

“Don’t Take Any Wooden Nickels”: Western Esotericism, Yoga, and the Discourse of Authenticity

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Hardly anyone would doubt that history is full of charlatans. However, the situation becomes much trickier when dichotomies like “real” vs. “fake,” “genuine” vs. “fraudulent,” or “authentic” vs. “inauthentic” become applied not just to individuals or institutions but wholesale to entire objects of study, such as musical genres, regional cuisines, or in our case modern occultists who have engaged with the literatures and traditions of Asia. It is a scholar’s job to analyze, and in the process we often discover bogus representations that necessitate a good, solid debunking. Such critical assessments can serve as an etic “check” on over-enthusiastic emic perspectives or exaggerated idealizations of charismatic personalities. However, there is always an important corollary to keep in mind: to postulate something as “inauthentic” requires by dialectical reasoning to assume that there is an “authentic” something (unless, of course, everything is “inauthentic,” but then the descriptor becomes categorically meaningless).

In this chapter I examine how this “discourse of authenticity” both differs and overlaps in two growing academic fields, that of Western esotericism and yoga studies, and how the preoccupation with preserving an authentic, pre-modern “East” often overlooks the innovative contributions of native South Asians who adapted their teachings to fit new audiences, both pan-Indian and outside of India. This discourse is especially relevant to post-Orientalist scholarship that treats on Western occultist movements in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, such as for example the early Theosophical Society founded by H.P. Blavatsky (1831–1891) and Henry Olcott (1832–1907) as well as the Thelema of Aleister Crowley (1875–1947), all of whom integrated, albeit in different ways, not just Indian teachings but also ideas from Buddhism, Daoism, Sufism, and so on into published occult literature and oral teachings (cf. Sand and Rudbøg, 2020; Krämer and Strube, 2020; Baier, 2016; Djurdjevic, 2014; Bogdan and Djurdjevic, 2013). It is also relevant to the study of lesser-known personalities, such as Theodor Reuss (1855–1923) and Franz Hartmann (1838–1912), both of whom likewise expanded their views on occultism to also encompass yogic teachings. To be sure, these Western occultists modified and adjusted religious teachings to fit their own agendas, curriculums, and world-

views, which is certainly a phenomenon that should be considered with a critical eye. However, what I wish to emphasize in this chapter is that there were also colonial-era Indian authors who made recourse to theories of Western scientists and philosophers to reinterpret Indian teachings, especially on Early Modern Yoga.¹ Upon further examination of both sides of the exchange, a narrative emerges that shows a great deal of agency on the part of Indian authors; these processes were far from unidirectional from West to East.

To make the above points clear I will first explain how the discourse of authenticity is operative in the fields of Western esotericism and yoga studies, especially where they intersect. I will then contextualize this preoccupation with authenticity itself and problematize its participation in a much more specific and ethically normative discourse, that of “cultural authenticity,” and highlight the problems with the normative assumptions of “authentic culture,” whether Western or not. As an example I will refer to a Bengali vernacular-language translation that utilizes European scientific and philosophical terminology to help facilitate a reader’s understanding of yogic teachings on a Tamil regional form of Rajayoga (Tamil: *rājayōkam*). At the conclusion of the chapter I will argue that it is more productive to frame esoteric movements more neutrally as having “local” and “translocal” dimensions, using a slightly modified definition of “translocalization” as postulated by Ros (2012). My overall aim is to encourage scholars to be open to critically examining the historical contingencies of any given movement’s interaction with outside theories or practices, regardless of their perceived (in)authenticity.

Before proceeding, first a note on geographical terminology: in this chapter I use the adjectives “Western” and “Eastern” only for convenience, especially with regard to occultism, which I would argue has been translocal in scope since at least the nineteenth century. The same goes for the related terms Orientalism and its corollary Occidentalism. As Makdisi (2014) has pointed out, Occidentalism, the opposite pole of Said’s *Orientalism* (1978), also has a historical genealogy that is inextricably intertwined with the genealogy of Orientalism, pointing to the problems with addressing what is Western unless one also addresses what is Eastern. Indeed, when these words are stripped of discursive baggage, Occidentalism and Orientalism only etymologically refer to Latin present participles that denote the directions of the sun’s rise (*oriens*, “rising”)

1 I have elected to keep both Early Modern Yoga (which I generally date to the eighteenth to late nineteenth century) and Modern Yoga (following De Michelis, starting around 1896 with the publication of Vivekananda’s *Rāja Yoga*) capitalized since this defines a fairly discrete trajectory of yoga’s engagement with modernity. At the same time, I have preferred to keep “yoga” lowercase when speaking about it in more general terms.

and fall (*occidens*, “falling down,” “setting”), which are also inextricable from each other—except perhaps at the earth’s poles. My point is that to postulate a Western esotericism also implies the postulation of an “Eastern esotericism,” which even if left unstated or unanalyzed creates a category that has no intrinsic existence apart from various disconnected movements, whether Islamic, Hindu, Buddhist, Daoist, or non-sectarian (e.g. the Bāul Fakirs of Bengal, see Cantú, 2019) that could be justifiably said to participate in a kind of esotericism.

1 The Problem of Authenticity at the Intersection of Western Esotericism and Yoga Studies

The fields of Western esotericism and yoga studies² currently have differing approaches to the discourse of authenticity based on the research priorities of their respective scholars. Even a cursory survey of subsequent scholarship on Western esotericism will show that a preoccupation with authenticity does not currently figure highly into the discourse of the field, in which ritual innovations and creative adaptations to a disenchanted modernity are ever-present themes (cf. Pasi, 2009 for a good thematic summary of occultists’ engagement with modernity). Faivre (1994, p. 7, cf. p. 58) locates a late fifteenth-century CE formation of modern Western esotericism in the Italian Renaissance harmonization of disparate philosophical “links in a chain,” represented by various personalities (e.g. Moses, Zoroaster, Hermes Trismegistus, and so on), while Hanegraaff (2015, p. 64) locates such a formation in the “virulent polemics of early modern Protestant thinkers.” Such historical frameworks rarely if ever dismiss the contributions of nineteenth- to twentieth-century occultists as outright inauthentic by comparison, although sometimes these occultists’ adaptations to post-Enlightenment modernity are framed as reinterpretations of, or changes from, an “original” (i.e. authentic) esoteric worldview as informed by Faivre’s six characteristics of esotericism as a “form of thought” (Faivre, 1994, pp. 10–15).

For instance, Hanegraaff elsewhere praises—as a methodological example—a hypothetical research project on occultism that would “demonstrate how the original contents and associations of an idea complex that originated

2 While there are earlier foundations for these fields, for the sake of simplicity I locate the beginning of Western esotericism in Antoine Faivre’s *Access to Western Esotericism* (1994, a translation from two volumes in French published in 1986) and the beginning of yoga studies in Eliade’s seminal publication *Yoga: Immortality and Freedom* (1958).

in the Renaissance are *changed* under the broad cultural impact of Enlightenment values and the rise of mechanistic science” (1995, p. 121, emphasis as in original). It does not appear that this example was intended to promote a discourse of authenticity, however, but rather to show the critical importance of historical context in the study of esotericism at a time in which the field was finding its theoretical *raison d'être*. At the same time, in later discourse on esotericism there is an understandable impetus to show how post-Enlightenment, “disenchanted” modernity (Hanegraaff, 2003), and especially philosophers of science (cf. Asprem, 2018, pp. 444–533; Faivre, 1994, p. 88) shaped these same occultists’ perspectives and social interactions and altered their relationship with the past.

By contrast, several prominent scholars in the growing field of yoga studies have been trying to excavate what in a recent book (Mallinson and Singleton, 2017) has been perhaps most aptly framed as the “roots of yoga,” that is, source texts of Hathayoga (Sanskrit: *hathayoga*), Rajayoga (*rājayoga*), and precursors to postural and meditative practice that are presented not just for philologically-minded scholars but also for the interested public at large. These as well as books published on Modern Yoga in the past decades (De Michelis, 2008; Singleton, 2010) are valuable studies, and present the genealogies of yoga in a comprehensive and relatively neutral manner with regard to authenticity claims. At the same time, such scholarship in yoga studies constantly has to negotiate with a popular concern both in and outside of academia about whether or not this or that tradition or author of Modern Yoga has or has not departed from the original traditions of the past. This is precisely where the discourse of authenticity steps in, and it becomes necessary to make an argument about what constitutes an authentic practice of yoga or to sidestep the question altogether and remain neutral.

For a good example of this popular concern from a yoga studies perspective, consider Chris Wallis (2016), who writes in a blog post on the “real story” of the chakras (Sanskrit: *cakra*), or “wheels” in the yogic body that are meditated on, that “the West (barring a handful of scholars) has almost totally failed to come to grips with what the chakra-concept meant in its original context and how one is supposed to practice with them.” Phrases like “original context” and “how one is supposed to practice” are, of course, authenticity claims, to which Wallis juxtaposes the perceived inauthenticity of John Woodroffe (1865–1936) and C.W. Leadbeater (1854–1934). Of course, Wallis correctly notes that these authors did modify and emphasize certain teachings on the chakras that were simply not present in the sources they consulted. However, in the hunt for authenticity Wallis also paints “the West” in broad strokes and in-so-doing omits consideration of other occultists, such as Aleister Crowley, who was apparently unfamiliar with Woodroffe’s work and recorded teachings on the chakras in an

unpublished diary at least as early as 1901 during a trip to Sri Lanka. Occultists like Crowley, Reuss, and even Carl Kellner (1851–1905, cf. Baier, 2018) derived teachings on them based on a translation by Srish Chandra Basu (a.k.a. Sris Chandra Vasu, 1861–1918) of the *Śhiva Samhita* (*Śhiva Samhitā*), and in Crowley's case also the published works of Sri Sabhapati Swami (b. 1828).

These and other interesting stories of occultist engagement with yoga are often elided in the pursuit of authenticity, which is less interested in analyzing the historical intersections of ideas than delineating a culturally authentic “yoga” that is rooted in premodern, pre-colonial India. The main theory is that yoga, as a culturally authentic invention of pre-colonial India, has been constantly appropriated and modified by cultural or ethnic outsiders. Yet the occultists known to Western esotericism are problematic in this regard, since their roles are usually much more ambivalent than the missionaries and government administrators of the period.

Some scholars like De Michelis (2008, p. 10) have also noted this elision and expressed such engagement in terms of “modern re-elaborations.” Others use similar terminology such as “hybrid,” “syncretic,” “innovative,” “neo-,” and even “colonial-era.” To be clear, I think these are all fair ways of framing yoga's encounter with modernity. At the same time, I wish to point out how such phrases can be distorted so as to assume a normative lens of cultural authenticity. In this case, “re-elaboration” entails that there was a premodern (and non-Western) elaboration of Hinduism—or any religion for that matter—prior to its re-elaboration. This may very well be objectively and historically true, in that certain religious currents later described as Hindu did of course develop in the classical and medieval periods independently of Western “influence” as defined in general terms. It may also understandably be the difficult task of the scholar, whether Indian or foreign, to excavate what these pre-modern views really were, as unmediated as possible by the gloss of the present; such a task is important and should not be minimized. However, to take this analysis a step further and dismiss any Western-inspired re-elaborations as “inauthentic” and instead idealize original Hindu elaborations as “authentic” is to freefall head-first—and to be fair, often unwittingly—into the discursive labyrinth of authenticity with its competing claims of power structures and hegemonies, cultural and racial identity politics, and commercialization.

It is where the fields of yoga studies and Western esotericism intersect that one often finds the most explicit scholarly preoccupation with authenticity. The works of De Michelis (2008) and Djurdjevic (2014) largely sidestep such a concern to focus on various historical actors and/or phenomenological comparisons, although Djurdjevic does briefly indicate (*ibid.*, p. 12) the problems associated with an imbalanced scholarly focus on “the issue of legitimacy and

the supremacy of origins.” Other prominent treatments on this intersection (Urban, 2008; Partridge, 2013), however, as well as popular media (Ratchford, 2015), have more or less directly framed Western interest in yoga—whether on the part of occultists or by practitioners of the “modern postural yoga” of the for-profit studio—in the context of a commodification or exoticization of culturally authentic traditions, the original substance of which has been lost in the process. It is clear that the points raised by Urban and Partridge pose the most serious challenges to the authenticity of occultist mediators of yoga, which I will focus on here, and therefore their critiques will be directly addressed.

Urban (2008) examines the Bavarian occultist Theodor Reuss in his chapter “The Yoga of Sex.” The chapter is part of a broader phenomenon that Urban terms *magia sexualis*, which is the title of a French translation of a work by Paschal Beverly Randolph (1825–1875; Randolph, 1931) as well as a clever modification of the Foucauldian dichotomy of *scientia sexualis* and *ars erotica* (Foucault, 1976, pp. 53–73). Foucault (p. 57) was already dismissive of the idea that there could be any kind of *ars erotica* or cultivation of the art of pleasure in sex in Western society, at least on the surface, noting instead that China, Japan, India, Rome, “Arabo-Muslim,” and numerous other societies had endowed themselves with such an art. Urban seems to follow this line of reasoning, framing Reuss’s complex in the Western concept of transgression as rooted in the framework of confession and its punishment (Foucault, 1976, pp. 84–85). After selectively quoting sources that describe the initiations of Reuss’s *Ordo Templi Orientis* (O.T.O.) at Monte Verità as a menagerie of orgiastic rites, he concludes (2008, p. 428):

But in this regard, Reuss was perhaps only fulfilling his role as founder of the secret order of “Oriental Templars.” An eclectic blend of Eastern exotica and Western erotica, the O.T.O. was from its inception less an embodiment of any actual Indian tradition than a product of Orientalist fantasy, nineteenth-century sexual obsession, and an ideal of radical liberation through sexual transgression.

Note the distinction between “actual Indian tradition” and “Orientalist fantasy,” which appears to be predicated on a discourse of authenticity. This line of reasoning seems intuitive and even superficially attractive, and similar discourses form a recurrent theme in Urban’s extensive body of work (cf. especially Urban, 2004, 2003, and 2001 for similar dismissals of Western esotericism as inauthentic appropriations of tantra). Yet there is more here than just novel Orientalist interpretations: an examination of Reuss’s sources re-

veals that the layers of textual strata are more complicated. For the “actual Indian tradition” in this case, Urban upholds the ca. sixteenth-century *Bṛihat Tantrasara* (*Bṛhat Tantrasāra*, “Great Essence of the Tantras”) as an exemplary model for both tantra and yoga. This Sanskrit text, attributed to one Krishnananda Agamavagisha and composed in a Bengali milieu, was primarily designed for ritual practice (*sādhana*) and included seed-syllable formulae (*mantras*) and diagrams (*yantras*) used to invoke various deities. While *Bṛihat Tantrasara* is undoubtedly an historically important tantric text of Indian origin, Urban sets it up as a de facto standard to which Reuss’s own writing should adhere to in order to pass an authenticity test. In other words, he seems to juxtapose what he perceives as an actual exemplar of tantric literature as the lens through which to expose Reuss’s phony imitation, a comparison that is made clear at the very beginning of the chapter, which is opened with apparently incompatible quotes by both Krishnananda and Theodor Reuss. Although Urban admits that he refers only to the *Bṛihat Tantrasara* and not to other tantric texts for “the sake of simplicity,” his selection ends up obscuring the fact that Reuss himself did consult other Sanskrit source texts that include teachings on yoga, albeit in translation or as mediated by his associate Carl Kellner (Baier, 2018, p. 405), for his writing on yoga and tantra. These Sanskrit texts, particularly the ca. fifteenth-century *Shiva Samhita* and to a lesser extent the *Shiva Svarodaya* (*Śivasvarodaya*, portions of which may date from the twelfth century CE), were translated and published by highly literate Indian colonial-era Sanskrit pandits and authors,³ and are the ultimate source for much of the Indic material in Reuss’s pseudonymous essay, “Mystic Anatomy,” a primary source—neglected by Urban—that includes some of Reuss’s same teachings on sexual magic that he dismisses as an “Orientalist fantasy” (cf. Bogdan, 2006 for a reprint of “Mystic Anatomy” and an insightful counterpoint to the common scholarly conflation of sexual magic with tantra).

Partridge frames his critique of the Theosophical Society in the context of late twentieth-century theoretical discourses on Orientalism (Said, 1978). While admitting the presence of “sweeping generalizations” in Said’s work, Partridge (2013, p. 312) notes at the same time that it is difficult to deny “his thesis that, by and large, the history of Western attitudes towards ‘the East’ is a history of the formation of a powerful European ideology constructed to

3 The first translation of the *Shiva Samhita* was made by Srish Chandra Basu, as mentioned above, and published serially in *The Arya* journal between 1884 and 1885 as well as separately in 1887 and 1893. A partial translation of the *Shiva Svarodaya* was first published by Rama Prasad in 1890.

deal with the ‘otherness’ of Oriental cultures.” He then goes on to apply this rubric to all kinds of esoteric wisdom of an Eastern character that entered Theosophy, from Egyptosophy to the *Book of Dzyan*. Although Partridge does not directly treat Theosophical attitudes towards yoga, they are implicated in his critique since they are explicitly framed by Theosophists as a source of Eastern knowledge. In his concluding remarks, Partridge notes (p. 330) that, as the “unwitting” example of Blavatsky suggests, one can detect a Western style for dominating the Orient “simply in the attitudes of those belonging to a colonial power.” Hanegraaff (2015, p. 70), citing Partridge, similarly notes that the discourse on what separated Western from Eastern “just happened to be dominated by European and American occultists.” However, the claim that one must have an Orientalist attitude simply by virtue of belonging to a colonial power, or by osmosis so to speak, is however precisely what post-Saidian scholars like Makdisi have been at pains to nuance by bringing up problematic exceptions to the typical Orientalist model, such as the poet and abolitionist William Blake (1757–1827). Partridge furthermore concludes (*ibid.*) that the hidden Tibetan wisdom of Theosophy was not an Indian teaching but “a product of Western Romantic and esoteric occulture, informed by earlier Orientalist interpretations of Indian and Egyptian texts.” While this very well may be true, Partridge frames this transformed “product” as not authentically Eastern (whether Indian or otherwise), which, of course, brings us right back to the problems associated with the discourse of authenticity (cf. also a similar use of “authentic” in Hanegraaff, 2015, p. 86).

The criticisms of Urban and Partridge depart from an earlier generation of scholars, who sometimes introduced criticisms of Western esotericism or related currents on other grounds. As De Michelis points out (2008, pp. 10–11), the seeds for dismissive attitudes as far as modern Western esotericism goes are traceable in the earlier scholarship of Raymond Schwab (1884–1956) and Mircea Eliade (1907–1986), the latter of whom penned a highly influential monograph on the study of yoga that, as his former personal secretary David White records in his introduction to a recent reprinting, was “the first truly mature and comprehensive study of yoga ever written,” despite its shortcomings (Eliade, 2009, p. xxv). Eliade is especially worth considering since his book *Occultism, Witchcraft, and Cultural Fashions* (1976) treats on the so-called “occult explosion” that was happening in the late 1960s and 1970s, in which there was a renewed interest among American and European youth in everything from astrology to yoga and tantra. Interestingly, Eliade (1976, p. 66) puts forward the voice of René Guenon (1886–1951) as an insider critic of occultism whose critique of Theosophy on the grounds of inauthenticity continued to resonate even amid the current occult explosion: “Considering himself a *real*

initiate and speaking in the name of the *veritable* esoteric tradition, Guénon denied not only the authenticity of modern Western so-called occultism but also the ability of any Western individual to contact a valid esoteric organization" (italics as in original). In other words, the Traditionalism of Guénon (cf. Sedgwick, 2004 for his role in this movement, also Faivre, 1994, pp. 100–102) was Eliade's counter-pole to the youthful, overweening enthusiasm for the occult that he perceived in his day. Guénon, therefore, represents an even earlier foundation of the discourse of authenticity as a Traditionalist critic *par excellence* of the perceived inauthenticity of occult interest in yoga. Of course, when we bring these poles in conversation with Hanegraaff's observations on disenchantment, it becomes clear that the Guénonian dismissal of occultist authenticity cannot be separated from his wholesale dismissal of modernity, which was so extensive that "one wonders what would be left of their concept of 'Tradition' if modernity did not exist" (Hanegraaff, 2003, p. 377n37). As a result, I would argue that the critiques of Urban and Partridge on occultists' engagement with Asia, founded primarily on post-Orientalist, Foucauldian, or Marxist arguments, depart from Guénon's Traditionalist rejection of modernity despite their similar assumptions as to the *a priori* inauthenticity of Western occultists who attempted to engage Eastern teachings.

Regardless of whether post-Orientalism or Traditionalism is the premise, I wish to emphasize another major substantive issue that arises in both the above treatments of occultists' engagement with South Asia. The issue is that, while both authors attempt to deconstruct the dominant lens of the Western gaze on yoga and/or esotericism, the result is an analysis of this material almost entirely from the perspective of Western authors. In other words, instead of considering the biographical and publication data of the actual mediating Indic sources that occultists like Reuss, Crowley, and/or Blavatsky consulted, instead all we get is a scathing critique of these very same Western occultists. While infamous occultists can certainly take the criticism (as they did in their lifetimes!), in such treatments the agency of certain important Indian vernacular and English-language authors (e.g. Sri Sabhapati Swami, Srish Chandra Basu, Baman Das Basu, Ram Prasad Keshyap, T. Subba Row) and publishers (R.C. Bary & Sons) in these colonial-era occult milieus is unfortunately all but ignored. Yet they are critically important in this context since these are precisely the same authors who informed occultists on matters of yoga, whether accurately or not, and they had their own agendas and historical contexts that are nevertheless relevant to the field of Western esotericism as well as to yoga studies.

De Michelis's informed focus primarily on celebrated personalities especially points to the need for a closer examination of some of these more tan-

gential figures in the early formulation of Modern Yoga, such as Sri Sabhapati Swami and his editor Srish Chandra Basu, also mentioned in the list above. I would argue that the reception history of their works, while perhaps idiosyncratic and strange to a scholar of pre-modern yoga, should be thoroughly analyzed before making claims as to the authenticity or inauthenticity of a given occultist's teaching on yoga. Such authors have a two-fold legacy: on the one hand, they have one foot in colonial modernity with its Victorian trappings and biases against the perceived degeneracy of Hinduism, but on the other hand they dug deep into the historical and textual traditions of the premodern past. Some engaged living teachers on yoga and collected oral instructions, while others supplied the first available translations of a wide variety of medieval Sanskrit works (e.g. *Shiva Samhita*, *Shiva Svarodaya*, and *Hatha Pradipika* [*Haṭhapradīpikā*]), works that have only in recent decades attracted the critical attention of philologically trained scholars. Although there are deficiencies in these translations due to either an inadequate number of manuscript exemplars or colonial-era biases on Hathayoga, the legacy of their contributions should still at least be properly contextualized before making sweeping claims as to the complete inauthenticity of their perspectives.

Now that it should be clear how the discourse of authenticity is operative in the fields of yoga studies and Western esotericism, and especially where the two fields intersect, I want to examine the term "authenticity" itself and stress how it is usually inextricably intertwined with the concept of "cultural authenticity" today. An analysis of the word's etymology brings to light two of the most salient features of what it means for something to be "authentic" in contemporary English: 1) it must be "original," or 2) it must be "authoritative," meanings that both overlap and contrast. While a genealogy of the term "authentic" in philosophical discourse would widen our overall semantic view, by the twentieth century the term also became intertwined with culture (cf. Lindholm, 2008). As Frosh (2001, pp. 541–542) has argued, the concept of "culture" evolved from a distinction between sophisticated elites and the vulgar masses into a distinction between "inauthenticity" and an artist-like "truth-to-oneseif." Beginning from around the late-1960s and 1970s onward, however, a broader, more collective ideal of "cultural authenticity" arose simultaneously (such as in Iran in the lead up to the Iranian Revolution of 1979; cf. Nabavi, 2015, p. 175), and was later expressed in the Nara Document on Authenticity (1994). Today, similar collective ideals of cultural authenticity are behind treatments of the "cultural appropriation" or "cultural borrowing" of Modern Postural Yoga (Appiah, 2018), today a multi-billion-dollar global industry (Jain, 2015; Foxen, 2017). The discourse of authenticity has especially emerged in popular debates in which yoga is considered a Hindu cultural practice that

should not be modified by meddling foreigners, such as the Take Back Yoga campaign launched in 2010 by Aseem Shukla (Vitello, 2010). Although reasonable criticism could be levelled against commercialized forms of yoga and their surface-level, aesthetic marketing of stereotypical Indian tropes, I would nevertheless argue that the ethical normativity attached to popular concepts like cultural appropriation or borrowing obscures their shifting foundations in this broader discourse of cultural authenticity.

2 Yoga and Western Philosophy and Science

A final topic of relevance is the application of science and philosophy (or even “philosophy of science”) in the discourse of authenticity when applied to Modern Yoga. Joseph Alter has presented perhaps the most comprehensive study of this interplay, and observes (2004, p. 33) that “...the term ‘science’ is an eminently modern concept that is saturated with power implications and linked as much to a hierarchy of knowledge as it is simply to the rational techniques and procedures of knowing, and the nature of reality so known.” He goes on to note how yoga, especially Hathayoga, needed to distance itself from religious beliefs and ally itself with an objective, verifiable practice, and introduces the experiments of Swami Kuvalayananda in 1924 as a useful starting point for this synthesis. Alter’s overall analysis of yoga’s embrace of science and the tension between its universality and cultural relativity is, in my view, fair and certainly on point. However, like De Michelis’s use of “re-elaborations” above, I think it is important to expand on Alter’s above definition of science by emphasizing that pre-modern understandings of the yogic body were also saturated with power implications between guru, students, and devotees (e.g. the popular Indian saying “Guru is God”), as well as in the broader social climate in which they operated. In this respect Western science and philosophy only introduced new authorities and methods into the mix that could be resorted to, while at the same time offering yet another foundation for the discourse of authenticity (i.e., whatever is scientifically verifiable is authentic). Even similar attitudes to Western scientific materialism were not entirely new on Indian soil; we know for example that there were philosophical schools such as the Charvaka (Sanskrit: *cārvāka*) and Lokayata (*lokāyāta*) prevalent in the pre-modern period that made truth claims based on what was materially verifiable rather than based on hearsay or inference (*anumāna*) (cf. Bhaṭṭācārya, 2011).

In any event, the early modern period offers a critical transition period in which indigenous systems of yoga begin to be justified, in Indian vernacular languages no less, with recourse to the science of the times rather than ear-

lier proofs or authorities (*pramāṇas*). For example, consider the case of Sri Sabhapati Swami (b. 1828), whose practice of yoga called “Rajayoga for Shiva” (Tamil: *civarājayōkam*) is the subject of my dissertation (see also Cantú, forthcoming). His works were published in a variety of Indian vernacular languages such as Tamil, Hindi, and Bengali in addition to English and German, and he was known to both Blavatsky and Olcott as well as Hartmann and Crowley (although there is no evidence that the latter two ever met him personally). Sabhapati had two gurus, at least one of whom (Chidambara Periya Swamigal) was directly linked to the Tamil Virashaiva (Sanskrit: *virāśaiva*) movement, which is a radical caste-rejecting Shaiva movement with origins in Karnataka and Andhra Pradesh that spread to Tamil Nadu around the seventeenth century CE via the efforts of figures like Perur Santhalinga Swamigal and his disciple Kumara Devar (Steinschneider, 2016, pp. 20–21). Subsequent Tamil Virashaiva figures in their lineage-based tradition (*parampara*), like Sabhapati’s aforementioned guru, also incorporated Brahmanical teachings on the Upanishads, Vedanta and so on into their discourses, accounting for the presence of Vedanta in Sabhapati’s works, which therefore has a different origin from the Vedanta of later authors like Swami Vivekananda (1863–1902). Sabhapati’s teachings on yoga more broadly reflect a local colonial-era Tamil synthesis of these Virashaiva practices with, on the one hand, the teachings of the Siddhars (Tamil: *cittarkal*), that is, regional Tamil alchemists and yogins, that he obtained from his other guru, Shivajnanabodha Rishi of the Pothigai Hills in the south of Tamil Nadu, near the border with Kerala.

Sabhapati only superficially engaged Western scientific or philosophical discourse in his works, and was mostly content to express his own interpretations of the teachings of the gurus mentioned above as well as his own doctrines. However, some of his followers, called both “admirers” and “students” depending on the work and its context, did engage Western discourses. In a translation of one of his works into Bengali, the translator Ambikacharan Bandyopadhyay supplied (1885) an additional prologue that makes recourse to the opinions of Immanuel Kant (1724–1804), Herbert Spencer (1820–1903), William Hamilton (1788–1856), and Henry Longueville Mansel (1820–1871) in the context of such topics as “contraction and expansion,” the “relative realities” of time and space, the “negation of conceivability,” the “unconditioned consciousness,” the “inconceivable and imperceptible,” and “mechanical motion.” These are figures related to the worldview of what Egil Asprem (2018, pp. 67–72) has called Victorian scientific naturalism. This worldview had such a prominence that Crowley, who engaged Sabhapati’s works, also used the theories of some of these authors—independently of Sabhapati’s Bengali translator—to justify his own theoretical teachings on modern ceremonial

magic.⁴ Examples like these highlight the fact that Western authors were not alone in subjecting indigenous cosmological theories and practices to scientific speculation, but rather Indian authors also participated in this project, using many of the same authoritative voices that their Western occultist counterparts did. The appeal to authorities of course has a long history in the Indian context as well, with its vast Sanskrit commentarial tradition and inclusion of certain voices at the expense of others. These early modern Indian authors' own unique perspectives on science and philosophy therefore deserve proper treatment beyond what the discourse of authenticity, as reflected in the writings of Urban and Partridge, as well as in the works of much earlier "authenticators" like Guénon, currently allows for.

3 Conclusion: Authenticity or (Trans)Locality?

The above issues have been raised to provide a counterpoint to the perspective that authors of Western esotericism, both within and outside of India, were promoting or selling inauthentic interpretations of yoga for any number of reasons, and that as a result these views should be unequivocally dismantled and/or corrected in favor of restoring the pre-modern or indigenous "real thing" that predates any Western alteration of yoga in the context of colonial modernity. While not dismissing the importance of subaltern studies and sincere efforts to "decolonize" the academy, I think that a more comprehensive historical perspective emerges when occult interest in South Asia is treated in more neutral terminology that avoids an idealization of pre-colonial "authenticity" in the context of yoga. One example of an insightful and nuanced use of such neutral terminology is the phrase "intercultural transfers" employed by Baier in the context of Theosophical appropriations of the Tantric chakras. Baier (2016, p. 310) describes these transfers as "not simply an encounter between Western Theosophy and South Asian tradition... but a complex reciprocal process of transculturation within the Theosophical Society itself." Citing Fernando Ortiz and Mary Louise Pratt, he notes (*ibid.*) that such a concept as transculturation provides "an alternative to the concept of mono-directional assimilation" and "emphasizes the multi-laterality of intercultural processes within colonial settings."

Indeed, if we strip away the ethical and normative aspects of "cultural authenticity," I think what we are primarily left with is a raw tension between

4 I am grateful to Bill Breeze for this insight.

local and translocal cultural perspectives, very similar to Baier's mention of "transculturation" above. The flow from local to translocal has also been referred to as "translocalization," by which I mean that practices—in this case of yoga—were circulated through networks that gradually separated them from their original local religious contexts but at the same time never fully eliminated certain distinctive traces of localized content. This is a slightly modified definition from that given by Alejandra Aguilar Ros (2012), to whom I am indebted for this concept. The flow from translocal to local, on the other hand, is called "localization," and describes the reverse process of translocal content becoming localized or even "re-localized." This is similar to what Michael Bergunder (2014, p. 401) notes is "the primary focus of postcolonial studies," namely the appropriation of Western knowledge by the colonized, although I would add that in the case of yoga and occultism such knowledge also often includes pan-Indic content that is re-localized in vernacular-language sources, as we saw in the example of Sabhapati's Bengali translation above. Translocalization additionally resembles the now-famous "pizza effect" that Agehananda Bharati (1923–1991) first described, except that the presence of the translocal necessitates a common medium, in the case of Early Modern Yoga the dissemination of books published in English (and to some extent also German and French), accessible in a variety of geographical contexts—both among educated elites in India and abroad—rather than a "mono-directional assimilation" from one regional milieu to another.

The interplay between local and translocal could also inform debates as to whether or not Western esotericism should drop the geographical and cultural qualifier "Western" (cf. Roukema and Kilner-Johnson, 2018; Asprem, 2014). The dichotomy forces the following question in particular: for something to be translocal, must it necessarily be Western as well, and thus in the modern Indian context a colonial imposition? The presence of Indian authors on yoga who were the primary mediators for Western occultists complicates such a rigid adherence to the qualifier Western, even if at times they wrote in a Western language (English), often came from Brahman and/or other elite caste backgrounds with exposure to the West, and made recourse to Western philosophy. Indeed, even such general assumptions about the social and economic status of individual identities start to blur when one looks at the historical contexts in which each author operated as well as their broader family, teachers, and associates, or when one analyzes differences between the personalities that various occultists consulted or rejected. I think that it makes more sense in cases like these, therefore, to use categories like "translocal esotericism" and "local esotericism" to describe the ways in which Indian teachers and authors on esotericism have transformed and adapted to a variety of translocal and

local audiences. While I don't think this necessitates a full departure from the adjective "Western" in every case, I think it is at least important to avoid debates over whether or not this or that esotericism is an *authentic* form of Western esotericism, thus falling right back into the discourse of authenticity as analyzed in the context of an "authentic yoga" in the above sections.

In concluding, I leave the reader with three general suggestions for tackling these issues that I think may facilitate further scholarly understanding of these flows between the local and translocal. First, while it may be tempting to automatically judge the translocal as inauthentic since it departs from the perceived authenticity of a local perspective, I think it makes more sense to suspend such a judgment and only levy it as a secondary step in the event that it is the explicit wish of a given scholar or author. Second, if one really wants to pursue a judgment of inauthenticity on the grounds of localized authenticity then I am also of the persuasion that this first necessitates a rigorous appraisal of the translocal primary source material and its context. Thirdly, while recognizing that all translocal literature must be localized to some extent and *vice-versa*, I think that a useful if not necessary practice is to conduct a rigorous examination of local perspectives in conversation or comparison with the translocal literature, either through ethnography, textual study, or preferably a combination of both, together with a command of the relevant languages necessary. Only then can a full perspective emerge that more comprehensively engages both local perspectives and translocal literature without risking the dismissal of one as limited in scope or the other as culturally inauthentic.

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