis for the teachings of *haṭha* Yoga, which flourished from the thirteenth century C.E and wich entered its decline in the eighteenth century (Gonda, 1965:268; Buoy, 1994:5). The term *haṭha* means “forceful” or “violent”, but it is also interpreted to indicate the goal of the system (Eliade,

1969:229). As Mallison (2005:113) has noted, the corpus of *hatha* Yoga is not doctrinally whole and does not belong to any one single school of Indian thought” (Singleton, 2010:27)

We can say that a common element present in several schools and tantric masters teachings was the creation of a divine body, the home of God, made of the immortal substance – the divine diamond (*vajrādaiva*, which means both *vajra*, ‘diamond’, and *daiva*, ‘divine’). For the tantric masters, just as the salt invisibly dissolves in water, God is dispersed throughout the body. In this context, Hatha Yoga arises and comes to acquire great importance, due to its influence in the world today. The name Hatha is traditionally explained as the union of the sun and moon (*Ha-tha*), the conjunction of two great principles or dynamic aspects of the body: the

poles Shiva – Shakti. The energy that ascends from the Shakti to the Shiva pole (called Kundalini) is related to the process of enlightenment. But how does this process of deification of the body develop through tantric practices? On this subject, Gavin Flood writes:

“The tantric body is encoded in tradition-specific and text-specific ways. The practitioner inscribes the body through ritual and forms of interiority or asceticism, and so writes the tradition on to the body. Such transformative practices are intended to create the body as divine. This inscribing the body is also a reading of text and tradition. Indeed, the act of reading is of central importance in the tantric traditions.” (Flood, 2006: 13)

We see, thus, how important the text is in this context. The earliest text of this tradition is probably

Gorakṣa Śataka, attributed to *Gorakṣanātha*. It is followed by *Śiva Saṃhitā* (fifteenth century A.D.), *HaṭhaYogapradīpikā* ("Light on Hatha Yoga", classic manual written by *Svātmārāma Yoguendra* in the fifteenth-sixteenth century), *Gheraṇḍa Saṃhitā* (collection of *Gheraṇḍa*, probably written in the seventeenth- eighteenth century), and a few other important texts (Singleton, 2010: 28).

The *Gheraṇḍa Saṃhitā* is one of the latest texts of the tradition and so it offers a synthesis of teachings from the previous texts. Therefore, to understand Yoga in contemporary times, we consider it to be one of the most important works (Gnerre, 2013). In the text, the sage *Gheraṇḍa* explains in the following way the importance of the physical practice for the Hatha Yoga Tradition:

“As by learning the alphabet one can learn all the scriptures, so by thoroughly practicing first the (physical) training, one acquires the Knowledge of the True.” (Gheraṇḍa Saṃhitā; Aphorism 1.5, in: Vasu, 1996: 85)

In the traditional context, therefore, physical training was a very important technical aspect, necessary for acquiring the Knowledge of the True (Brahman). In the twentieth century, however, when Yoga physical techniques became largely widespread in the western world, the seduction of the postures seemed to override other aspects of the practice.

Yoga arrives in the West

In this brief history, it is possible to observe that Yoga undergoes important transformations throughout

its history in India and also assimilates elements from multiple sources, being, therefore, not something absolutely "pure and original", but open to change. It was precisely this openness that allowed some teachers to disseminate it in the Western world.

Undoubtedly, a significant event related to this process of dissemination of Yoga in the West during the early twentieth century was the British domination of India (1858-1947). As we noticed before, different traditional Yoga schools have survived throughout the history of India – from the Vedic period to the mid-nineteenth century, when British occupation finally introduced the West to this long tradition. From this period on, Western studies – especially by British academics – about the history and Hindu philosophy were intensified.

The process of creating universities in Indian territory inspired by the British model allows for a migration of British researchers – especially those linked to the areas of archeology, anthropology and history – to India since the mid-nineteenth century. As colonizers themselves begin to make concessions to the colonized, allowing upper-caste Indians to enter these universities, the doors of academic education open for Indian students, too (Pannikar, 1979).

Such students, in some cases, also had training in traditional techniques of Yoga (that was the case, e.g., of Swami Vivekananda and Paramahansa Yogananda, which we mention below), and were able to translate the ancient texts in terms of an academically organized

speech². In addition to this fact, we must also mention the possibility of Indians traveling to England to study in traditional British institutions – a possibility that in many cases helps to form great illustrated yogis, as is the case of Sri Aurobindo.

It was, therefore, through a process that includes mastering the English language, that Indians themselves became imbued with the mission of bringing the tradition of Yoga to America and Europe. Swami Vivekananda is considered the pioneer in this process. An Indian Hindu monk and chief disciple of the nineteenth century saint Ramakrishna, he delivered a

² It is important to notice that the process of bringing Yoga to the West wasn't simple, especially in the case of Hatha Yoga. About this matter, Singleton (2010; 41) says: "During the decades around Vivekananda's reformulation of Yoga it is common to find European characterizing yoguins as dangerous, mendicant tricksters, often in contradistinction to the contemplative, devotional practitioners of "true" Yoga. In this sense, scholarship contributed to keeping the hatha yoguin and his practice beyond the pale of acceptable religious observance."

historic speech in The Parliament of the World's Religions in September of 1893 at the Art Institute of Chicago. After his successful speech, Vivekananda received a standing ovation from the crowd of seven thousand people. (Banhatti, 1995)

Another important Indian master that brought the Yoga tradition to the west in the beginning of the twentieth century is Paramahansa Yogananda who, in 1920, participated in a religion congress in the United States, and remained in this country until his death, in 1951. In the United States, Yogananda founded the Self Realization Fellowship and other important Ashrams established in California, where Western students had their first contact with the techniques of Kriya Yoga. The recognition of the legacy of Yogananda by Western society can be seen in the numerous editions of his most

celebrated work, *Autobiography of a Yogi* (Yogananda, 2007).

Besides Yogananda and Vivekananda, other important Yogis participated in this historic moment that marks the transposition of yogic techniques to the west (between the late nineteenth century and the early twentieth century). Among these were Sri Aurobindo (a great political leader in the process of independence of India and creator of Integral Yoga), Swami Muktananda (Siddha Yoga Dham creator), Maharishi Mahesh Yogi (Transcendental Meditation), Bagwan Rajneesh (who became known as Osho, founder of the Osho international Foundation), B.K.S. Iyengar (Iyengar Yoga), and Pathaby Jois (Ashtanga Vinyasa Yoga). It is important to keep in mind that many other masters have not been mentioned in the brief list presented here.

However, although it is possible to make a list of teachers who came to the United States and Europe, it is always difficult to speak of a common history of "Yoga in the West."

After all, as Edward Said (2007: 28) reminds us so well, both "West and East" are concepts constructed in a particular historical moment. Such concepts were created under a European perspective, in a "orientalist" context, for specific purposes and related to domination processes. The idea of Orient or "East" was related to the "other ", to the "different ", while West, in this discursive context, signified what "is familiar to us". Thus, East and West are not just previously existing geographical locations, but social and discursive constructions created to differentiate and classify cultures and civilizations. In

this paper, we used these terms to designate a "social and discursive construct" called "West".

Just as there is a huge diversity of cultures that can be called "Oriental ", there is also a huge diversity of cultures that can be called "Occidental". Therefore, the way Yoga is received and assimilated by North American society cannot be identical to the way Yoga is received or assimilated by Brazilian society. Although some teachers seek to "preserve" a Yoga they consider "the original one", every culture that comes in contact with this tradition imprints different characteristics to the way it understands Yoga, practices it, translates it, and adapts its practices to the way corporeality is culturally seen.

Yoga made in Brazil

It is important to remember that Brazil and India shared a Portuguese presence between the sixteenth and nineteenth centuries. However, even though the Portuguese colonial presence left deep marks in Brazilian national identity, it did not have a similar weight in Indian culture – where it was restricted to Goa, Kerala and a few other locations. But what is significant to point out here is the fact that the Portuguese presence served as a first bridge between these two cultures, especially in commercial trade and in religious fields. The religiousness developed in Brazil had its own oriental features, brought by missionaries who had been in the oriental Portuguese colonies, especially in Goa (Freyre, 2000: 51). It is possible to say, therefore, that one important form of assimilation of Yoga in Brazil was through the route of Christianity.

The famous Brazilian historian Gilberto Freyre, in his book *Tropical China*, mentions the importance of oriental goods such as silk and Indian spices in Brazilian culture. Furthermore, there is an intense botanical interchange between these two nations. Our mango trees covered backyards, the Northeastern beaches full of coconut trees, and the sugarcane – which occupied vast portions of Brazilian land – are clear references to Indian land and scenery. However, all these elements arrived in Brazil at a time when our so-called "national identity" was still at a seminal moment. The fact that Brazil remained a colony until the early nineteenth century, explains the role played by such elements in the formation of our "Brazilianeness" that somehow ended up amalgamating aspects of both cultures. This process (or construction) of a Brazilian identity is something

intensively studied by historians of the first half of the twentieth century as Sérgio Buarque de Holanda, Caio Prado Júnior and Gilberto Freyre. Although there is a number of contemporary authors who criticize the works and the theory of these first historians, it is important to analyze their central hypotheses for the birth of something called the “the Brazilian national identity” (Gnerre, 2001).

For such historians, Brazilian identity acquires certain characteristics, which range from body elements to social practices, especially in the nineteenth century. Understanding these elements becomes important to grasp how Yoga arrives in Brazil, at a time when a Brazilian “way of being” was already under way. Because it happened at this later moment, the arrival of Yoga in Brazil in the middle of the twentieth century is a

different process from the arrival of the first references to the Indian world in the form of vegetables or silk, for example, which were directly and viscerally assimilated into our “work in progress” nationality.

The arrival of Yoga in Brazil in the mid-twentieth century represents a different process, because it happens as a cultural encounter between two cultural and national constructions that have already defined their historical specificities. We can say that this path of Yoga in Brazil is a particular and highly representative episode of the trajectory of its diffusion in the West in general.

Although there are several works about Yoga by Brazilian authors, such publications were, in most cases, written by Yoga teachers. These authors’ major concern is to define Yoga for the Brazilian public, without focusing on an analysis of a history in which they

themselves are active participants: the history of Yoga in Brazil.

In the research we conducted on the subject, we established two phases in the history of Yoga in Brazil. By systematizing the history of Yoga in Brazil taking as a reference these two phases, it was not our intention to propose entirely "different" periods. Our sole purpose was to indicate the observed characteristics that marked certain stages of a still ongoing process.

2.3.1 First notices of Yoga in Brazil

The beginning of this story takes us back to the 1940's, when we find records of the first teachers who settled in Brazil. The analysis of texts written by Brazilian Yoga teachers relative to this period when Yoga was first introduced in the country shows a consensual

discourse that establishes Leo Alvarez Costet de Mascheville (Sevanada Swami) as a pioneer of the tradition in Brazil (Sanchez and Gnerre, 2015: 60).

Shortly after its arrival in the United States, the tradition of Yoga was brought to the Southern Cone countries, especially to Argentina and Uruguay. This process, however, does not correspond to the migration of an Indian yogi to the region; it corresponds, instead, to the presence of a Frenchman known as Swami Sevananda (Leo Alvarez of Masqueville). In the early 1930's, Sevananda founded the Independent Group of Esoteric Studies, a kind of 'spiritual' university, in Montevideo (Uruguay). Lines for studying Yoga, theosophy, Buddhism, and Vedanta were probably created within this group. After leaving Uruguay, the group went to Brazil (mainly to the Southern States) and

to other Latin American countries, offering lectures on spiritual matters. Sevananda himself, in his biography, is said to have been responsible for the first presentations about Yoga in Brazil, in 1947. It is believed that during his travels, he used elements of the educational system of Sri Aurobindo's Integral Yoga, as well as other elements from the systems of thought of yogis like Vivekananda, Ramakrishna, Yogananda and Sivananda. With respect to this history, another Brazilian Yoga Teacher writes:

“Undoubtedly, the practice of Yoga in Brazil begins with the work of the French Leo Alvarez Costet of Mascheville (1901-1970), called Swami Sevananda, which according to the biography released by the Order he founded, Order of Sarvas Swamis, settled in Uruguay in 1932, and from there, in June of 1952, started a journey in Jeep and motorhome through Brazil. He and

his second wife, Sadhana, reached Resende, in the State of Rio de Janeiro, in 1953. There are previous informations on a study group of Lages (SC), of which there is no record in official documents. I have in my hands official copies of the documents related to the founding of the AMO-Pax monastery (AMO means Western Mystic Association), whose legal foundation date is 10.29.1953 and whose mystical foundation (or opening celebration) date is 11.20.1953. In the documents of foundation, even the presence of Nero, the dog who insisted on watching, is also reported. (Caruso, 2010; 50)”³

³ Translated from the original version of the text, in Portuguese: “Indiscutivelmente a prática do Yoga no Brasil se inicia com os trabalhos do francês Leo Alvarez Costet de Mascheville (1901-1970), denominado Swami Sevananda, que segundo a própria biografia divulgada pela Ordem que fundou, Ordem dos Sarvas Swamis, instalou-se no Uruguai em 1932, e de lá, parte em junho de 1952, de jipe e trailer por uma jornada pelo Brasil. Ele e sua segunda esposa, Sadhana, chegam a Resende, no Rio de Janeiro em

Sevananda became known in many parts of the country because of his travels in a motorhome, seeking to take his Yoga teachings to distant places in Brazil, a huge country crossed by precarious roads in the first half of the twentieth century. After all those travels, he finally consolidated his monastery in Resende, a town in Rio de Janeiro State.

1953. Existem informações prévias sobre um grupo de estudo de Lages (SC), de que não se encontra registro em documentos oficiais. Tenho em mãos cópias oficiais dos documentos de fundação do Monastério Amo-Pax, (AMO significa Associação Mística Ocidental) que possui fundação legal em 29/10/1953 e fundação mística (ou celebração de inauguração, como queira) em 20/11/1953. Nos documentos de fundação, relata-se até a presença do cão Nero que insistiu em assistir.” (Caruso, 2010; 50)



Image 1: Swami Sevananda in his motorhome
(1953)

After this first encounter between Yoga and Brazilian culture, other important masters appeared in the national scene, especially in Rio and São Paulo. In April 1958, Shotaro Shimada (1929-2009), a Brazilian of Japanese origin, founded the first academy of Yoga in Brazil, in São Paulo. Shimada used to begin the study of Yoga with breathing exercises, and he called the

Prāṇāyāma exercises "respiratory gymnastics", because he felt resistance on the part of his students against the term Yoga. Also in December of 1958, Jan Pierre Bastiou, a monk in Sevananda's monastery, founded the first academy of Yoga in Rio de Janeiro. We can say, therefore, that the end of the 1950's delimits a first stage of the consolidation of Yoga presence in Brazil.⁴

Another important thing to point out about Swami Sevananda is that he introduced Yoga with mystical connotations and a monastic approach, especially after the foundation of the Monastery of Resende – a small town in the outskirts of the highest

⁴ For more biographical information on the teachers of this period, see important narratives in the Brazilian society of Yoga website: <http://www.sociedadebrasileiradeYoga.com/#!histria-do-Yoga-no-brasil/c1j6c>. Access in 23/03/2015.

mountain range of Brazil.⁵ An important historical information to bring to this picture is that Resende, the town where Sevananda founded his monastery is also the home of the Military Academy of Agulhas Negras ('black needles'), one of the most important military schools in Brazil, which played a decisive role during the military coup in Brazil in 1964.⁶ Such geographical coincidence helps us to understand why Yoga had followers among the military in the Brazilian society, in the early years of the military regime.

We give an example here: Caio Miranda, a Brazilian Army General, was also the first author to

⁵ The highest mountains of Brazil are located at the Mantiqueira Mountains. It's a mountain range that spreads through three States in the Southeast of Brazil: São Paulo, Minas Gerais and Rio de Janeiro. The Black Nedles Peak (Pico das Agulhas Negras), considered a mystical mountain, is located behind the town of Resende, and is 2.791.55 meters above sea level.

⁶ About the military coup and the military dictatorship in Brazil, see Gaspari (2002).

write a book about Yoga in Brazil, called “Liberation Through Yoga” (1960). He wrote several other books, founded nearly twenty Yoga institutes in various cities, and prepared dozens of Yoga teachers. As registered in his biographical note, he created a method of his own, based on breathing exercises and asanas for body strength (he was rigorous in the correct execution of the postures), followed by an induced relaxation conducted on an inclined board – his Laya Yoga technique aimed at inducing sedation of emotion and cessation of mental activity.⁷

Appreciation of the physical and health of the lungs were aspects deeply valued by Caio Miranda. Many reports describe the author as a charismatic figure,

⁷Caio Miranda’s biographical note.
<http://www.abYoga.org.br/artigos/20/prof-caio-miranda-1909-1969>.
Access on 10/05/2015.

tall, strong, with an athletic body and a firm and serious voice, who was a Physical Education instructor in the Army⁸. In fact, if we look at his photograph printed on the cover of a Laya Yoga record, his physique calls attention:



⁸ Caio Miranda and the history of Yoga in Brazil.
<http://Yogakaruna.blogspot.com.br/p/historia-do-Yoga.html>.
Access on 10/05/2015.

**Image 2: Caio Miranda as portrayed in "Laya
Yoga – Deep relax" Record Cover**

But what we want to point out here, first of all, is that when Caio Miranda introduced the practice of postures (asanas) of Yoga, he was already acting as a Physical Educator in the Brazilian Army. This fact, together with his reading of Ramacharaca Yogi⁹ – who was also adept of Yoga as a source of "healthy bodies" – gives us precise indications about the presence of discourses that value empowerment of the body in Brazilian Yoga tradition. In fact, this model of vigorous body interacts with the traditions of the tantric Hatha Yoga and the Brazilian capoeira which, although not

⁹ Yogi Ramacharaca was the pseudonym adopted by the US lawyer William C. Atkinson who, in the early twentieth century, became a disciple of the famous Indian yogi Baba Bharata, and published books about Yoga in the United States.

widespread in military areas, has always been part of our national imaginary concerning the strong body.

When introduced by Caio Miranda as a health practice in our society, Hatha Yoga had already been freed, since the beginning of its history in Brazil, of any association with the fakirs or other "degenerations" with which it was frequently associated throughout the nineteenth and early twentieth century, especially in Europe and the United States (Singleton, 2010: 36). There was, indeed, an emphatic discursive effort to make clear that Yoga was a health practice, adequate for modern Western people. In harmony with this healthy lifestyle goal, a modernity feature associated with Yoga, Caio Miranda conducted famous Yoga classes on Ipanema Beach, in the early 1960's. Yoga was therefore present in the most beloved beach and icon of the Bossa

Nova movement (which, by the way, also played an important role in the creation of a national identity in Brazil). But, despite all the beauty of the “Ipanema beach culture”, Brazil was, between the years of 1964 and 1985, under a military regime – a dark period that has been called “the leaden years”. We can say, therefore, that Yoga does not enter our culture only by influence of alternative people (esoteric-oriented or, later, hippies), but also by influence of the military themselves. (Gnerre, 2010: 265)

2.3.2 The spread of Yoga in Brazilian society

In 1962, another military and Brazilian Army teacher – José Hermógenes, later known as Master Hermógenes – founded the Hermógenes Academy of Yoga in Rio de Janeiro. Besides being known for his teaching, Hermógenes became one of the most well-

known Brazilian authors of books about Yoga. His publications, “Self-perfection with Hatha Yoga” and “Yoga for Nervous”, became instant classics in the late 1960’s, when Yoga was popular especially among fans of an “alternative lifestyle” and seen as part of the universe of those seeking practical ways to attain self-knowledge and spiritual fulfillment outside the major religious theodicies.

Having himself been cured of tuberculosis in the 1960’s through the practice of Yoga exercises, Hermógenes militated for the acceptance of these techniques by the medical community. He is considered, nowadays, a pioneer in bringing Yoga therapy practices into hospitals, having worked mainly in the Holy House of Rio de Janeiro – where he achieved important results in curing cases of pulmonary diseases. The works of

Hermógenes are centered on benefits for the body and health that arise from practices of pranayamas and postures, but without leaving aside the spiritual goals of such practices. (Gnerre, 2010: 266).

The author reports many cases of healing on the pages of his book “Self-perfection with Hatha Yoga”. This gives us an indication that this discourse about the health benefits of the practice was also the gateway for Yoga in the lives of many Brazilians – who started practicing influenced by the writings of Hermógenes, since his works have an eminently practical character. Because his Yoga practice proposal was basically "therapeutic" and available for practitioners with any health condition, including the sick, it can be said that Hermógenes brought a major contribution to the democratization of Yoga in Brazil.



Images 3 and 4: Hermógenes portrayed as a military and as a Yoga master

The first element that calls our attention in Hermógenes' work is precisely his willingness to create accessibility to the practice of Yoga in two fields: the practical field of postures and pranayama, and in the conceptual or philosophical field, where his main goal was translating Yoga terminology into a language understandable by all Brazilians. It is precisely in this respect that we can clearly recognize legacies of the Christian tradition in the teachings of Hermógenes. For instance, he has become famous for singing St. Francis of Assisi's prayer in the form of a mantra in Brazilian Yoga Congresses in the 1980's and 1990's. Another famous example of the adaptability of his practice to the Christian framework is the reported healing of a nun through the practice of pranayama, as described in one of his books:

“One of the most interesting cases, because of the notoriety it achieved, occurred with a Vicentin sister at Santa Casa Hospital, in Rio de Janeiro. She entered the infirmary suffering from a strong asthma attack, aggravated by a pulmonary emphysema, after having received extreme unction – her death was therefore expected. The Divine Physician inspired me to intervene, appealing to the feelings and religious beliefs of the patient.

– Sister, every day you say: ‘Thy kingdom come; Thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.’ Isn’t it?

Almost suffocating and breathing with difficulty, she confirmed.

– You say it, but you do not follow through – I admonished her with a friendly smile, as if apologizing

for my impertinence. You really need to let God take care of your body. Let's learn how to do it. (...) I will teach you how to experience "Thy will be done" in your body and you will see how, right now, this crisis will cease because God does not fail when He is in command". (Hermógenes, 1982; 46)

From this point on, we are told that Professor Hermógenes taught the sister to practice pranayama exercises and to practice devotion and surrender to the absolute God. Shortly after that practice, it is reported, the respiratory crisis subdued, the sister was healed, and the case became notorious. Such syncretism with Cristian beliefs made the philosophy and the physical practices of Yoga much more palatable for the Brazilian population. From this moment on, a large increase in the number of practitioners in the country was registered,

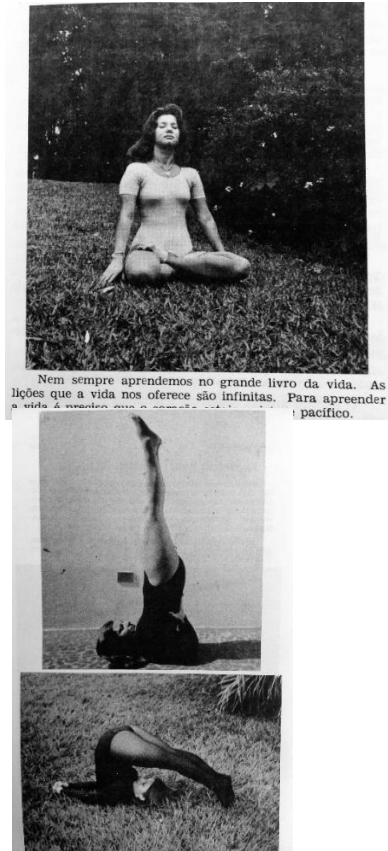
many of whom were particularly interested in Yoga as an Indian tradition “dressed” in Brazilian clothes. This was the greatest legacy of Hermógenes, who died in 2015 at the age of 94.

In the mid 1960’s, we see the emergence of another central character of the Yoga movement in Brazil: Master DeRose. He founded the Brazilian Institute of Yoga, also in Rio de Janeiro. In 1969, DeRose published the first edition of what came to be considered his most important book, “The Handbook of Ancient Yoga”. Taking a different path from the one chosen by Hermógenes, DeRose claimed, in his books, that he was the holder of ancient Yoga in Brazil, preserved in its original Indian form. In 1978, DeRose led the campaign for the promulgation of a law regulating the profession of Yoga teaching in Brazil.

Under his influence, several University Extension courses in Yoga Instructors Training appeared in universities across the country. In 1981, Swami Sevananda, Caio Miranda, and other names of Yoga in Brazil founded the 1st Regular Training Course in Yoga at an institution which was called, at the time, the Paraná College of Bio-Psycho Science. In the 1980's and 1990's, various Federations and Associations of Yoga popped up throughout the country, with teacher trainings and Yoga academies (DeRose, 1985)

Although the practice of Yoga in India is usually said to have originated among male practitioners, in Brazil it was rapidly associated with a female universe, and gained ground especially in academies since the 1970's. It was by taking this path of transformation in the social imaginary that the practice of Yoga in Brazil

ceased to be associated in our society with exotic elements, and began, instead, to be associated with beautiful female bodies in Brazilian Yoga books and magazines. As a matter of fact, the appreciation of the female body is another important watermark associated to Brazilianity.



Images 5, 6: Photographs of Brazilian women practicing in the 70's. Maran (1977)

3. Conclusions: Multiple faces of Yoga in contemporary Brazil

This trajectory of fruitful interactions between Brazilians and Yoga, which starts in the 1940's, contributed to a growing interest in the practice – especially as physical practice – on the part of the media and of contemporary Brazilian society.

However, this increase in attention to the immediate and physical benefits of Yoga did not exclude the growth of interest in Yoga as a spiritual path within Brazilian society. In fact, both elements are connected and often, when in the context of a physical practice, led the practitioner to want to know more about Yoga cultural tradition. This, in turn, led to an even greater interest and, eventually, to the adoption of certain spiritual practices of Hindu religions.

The syncretism, which, according to historians and anthropologists (such as Gilberto Freyre and Darcy Ribeiro) is a traditional feature of Brazilian religiosity, can be considered a cultural element that contributes to the ongoing process of accepting spiritual elements of Yoga within our society. Syncretism is a characteristic of Brazilian society that reflects its colonial past, when the first Portuguese relations with Hindu deities were established. Since the occupation of Goa in the sixteenth century, a significant interaction began between Luso-Brazilian and Indian cultures (Subrahmayam, 1994; 190).

Nowadays, along with such syncretic incorporation by those who already identify themselves with a traditional religion, Yoga has become a form of spiritual practice for many individuals who are deprived

of a religion in their everyday life – a phenomenon that is very characteristic of contemporary materialistic society. Thus, despite the many speeches focused on the physical, one realizes that it is possible for the Brazilian society to accept the spiritual characteristics of the practice of Hatha Yoga. The consolidation, in Brazil, of the Yoga practice as a physical or spiritual path is, therefore, a reality in many organizations throughout the country.

Finally, we must also point out another crucial aspect that has gained importance in recent years: the study of Yoga and Indian culture in the context of Brazilian universities. There are important research groups at the University of São Paulo – especially in the field of Sanskrit –, at the Federal University of Paraíba and at the Federal University of Juiz de Fora, in the area

of Religious Studies. We also have several graduate programs where researches are being conducted in areas related to health and physical education. In the context of research groups, researchers have been devoting themselves to a comprehension of the Yoga tradition, starting from its cultural and civilizational Indian backgrounds, by, e.g., translating Sanskrit texts into Portuguese. Year after year, students in different Brazilian universities are starting to do research about the Yoga tradition for their Masters and Doctorate theses. The Yoga tradition has thus become a fundamental element of the cultural dialogue between India and Brazil at different levels and in various contexts, and such fact allows us to recognize that the importance of Yoga in our society is constantly growing.

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