

Yoga Traditions and Comparative Mythology: Ongoing Revolutions in Yoga History

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Abstract

Modern as well as premodern yoga texts are filled with mythological motifs, providing rich case studies relevant to studies of mythology over vast periods. Serious work in the field has only been possible since the mid 1990s, when yoga historians began debunking claims of fantastic continuities in yoga supposedly reaching 5,000 or even tens of thousands of years into the past. Classic examples show up in Mircea Eliade's influential *Yoga: Immortality and Freedom* (French ed. 1954, updating his earliest work from the 1930s; Eng. trans. 1958) which routinely confuses yogic ideas in layered texts from early modern times with ideas originating as much as 2000 years earlier. Eliade's work did much to feed New Age conceits that classic yoga preserved, as he put it, a pure "archaic spirituality that has survived no where else" but India.

A long line of yoga historians since the mid 1990s (e.g., Buoy, Sjoman, DeMichelis, Altman, White, Mallinson, Singleton, Maas, Birch, along with tantric scholars) have begun to unravel the complex layers in yoga traditions, exposing internal conflicts and developments in those traditions passed over lightly by Eliade and his followers. But in other circles the idea persists of yoga as an Indian *philosophia perennis* of sorts that has survived with only minor changes since Vedic or Indus or even earlier times. Such ideas are not limited to New Age enthusiasts or the political fantasies of Hindu nationalists. Thus, reflecting ideas of earlier writers influenced by Eliade, including the late Georg Feuerstein (1998), Edwin Bryant (2009) argues that yoga practices can be traced back to India's earliest civilization in the Indus Valley, a view like Eliade's that has been shown repeatedly in recent decades to be anachronistic by many thousands of years.

In this talk I will review issues in comparative mythology impacted by the ongoing revolutions in yoga history. Some those issues include 1). new light those revolutions throw on the development of many of yoga's most esoteric doctrines, many deeply rooted in mythological ideas (*cakras*, *kundalini*, the "three channels", the "subtle body", etc.); 2) the confounding roles that long-term interactions between oral and literate traditions, textual backdating, and outright forgeries play in yoga studies, in modern times typically driven by political or commercial motives (or both); 3) problems linked to the biological sides of yoga that complicate efforts to distinguish claims of long-distant transmissions of its practices from products of parallel evolution; and 3). remarkable mathematical patterns in the evolution of yogic traditions that are predictable enough to be simulated in simple computer models, reflecting the repetitive application of standard exegetical strategies to resolving internal conflicts piling up over long periods in its heavily layered sources.

Illustrations are given throughout to parallels in mythological developments outside India in many Old and New World civilizations, further suggesting that yoga history provides a powerful model for studying the evolution of premodern mythologies globally.