

AMERICAN UNIVERSITY OF BEIRUT

YOGA PRACTICES IN BEIRUT

by
ANNABEL CLAIRE TURNER

A thesis
submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the degree of Master of Arts
to the Department of Sociology, Anthropology and Media Studies
of the Faculty of Arts and Sciences
at the American University of Beirut

Beirut, Lebanon
January 2015

AMERICAN UNIVERSITY OF BEIRUT

YOGA PRACTICES IN BEIRUT

by
ANNABEL CLAIRE TURNER

Approved by:

Livia Wick
Dr. Livia Wick, Assistant Professor
Department of Sociology, Anthropology and Media Studies

Livia C. Wick
Advisor

Rosemary Sayigh
Dr. Rosemary Sayigh, Visiting Professor
Center for Arab and Middle Eastern Studies

Rosemary Sayigh
Member of Committee

Omar Al-Dewachi
Dr. Omar Al-Dewachi, Assistant Professor
Department of Epidemiology and Population Health

O. Al-Dewachi
Member of Committee

Date of thesis defense: January 10, 2015

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I am thankful to all of the people who have supported me throughout my studies at AUB. I owe special thanks to Livia Wick, my advisor, who showed endless patience and meticulous support towards completing this thesis, to Omar Al-Dewachi for his insights and thoughtful comments from the outset to the end of my project, but most of all to Rosemary Sayigh for her boundless and consistent support throughout my entire degree programme, and for her humility, understanding, and passion, which I will always admire.

I am grateful to my husband and best friend Bashir for keeping telling me that, “it’s almost done”. To my kind friends for giving me their time and for sharing their intimate thoughts and feelings about yoga practices, which made this thesis possible: and then for keeping asking whether I had finished yet. And to my dear friends Jihad and Leila who were always surprised that I hadn’t, but were so willing to help me until the very end.

Finally, I dedicate this thesis to my son Nour, who despite occupying every second of space in my thoughts since he was conceived has given me infinite reasons not to give up.

AN ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS OF

Annabel Claire Turner for Master of Arts
Major: Anthropology

Title: Yoga Practices in Beirut

This thesis explores yoga practices in Beirut through the lens of yoga practitioners and teachers living in the city. I use my position as ‘an accomplished apprentice’ (Wave and Wenger 1991) to draw my results from participant observation, interviews and life history recordings with the aim of addressing a key question: what does yoga mean to those individuals who practice it? Narrative is therefore the main discourse of my thesis.

Whereas yoga is typically viewed as a ‘peaceful’ reflection of our society and its needs, yoga in this thesis emerges as the way in which individuals use the body to both challenge and to find their space in their immediate surroundings.

Beginning with a description of yoga spaces, I explore the language and symbolism that is evoked by yoga practitioners through the treatment of the body. Based on my interviews, I reveal that rather than acquiring the ‘perfect body’ as dictated by the forces of societal pressure, yoga practitioners reported that instead they became the ‘perfect self’.

I take this argument further through looking at the life histories of three of Beirut’s female yoga teachers, capturing their search for meaning, some commonalities between their life experiences, and the search for a ‘deeper’ meaning to life and death.

In my final chapter, I highlight the tensions that exist in the yoga community based on its commodification and market value in Beirut society. I address key themes, such as gender and social class, and raise a number of inherent contradictions by offering a description of a yoga class that speaks of “universal love” at the same time as shunning a young Syrian girl that enters the practice space.

CONTENTS

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS.....

ABSTRACT.....

Chapters

INTRODUCTION.....	1
A. Part one.....	1
B. Part two.....	2
I. LITERATURE REVIEW.....	9
A. Modern yoga studies.....	10
B. Anthropology of the body.....	18
II. METHODS.....	21
A. Part one.....	21
B. Part two.....	26
III. BODY AS A SITE OF SPIRITUAL AWAKENING.....	38
A. On the inside.....	39
B. Entering the space.....	41
C. “Liberate your <i>jiva!</i> ”.....	44
D. “Practice, practice, and all is coming.”.....	48
E. The physical body.....	49
IV. THE SEARCH FOR MEANING.....	53
A. Initiation.....	53
B. The encounter with society.....	58

C. The physical practice.....	63
V. MARKERS OF IDENTITY IN BEIRUT SOCIETY.....	67
A. The social space.....	67
B. The commercial space.....	69
C. “Liberate your <i>jiva!</i> ”.....	73
D. Women.....	75
E. Feeling united.....	78
VI. CONCLUSION.....	82
A. Part one.....	82
B. Part two.....	84
Appendix	
I. INTERVIEW GUIDE FOR YOGA TEACHERS.....	87
II. INTERVIEW GUIDE FOR YOGA STUDENTS.....	89
BIBLIOGRAPHY.....	91

INTRODUCTION

A. Part one.

When I decided to tackle “Yoga in Lebanon” for the subject of my thesis, I immediately came across so many different takes on the topic. Like all traditions and practices, there was a clear division between how insiders and outsiders viewed the practice of “Yoga”¹. For the outsiders reading this thesis, the social sphere that surrounds the yoga community, as well as the distinctively social dimension of modern yoga, may come as a surprise. Certainly, yoga has emerged in Lebanon (and beyond) as a physical, spiritual or religious, and social practice – serving all dimensions. From the insider perspective, the sense of belonging to a yoga community in Beirut is profound and was evidenced not only in my interviews with teachers and students but also in the willingness of participants to help in this study.

I situate this thesis in the context of modern yoga studies, a new and emerging field of the social sciences (Baier 2012). Modern yoga studies seeks to understand the phenomenon of yoga over the past two centuries, seeing the emergence of the yoga boom² (Singleton 2010: 3) worldwide as something specifically ‘modern’, and not an

¹ I use the term practice in the sense that it is habitual way of doing, and in the case of yoga, it refers to the routine manipulation of the body, which varies greatly in style between practitioners and denominations of yoga. In modern yoga, we also refer to “practice” as the regular event of “coming to the mat”. At the same time, you can be “practicing” yoga by acting virtuously, by giving generously, or for example by engaging in ‘service’, which can mean manual work or employment, as well as working for one’s family.

² “Since the 1990s, yoga has become a multimillion dollar business, and high-profile legal battles have even been fought over who owns āsana. Styles, sequences, and postures themselves have been franchised, copyrighted, and patented by individuals, companies, and government, and yoga postures are used to sell a wide range of products, from mobile phones to yoghurt. In 2008, it was estimated that U.S. yoga practitioners were spending 5.7 billion dollars on yoga

inherent legacy of a practice traditionally Indian or Hindu. Moreover, my own study follows the position of Karl Baier who referring to the field of religious studies scholars, describes yoga as a “‘post-religious’ form of religiosity” (Baier 2012). While all religious rituals have traditionally used and engaged with the body in some way, the specific use of the body in our modern context reflects the various social and cultural norms that humans are commonly adhering to today, such as physical exercise, diet, as well as the encouragement of certain individual freedoms. These practices are backed up by philosophies, epistemologies and worldviews that have helped to create concepts such as “health” and “spirituality” – the two becoming inextricably linked through the practice of yoga. At the same time, based on my interviews, I argue that the practice of yoga emerges as a vehicle through which practitioners overcome certain societal norms or challenges that they face. The practice of yoga, the discipline and care of the body emerges as a means of freeing the body from physical, as well as social constraints.

B. Part two.

Yoga has sprung into bloom in Beirut like in many cosmopolitan cities throughout the world. In Lebanon, the height of this growth peaked over the last ten years and the trend continues: a variety of “Yoga” inspired traditions, practices, and philosophies are kindling within society. In Beirut alone, there are more than 30 yoga centers today – while more and more centers are emerging throughout the small country of Lebanon, from Tripoli in the north to Sour on the southern tip. There are dozens of modern yoga practices enacted in Lebanon, each encompassing a different fusion of Eastern and Western traditions. Yoga teachers and spiritual gurus from abroad make

classes, vacation, and products per year (Yoga Journal 2008), a figure approximately equal to half the gross domestic product of Nepal (CIA 2008).” (Singleton 2010: 3)

annual visits to the country, and more and more Lebanese students are traveling afar to undergo “Yoga Teacher Training” programs. As of 2013, yoga teacher training programs are even being offered at two locations inside Lebanon, both in Beirut and also towards the north, in Jbeil.³ Both trainings have gained significant attention and at least 12 committed participants in each training.

We are witness to the fact that the practice of yoga in Lebanon is exponentially growing. Yet to date, there is no study of yoga practices in Lebanon or in the Middle East for that matter. Even more problematic, the only research to approach the subject of yoga in our region states that: “yoga conferences, centers and courses form part of a globalized urban culture in Islamic countries, though the offerings are still somewhat limited” (Baier 2012: 1). Yet, Beirut along with the capitals of several Middle Eastern countries (such as the United Arab Emirates, Qatar, Egypt, Morocco, Turkey, Iran, etc.) are burgeoning centers of yogic and related activities. These countries offer both extensive gym and studio based yoga practices. This is evidenced by the fact that Western teachers are even basing themselves in these countries for the sole purpose of making a living through teaching yoga, especially in larger, capital cities such as Cairo and Dubai, and more recently in Amman.⁴

Yet, it is certainly also true that yoga has inspired some controversy in Islamic societies amongst religious leaders, such as the Egyptian Mufti Ali Gomaa who deemed yoga as sinful in 2004, after he reportedly had yoga examined by a *fatwa* council (News

³ In 2013, one of Beirut’s most popular yoga teachers gained authorisation to give Yoga Teacher Training programmes from her own centre Shiva Lila, in Clemenceau. There is also a Canadian Yoga Alliance affiliated Teacher Training programme held at “Edde Sands” Beach Resort, organized by a Canadian expatriate and yoga teacher.

⁴ I have personal contact with four teachers who have recently moved to the fore mentioned cities over the past several years. Namely working for Ashtanga Yoga Cairo, Yoga Room Dubai, and One With Nature Amman.

24 Archives: 2004). Taking a slightly different angle, while yoga first emerged in Europe with Church-based yoga classes (Baier 2012), this seems difficult to imagine in Beirut and also in the region at large, where religious houses maintain an active stance in the role of community gathering and worship. This also reflects how yoga practitioners in Beirut have an initial association of yoga to sports or relaxation, and only later to spirituality, as was evidenced in the majority of interviews undertaken.

Beirut's 'cosmopolitan' atmosphere has historically housed a wide range of traditions and practices, with teachers recalling yoga classes being taught from as early as the 1960s⁵. It is also popularly known that Kamal Jumblatt, the late leader of the Druze community who played a key political role in the years preceding the Civil War, was also a "yogi" and spent a significant amount of time moving between India and his mountain retreat during the 1960s. Older teachers based in Lebanon have reminisced of occasions during the 1970s (and some more recently) where the practice of yoga was received suspiciously⁶. In a meeting with a female yoga teacher now in her 60's, the participant recalled a story of doing a "shoulder stand" while pregnant in front of her husband and mother in law, only for her mother in law to shout out that it was *haram*, meaning forbidden, and could cause problems for both mother and child. The interviewee pointed out that "problems" did not necessarily mean physical problems, but referred to invoking bad spirits and going against the will of God.

⁵ This was a point I hoped to expand upon in this thesis, however, upon reflection of willing participants to my study, it became clear that most current practitioners or teachers that were based in Lebanon before the outbreak of Civil War in 1975 in fact left during the period of the war. This made tracing a genealogy of yoga in Lebanon practically impossible within the scope of my investigation.

⁶ This was said initially in an informal discussion with the teacher but re-told in a Personal Interview with Teacher 7.

Today, the practice of yoga in Lebanon is an open, yet costly institution that promotes a holistic and particular attitude to the body, the mind and to notions of the divine, couched in a series of narratives, stories and tropes borrowed (authentically or in-authentically) from the Hindu tradition. Yoga centers honour gurus and teachers of modern day yoga practices through, for example, displaying images of renowned Indian teachers and statues or drawings of Hindu Deities. Sanskrit words, expressions and chants, as well as Indian music and dress are commonplace amongst yoga teachers and practitioners. The word “Namaste”, which is often translated as “the divine in me recognizes and bows down to the divine in you” (The Yoga Sutras of Patanjali 1978), is repeated by individuals to open and close almost every yoga class that I have attended during the course of my research and own studies. While many students may not be aware of the words’ meaning or religious connotations behind their yoga practices, other students of yoga devote their time to learning Sanskrit, reading the Bhagavad Gita and traveling regularly to study in India, for example. As a bare minimum, yoga practitioners will typically engage in the physical practice of yoga, *asana*, or meditation on a regular basis, which may be daily, weekly even monthly. As schools and traditions of yoga are so diverse, with no overarching body regulating the practices and values of yoga worldwide, least of all in Beirut, a ‘typical’ yoga practice or yoga lifestyle is almost impossible to define. Ultimately yoga practices are defined in the very act of doing, through the meaning and shape it is given by individuals, or practitioners.

Those both practicing or teaching any method of yoga in Lebanon today come from a particular group of society, ranging from the middle to upper classes but ultimately those who are exposed to a “global culture” through the possibility of education, travel, and lucrative employment. A significant proportion, although not the

majority of yoga teachers today are non-natives of Lebanon. The first remembered teachers of yoga in Lebanon were English (teaching in Hamra) and French (teaching in Ashrafieh). How yoga has transformed from the 1960s and 1970s amid the hippie era and at the close of Beirut's "golden" period to the present day is unstudied. But similarly to many European countries, the growth of this phenomenon can be situated amid processes of globalization⁷, the commodification of yoga practices in general, the boom of body consciousness in society, the isolation of individuals, as well as the high demands of capitalist economies that push individuals towards lifestyles or techniques that are believed to encourage relaxation, health and potentially fulfillment.

In European countries and in the United States of America, yoga arrived and was reproduced within a secular society, where religious beliefs have been almost entirely relegated to the private realm to echo Charles Taylor's secularization thesis⁸ (Taylor 2007). Yoga is arguably therefore a product of a culture of individualism, in terms of how an individual chooses to relate to their body image on the one hand, whilst it also reveals an individual choice (or rejection) of a 'worldview', and the creation of an identity that is associated with several imagined communities (Anderson 1983).

⁷ Theories of globalization are both multiple and contested in social science literature (Geschiere & Meyer: 1998). However, one of the strongest features of globalization theory has been to document the homogenizing tendency of a 'smaller world', arguing that 'global' life is moving towards unification. Appadurai made a noteworthy contribution to this topic, he explains that despite the "megarhetoric of developmental modernization (economic growth, high technology, agribusiness, schooling, militarization)..." which persists in so many countries across the world, this is "often punctuated, interrogated, and domesticated by the micronarratives of film, television, music, and other expressive form which allow modernity to be rewritten more as vernacular globalization and less as a concession to large-scale national and international policies." (Appadurai 1996: 10)

⁸ The philosopher Charles Taylor argues that one of the peculiarities of the modern age of secularism entailed a "privatization of religion" where beliefs and rituals were to be performed by social actors privately not as controlled by a political or communal order.

Benedict Anderson's argument is particularly relevant in the case of yoga, as modern yoga practices are commonly believed to be based on ancient teachings, which falls in line with Anderson's thesis that emerging societies⁹ cling to and build upon mythologies for their origins, choosing to believe that they are antique. In cities such as Beirut, it also helps to support a belief that individuals are 'Western' – as yoga practices are also associated with the 'modern' West. And in the case of Lebanon, which possesses strong faith-based communities, individuals can move outside of existing sectarian divides, while yoga communities may also facilitate movement across class lines. Although, as prices of yoga classes in Lebanon and Beirut in particular are not cheap, ranging between \$12 to \$20 for an average one hour and a half session, working class Beirutees, including migrant workers from all destinations, are largely excluded from this phenomenon.

It is also interesting to consider how yoga is affected by the prevailing facts on the ground after Lebanon has endured long periods of civil and regional wars and remains a society divided by rife sectarianism. Many yoga teachers comment on how the Lebanese people "need yoga", for example, and after the Ashrafieh bombing in November 2012, several yoga centers in Beirut followed up with "cleansing" and "peace bringing" classes¹⁰.

In this thesis, my central question is therefore how have yoga practices been received and reproduced in the Lebanese context? How does yoga reflect a global culture fascinated with 'the body'? How does the particular use of the body in yoga create or enhance religious or spiritual sensibilities? How does yoga transform or add to

⁹ Or in Anderson's case, the rise of the nation state.

¹⁰ Clemenceau's Shiva Lila Yoga Centre and Catherine Chidiac Power Yoga both offered such classes in November 2012.

social affiliations that create group formation, identification, and forms of belonging? Moreover, can we say that there is something particular about yoga in Lebanon? For a country that has suffered from war, yoga, a practice that is claimed to promote both religious union with the divine, and forms of reconciliation, how are yoga practices talked about and internalized? Finally, how can we as anthropologists understand yoga in Lebanon in its wider historical context?

CHAPTER ONE

LITERATURE REVIEW

The study of yoga in Lebanon is a new field, to a greater extent than the emerging field of yoga studies in India or in “the West”. I have found it to be most helpful to situate the study of yoga in Lebanon within the framework of modern yoga studies, and secondly within the context of anthropological studies of the body.

In this chapter of my thesis, I will review the most influential works on yoga and present the literature that has made the most notable contribution to our understanding of how yoga has spread throughout the world: raising the important questions of tradition and authenticity that haunt the subject of yoga in both the real and academic worlds. I will continue to present a genealogy of the anthropology of the body, addressing key arguments made by notable anthropologists over the last century. In so doing, I hope to emphasize yoga as micro practice that deals with the body in a particular way (as will be investigated throughout the thesis) and argue that it both challenges and contrasts with current assumptions of the body as a continuation of society’s image, as argued by various anthropologists from Mary Douglas (1966) to Michel Foucault (1977). Although yoga does reflect various cultural norms in modern society, in particular those that relate to the aesthetic body, it also emerges as a means

through which practitioners utilize the body in order to challenge or overcome the norms that they encounter.

A. Modern yoga studies.

There are a number of works that have been written on the spread or popularization of yoga over the past decades (Strauss 2002; 2004), as well as the interaction of yoga with the West (Singleton 2010; Alter 2004). One of the earliest works written on yoga as a transnational movement was based on a case study of Swami Sivananda (1887-1963) and several of his key disciples. The article entitled “The Master’s Narrative: Swami Sivananda and the Transnational Production of Yoga” was written by Sarah Strauss more than ten years ago but its model and analysis remain fundamental to our understanding of the expansion of yoga throughout the contemporary world. This case study is also particularly relevant for my study, as a large number of Lebanese teachers have undergone the Sivananda style yoga teacher training, both in India and also in Canada. Moreover, Beirut’s first yoga centre was the Sivananda Yoga Centre, still in operation today, and its first teachers were trained to follow the Sivananda lineage.

As Strauss details, until the late 19th century, the practice of yoga that most resembles our modern practices of yoga, i.e. the specific cultivation of the body, breath and various forms of asceticism, was kept within closed circles of Brahmin men and the transmission or teaching of yogic practices was legitimized through years of dedicated study, practice, and a long period of time withdrawn from society (Strauss 2002: 217).

Moreover, this training was dependent on a long and intimate relationship between guru and student, which required full surrender of the student to the teacher. While the transformation of this phenomenon is relatively unstudied, Strauss summarizes what we do know poignantly, explaining:

“Yoga originally developed as a predominantly male, high-caste, south Asian, ascetic, and spiritual set of beliefs and practices. In the late nineteenth century, knowledge of yoga began to circulate as a physical, mental, and spiritual health commodity among mass audiences in the United States, Western Europe and India. It has now become a globally recognized bodily idiom, part of the contemporary repertoires of men and women at all life stages and in many different countries. This modern transformation represents a shift from a regional, specialized religious discourse and practice geared toward liberation of the self from endless cycle of lives, to a transnational, secular, socially critical ideology and practice concerned with the freedom to achieve personal well-being.” (Strauss 2002: 217)

Swami Sivananda is significant for my study as he was the first to popularize yoga amongst a “common” audience. According to Strauss, Sivananda was against the secretive and elitist tradition of yoga and the “one-on-one mode of spiritual apprenticeship typical of traditional Hindu master-disciple relationships” (Strauss 2002: 226). In his personal biography, Sivananda presents the importance of “disseminat(ing) yoga” (Autobiography of Swami Sivananda 2000). In practice, this dissemination took two main forms: firstly through his writings and publications, and secondly through the travel of his disciples who were sent with the aim of spreading the teachings of yoga overseas.

Sivananda was author of more than 200 spiritual books and founder of the Divine Life Society, which after its establishment in 1936 took publishing as one of its central aims. His many writings were first written in English and circulated amongst an English speaking audience, before later being translated for the local community in Madras. As a medically trained doctor, Sivananda had been educated in English and his

grasp of the language is recalled as one of the reasons his teachings were well received further afield (Strauss 2002: 223). In fact, his grasp of Hindi (as opposed to more ‘traditional’ yogis) was minimal. His teachings centered on “how to practice yoga and live the Divine Life” (Strauss 2002: 223). Even today, the Sivananda Yoga Vedanta Centres describe their popular teacher training programmes as a method to learn how to live well and in peace, aside from learning how to both practice and teach yoga. Communal life also remains an essential part of the teacher training programme, as it has been from its inception.

The spread or export of yoga as a product overseas was made to succeed by several of Swami Sivananda’s disciples, namely Swami Sivananda Radha, Swami Vishnudevananda, and Swami Satchidananda who were among those responsible for taking yoga to the West, as well as historian and student of Sivananda, Mircea Eliade. Sivananda’s method and legacy has proved to succeed as the most popular Indian yoga school, with Swami Vishnudevananda establishing one of the largest international yoga schools in the modern world, namely the afore mentioned non-profit organization The International Sivananda Yoga Vedanta Centres. The organization is now landowning and maintains three notable ashrams in India, 6 more globally, and more than 30 smaller centres worldwide.

In many ways, the story and legacy of Swami Sivananda exemplifies the broader success story of yoga as both a spiritual and commercial modern phenomenon. The break from yoga’s perceived rigid structure facilitated by Swami Sivananda and his followers in the late 19th allowed its initial export, yet this transformation is still occurring today. Countless yoga centers have been opened throughout India, and across the world, led by lay people of every nationality, class and creed. This is evidenced in

Lebanon, with increasing equality with other global sites, however class divides do remain and yoga in Lebanon does exist in the majority of cases as a practice of the rich, as will be explored later in this thesis.

Strauss went on to write *Positioning Yoga; Balancing Acts Across Cultures* (2004), where she traced the transformation of yoga from its inception in the West at the 1893 Parliament of the World's Religions in Chicago, by one of Swami Sivananda's disciples, until the present day. In this work, Strauss's argument rests on the fact that although yoga is always traced back to India, it has developed a peculiar global culture that reflects the multitudes of "popular" culture and modern day value systems. Certainly, the fascination with the physical body, its care and aesthetic makes up part of contemporary popular culture. Moreover, I argue that yoga taken in its entirety fulfills specific demands of modern day society, such as the "need" for physical exercise but also personal reassurance, intimacy, friendship and a sense of belonging.

In 2010, Mark Singleton became known by academics and yogis alike for his relatively controversial book on yoga. In his book entitled *Yoga Body: The origins of Modern Posture Practice*, Singleton makes the case that yoga *asana* (postures) have only gained popularity in recent years. He argues that prior to the 19th century bodily *asana* were only a minor aspect of what Indian society understood as "yoga", usually described as the eight limbs of yoga, namely; *Yama* (ethical standards), *Niyama* (spiritual observances), *Asana* (postures), *Pranayama* (breath control), *Pratyahara* (sense withdrawal), *Dharana* (concentration), *Dhyana* (Meditation), and *Nirvana* (enlightenment). According to Singleton, the rise of health consciousness and physical fitness in the West was witnessed equally in India, which simultaneously saw postural yoga gain increasing dominance in what was considered yogic practices. Singleton

argues that this occurrence was tightly knit with India's fight for independence, as he explains: "...building better bodies, people reasoned, would make for a better nation and improve the chances of success in the event of a violent struggle against the colonizers" (Singleton 2010: 1). Singleton traces a number of figures who traveled throughout India teaching physical exercises under the title of "yoga"¹¹, but were geared towards increasing physical strength and fitness far more than they were towards reaching *Nirvana*. Moreover, he claims that these practices were equally influenced by Western gymnastics and weight training, specifically tracing back to a 20th century Danish exercise regime known as Primitive Gymnastics, which is itself an offshoot of a Scandinavian exercise system developed by a physical therapist called Pehr Henrik Ling (Singleton 2010: 1).

In an article written for the Online Edition of *Yoga Journal* at the publication of his book, Singleton reveals his own teaching background in yoga and presents his bewilderment at discovering that contrary to popular belief, yoga cannot be considered an ancient system, "...a practice handed down for thousands of years, originating from the Vedas, the oldest religious texts of the Hindus" (Singleton 2010:1). Singleton explains that Primitive Gymnastics had traveled to India, and all over the world, acting as physical training for armies, navies, and even in schools. Singleton backs up his claim by referring to a survey undertaken by the Indian YMCA, where it is revealed that Primitive Gymnastics was one of the most popular forms of exercise in the subcontinent, second only to the Scandinavian gymnastics designed by P. H. Ling (Singleton 2010:1). Singleton does not claim that all yoga *asana* are a branch of Scandinavian gymnastics, yet he does claim that popular yoga as we know it today is

¹¹ One of whom was Mollie Bagot Stack, who will be discussed in chapter five of this thesis.

inherently modern, and is influenced greatly by traveling physical practices of the early 20th century.

Although convincing, Singleton's article came up against great criticism from the majority of modern day yoga teachers and practitioners, ultimately because his research results seemingly demystify the "ancient spiritual" practice of yoga. Many of the yoga practitioners that I have met and/or interviewed conform to the commonly held belief that they are partaking in an ancient and authentic spiritual practice. Most, if not all, place great meaning and worth on yoga. In many ways, Singleton's article for Yoga Journal sought to soften the blow of his book as his article takes a more personal narrative towards his experiences in yoga and is revealing of his own private questions and experiences. He also makes a further claim that is absent from his book, that the Gymnastic method is in its own way a spiritual exercise. Singleton decides to sidestep this question of authenticity, explaining: "As a category for thinking about yoga, 'authenticity' falls short and says far more about our 21st-century insecurities than it does about the practice of yoga" (Singleton 2010: 1) He continues:

"One way out of this false debate, I reasoned, was to consider certain modern practices as simply the latest grafts onto the tree of yoga. Our yoga practices obviously have roots in Indian tradition, but this is far from the whole story. Thinking about yoga this way, as a vast and ancient tree with many roots and branches, is not a betrayal of authentic "tradition," nor does it encourage an uncritical acceptance of everything that calls itself "yoga," no matter how absurd. On the contrary, this kind of thinking can encourage us to examine our own practices and beliefs more closely, to see them in relation to our own past as well as to our ancient heritage. It can also give us some clarity as we navigate the sometimes-bewildering contemporary marketplace of yoga."

(Singleton 2010: 1)

Singleton's argument is simply that Yoga (through the different styles and traditions) is a “modern” practice in the sense that it has undeniably undergone significant transformation. Perhaps more interestingly, Singleton brings to light an unresolved question of the relationship between tradition and modernity that is constantly debated amongst social scientists. Yoga practices seem to be another example of what is commonly thought to be the siege of “tradition” that has been penetrated by “modern” elements, but perhaps the problem lies in what we perceive as being “traditional”.

What the 20th century Indian yogis did was to continue a “tradition” into a changing social and political environment. As Talal Asad notes: “A changing tradition is often developing rapidly but a tradition nevertheless” (Asad Interview 1996). And in this case Asad notes that liberalism is as much a tradition as any other “religion” even though not a religion in itself (Asad Interview 1996). He continues: “Liberalism is not a mixture of the traditional and the modern. It is a tradition that defines one central aspect of Western modernity” (Asad: Interview 1996). But modernity is not only constructed by the West; if anything modernity has always been formulated, thought of, and practiced in the “periphery”, or the colonies (Mitchell 1999). It included the workings of other traditions, that Asad suggests should be thought of as “practical knowledge” instead of a “single tradition” (Asad Interview 1996), that were encountering new discourses, in the Foucauldian sense of the term, and finding ways to express changing political, social and cultural settings. Then modern yoga should be thought of as a continuation of existing traditions that have slowly incorporated contemporary concerns and that have simultaneously contextually constrained the actors involved such as

Vivekananda, Krishnamacharya, Pattabhi Jois, Sivananda, and many other prominent modern day yogis.

The encounter with a curious West imposed a particular concern on approaching the body in different ways through the practice of yoga (something that Singleton observes), the formation of modern nation-states, of disciplined economies and populations, colonialism, and most importantly the rise of the secular as a public sphere in which communities meet and discuss. If anything, the quest for “tradition”, for authenticity, has been a very Western endeavor that has been subsequently re-articulated by Indian yogis in this case (but as well as other cultures such as the “Oriental” as Said has explained (Said 1979). It looks for authoritative practices in order to control relationships of power that are inherent in any discourse (Foucault 1985).

In line with Singleton's work that delineates the development of modern yoga, De Michelis traces the conceptual and cultural foundations of modern yoga by looking at the writings and declarations of Vivekananda and B.K.S. Iyengar, the first being one of the first yoga practitioners who made the discipline known in the West during the second half of the nineteenth century. De Michelis mainly argues that Vivekananda's genius lies in transforming a highly elitist (caste-based) and secluded discipline into a popular, universal, "rational" spiritual practice that can be practiced by everyone (De Michelis 2005). These findings are in line with Strauss, yet according to De Michelis, Vivekananda shifted the focus of a spiritual practice from “God” to “Self-Realization” thereby making yoga a discipline culturally in line with secular sensitivities (De Michelis 2005: 143). Although it was not Vivekananda who would set the stage for the popularity of modern postural yoga (as Singleton has shown his antipathy towards any spiritual practice that focuses on the body), his particular school did provide the

philosophical foundations that articulate yoga as a universal secularized discipline.

All this has an impact on the way we come to understand yoga as a spiritual practice that uses the body as a site of experiences, dispositions, sensitivities and attitudes.

B. Anthropology of the body.

At this stage it is helpful to introduce the literature on anthropology of the body. Anthony Synnott and David Howes' (1992) article was crucial in the formulation of the main argument for this thesis as it helped me to consider how our understandings of the body change over time and led me beyond a consideration of how I can "fit" a study of yoga within existing literature. Their article entitled "From Measurement to Meaning: Anthropologies of the Body" traces the discourse on the anthropology of the body, narrating its "discoveries", transformations and of course, claims that would now seem unbelievable. Beginning with anthropologists from the 18th century, we are reminded of anthropology's colonial history, of the anthropologists who were engaged in works that sought to measure and classify the human species into categories of race and later of gender but ultimately categories of "us" versus "them", "superior" and "inferior" – all of which took "anthropology as the science of the body"¹² as paramount. Peter Camper was the first anthropologist to make such claims on race based on a system of measuring the human skull (Synnott and Howes 1992: 155), and seemingly used this to try and prove "that blacks were biologically intermediate between apes and whites" (Synnott and Howes 1992: 155). This illustration reflects the historical present of the slave trade, imperialism and colonialism.

¹² Johann Freidrich Blumenbach is often recalled as the founder of physical anthropology.

During the late 19th century Robert Hertz and Arnold Van Gennep took their studies to a more interesting level when they argued that the social world makes an impression on the physical body, and visa versa. For Hertz, the physical body is also social, arguing that patterns of thought are reflected in the body – in its habits, custom, and care (Synnott and Howes 1992: 154). Van Gennep went further in that he argued that the social world also brings physical alterations to the body (Synnott and Howes 1992: 154). By the early 20th century Ruth Benedict had argued that our roles are learnt – that humans are socialized. Her research focused specifically on the learning of gender roles (Benedict 1935: 311).

But it was Mary Douglas (Douglas 1966) who brought the body itself to anthropology's central concern, as the “central (as opposed to peripheral) object of study” (Synnott and Howes 1992: 156). By exploring the relationship between body ritual and the caste system in India, Douglas argued that the treatment of the body amongst higher caste members, noting that the dislike of physical dirt or excretions increased as we moved up the caste system, worked to preserve and reinforce caste, or class, divides. Moreover, all of the above are undeniably political.

Michel Foucault made the connection between the physical body and political control explicit in *Discipline and Punish*. Writing in detail on the care and physical grooming of the body, he argued that the creation of “docile bodies” and “model citizens” is achieved by the “micro physics of bio-power” – the power that is exercised over the body in all its detail in the “microscopic physical actions” (Foucault 1977). The line of Foucault's argument is that the physical control and mastery of the body is essential, or conducive, for the control of society.

In this thesis, I argue that the practice of yoga, the discipline and care of the

body emerges as a means of freeing the body from physical, as well as social constraints. In light of this, this thesis seeks to address the subject of yoga as a micro-practice that compares to a religious body ritual, where the body is a vehicle or medium through which practitioners slowly master the physical self in order to liberate themselves from societal or external forces of power or control.

This thesis also seeks to fill a gap in existing social science literature on the Middle East, as well as studies of yoga, that have not addressed the subject of yoga in Lebanon, and rather popularizes studies of the Middle East that address subjects of war, violence, Islam, women and tribal groups, among other things. After a long time of immersion in yoga communities around the world, I argue that many of the findings in this thesis are applicable outside of the fieldsite of Beirut. This thesis therefore emphasizes the city of Beirut as a vibrant cosmopolitan city that is constantly reinventing itself; taking influence from both near and far. The images painted by press and academics that address sensational and media worthy topics fail to capture a picture of the every day life of those living in Beirut - and other Middle Eastern cities - in which yoga plays a meaningful role. A more ethnographic approach to the study of yoga will further seek to understand yoga's role in modern society from close up – rather than through a telescope.

CHAPTER TWO

METHODS

A. Part one.

This project first came about after feeling ambiguous about my past experiences as an anthropologist. For several years working in the region of the Middle East and eventually writing about the Palestinians in Lebanon, I felt the burden of studying and writing about the ‘other’, a problem that was amplified by my lack of adequate Arabic language skills, my position as a British citizen living in Beirut, and the persistent question of “who am I to write about this?”

At the same time, I was immersed within the yoga community in Lebanon, in both teaching and in maintaining a yoga practice of my own. Having been raised in a ‘new age’¹³ household and having practiced yoga since my teenage years, I was well versed with the ‘world’ that surrounds yoga. Yet, at the same time I found myself increasingly sceptical towards its commodification and especially towards the contradictions that are inherent in the community, such as the contrast between the teachings of humility and the wealth that is accrued (and often strived for) by both

¹³ “A broad movement characterized by alternative approaches to traditional Western culture, with an interest in spirituality, mysticism, holism, and environmentalism.” Google’s definition.

teachers and centres. I found this particularly relevant in the case of Beirut, as it was the field site of my own employment and most recent experiences as a practitioner, but I possessed certain questions that had been long unattended.

Having taken Ballet until well into my teenage years, I was first introduced to yoga by my mother who invited me to attend a class when I was fourteen. I was not very impressed: the class was very slow paced and held in a cool, old church hall in a hamlet called Heptonstall near to where we lived. I found it easy as my body was used to purposeful movement and I felt myself shying away from the few comments that were made about “living in the present moment” as my mother looked on at me for a reaction. I now feel that this is not surprising, given that my mother had routinely dragged my siblings and I along to all kinds of experimental events, such as Buddhist meditation groups, psychic readings, crystal healing sessions, and past life regression meetings, to name but a few, and we had grown disinterested in the majority of these types of outings. However, I went on to attend a regular class at the local gym, which was far more satisfying in my quest for physical fitness. It wasn’t until I began my undergraduate studies in Religion and Philosophy in London that I really took up an intense yoga practice. I believe that yoga at the time was part of my own search for independence in a new city: it was something that I was both familiar with and “good”¹⁴ at, but also by this stage of my life it was appealing – the yoga classes were filled of women older (perhaps more “grown up”) than myself who looked very sophisticated. I also felt good doing yoga, and incredibly good after practicing yoga. Despite being happy to be growing up and starting University in London, it was also a

¹⁴ There is no such thing as being “good” at yoga: as my teacher Hamish Hendry of Ashtanga Yoga London says, you can be very good at *asana* (postures), and not a “yogi” at all, i.e. not upholding of the *yamas* and *niyamas* (ethical observations).

time of unease, of solitude, and of thoughtful and intense academic study. By the age of 20, I was engaged in a daily practice of Ashtanga yoga, which has incrementally grown in my life from then on.

Although there are so many schools and styles of yoga today, all with equal claim to authenticity and value, the style of yoga that I follow belongs to a lineage of Indian teachers that reside in Mysore, Southern India. The present teacher is Sharath Jois, grandson of the late Pattabhi Jois, known for giving Ashtanga yoga its name. Ashtanga yoga is a vigorously physical yoga practice that slowly manipulates and masters the physical body with the ultimate aim of achieving stillness of the mind. In internal yoga circles, ‘Ashtanga yoga’ is often dubbed the snobbish style of yoga based on its strict following of the rules set down by Pattabhi Jois and maintained by his grandson that govern the physical practice. In this way, the school attempts to re-create a more traditional form of guru to student relationship by insisting that students spend lengthy periods of time studying with the school in India before being given authorisation to teach the method. On average, it takes three months long periods spent over eight years in order to become qualified. Simultaneously, the school attempts to delegitimize other types of training through their various fields of communication, specifically addressing the concept that you can attend a “Three weeks intensive yoga teacher training” and become a “yogi”¹⁵.

The philosophy of Ashtanga yoga is not dissimilar to other styles of yoga, but the physical practice or routine is markedly different. Ashtanga yoga is self-led, following a routine that does not change, but grows when postures are added as the body becomes stronger. The method insists on a daily practice, taking approximately an

¹⁵ I have watched Sharath speak many times in both Mysore and London and this is a consistent theme of his weekly seminar.

hour and a half, and ideally practiced before the hours of sunlight. Observance of the *Yamas* and *Niyamas* is insisted upon. Of the Ashtanga yoga practitioners that I have met (and there are many, as in Mysore we routinely practice in a room shared by 300 to 400 other students) in 99 per cent of the cases individuals are vegetarian, taking seriously the *yama. Ahimsa* (non violence). The teachers of the tradition also emphasise marriage as “the ultimate form of yoga”¹⁶, yoga being taken here in the broadest sense to mean union. Families are encouraged to attend the *shala* (school) to practice throughout the year, and marriages have even been held in the practice room over the past years, emphasising the value that individuals have given to their time spent studying with the teachers.

In the past nine years I have visited Mysore five times to practice at this school of yoga, which is something that I have consistently spent the rest of these nine years making possible. It has been meaningful and I have certainly found a community of people to which I feel that I ‘belong’: I have met some of my closest friends in Mysore. Sometimes, I find myself critical of the schools insistence on not changing the practice method, simply based on a view that I have held that all individuals are different and a single method cannot work for everyone. At the same time, I have wondered whether this reflects my own individualistic education, and also the fatigue that I have felt at times pushing myself into a vigorous yoga practice each day in the early hours of the morning. Yet, I am convinced of the practice, I have lived through years of experiencing the positive effects both physically and mentally from taking part in the practice. I have not been ill, and moreover, I have changed my outlook in approaching illness and pain, I have improved relationships, I deal better with my place in the world,

¹⁶ Sharath Jois, Conference, August 2013.

and I care less and less about the physical practice: I no longer believe that I am “good” at yoga, but see a long road ahead of me.

My introduction to Beirut was initially through childhood friends and I eventually moved to Beirut as a student of Anthropology in 2011 and quickly found myself in its yoga community. I had taught yoga on and off throughout my travels and work in the region, in the evenings after work in East Jerusalem. On arriving in Beirut, I met my husband to be who was already teaching Ashtanga yoga and his friends quickly became my own. I began teaching yoga and my practice intensified, visiting Mysore twice in one year. By 2012, I was introduced to the owner of NOK Yoga Shala, and asked to run the center, which I began with enthusiasm. This was altogether a turbulent period although the *shala* quickly grew under my instruction, with revenues increasing from \$1000 per month to \$19,000 in a single year. However, the daily administration was tedious, the clientele often disrespectful, and I felt more and more alienated from my conviction of “yoga”, with my personal practice bearing the effects of my own disenfranchisement.

My employment at NOK Yoga Shala terminated at the end of my maternity leave, 18 months after I had started working at the center. The Lebanese based shareholder of the company tragically died in a motorcycle accident, and one of the former teachers took over my place, lasting only several months, and taking the total number of managers at the center to five in the past three years. My immersion in the yoga community through NOK Yoga Shala consolidated many of the personal doubts that I had held about yoga in the modern world based on the push for wealth and success in an oversaturated market, but on reflection this was also a period of immense challenge, and subsequent growth.

Coincidentally I took a course in Medical Anthropology in 2012 that I enjoyed greatly and after discussions with my Professor, Omar al-Dewachi, I concluded that a study of yoga in Lebanon would be fascinating, and simply plausible based on my position as ‘an accomplished apprentice’ in yoga, what Wave and Wenger famously called “legitimate peripheral participation” within “a community of practice” (Wave and Wenger 1991).

This confidence in my research project served me until the writing process began. Participants and friends eagerly joined the study, volunteered to be interviewed in their homes, and even filled in answers to my questions over pages and pages if they were traveling and could not attend a physical interview¹⁷. Yet, when I came to write this thesis – my research results struck me as simplistic, predictable, and most of all - mundane. The challenge of writing about the ‘other’ that I felt I knew so well became overwhelming. I quickly realised that it is far easier to write about the distant ‘other’ than to address a personal subject that was loaded with my own judgements and prejudice. Returning to the writings of anthropologists writing about their own communities¹⁸, eventually spurred me through an initial lapse in writing.

B. Part two.

This thesis is therefore based on anthropological observations and interviews, including three life history recordings, taken over several years spent working in the yoga industry in Beirut. The qualitative method of investigation chosen for this thesis reflects what I considered to be the best possible method for gathering detailed

¹⁷ This applied to six interviewees in total.

¹⁸ For example, Martha Balshem in *Cancer in the Community: Class and Medical Authority* or David M. Schneider *American Kinship a Cultural Account*.

information from yoga practitioners in Beirut. Moreover, my focus on narrative allowed me to address a persistent question of mine that has been unaddressed in the literature on yoga so far: what does the practice of yoga actually mean to the individuals that take part in it? Without an ethnographic investigation of yoga, this question, along with the majority of questions raised in this thesis, would not be able to be sufficiently addressed. Narrative further allowed me to explore the contradictions inherent in Beirut's yoga community, meanwhile seeking to listen to the individuals that have given yoga meaning.

In total, I carried out 22 interviews with yoga teachers and practitioners based in Lebanon, which ranged from being relatively brief and un-instructive, to long email based interviews that perhaps offered personal information more easily disclosed in a private setting, to finally several hours spent talking face to face detailing rich life histories. This included six email based interviews, thirteen interviews carried out in person by the author, and three life history recordings. Although a face-to-face conversation, and better still a life history interview, would have been the best option for all interviews that were carried out, it was simply not possible. This was partly because some people were uncomfortable with this, some people were away or unavailable, and also because I opted for a "speaker-led" approach based on my position as a researcher and particularly the fact that I was a fellow teacher. In the end, I simply presented my research interests and then went with what each speaker was comfortable with - taking reassurance from the words of Kathryn Anderson and Dana Jack: "To remain attentive to the moral dimension of interviewing and aware that s/he is there to follow the narrator's lead, to honour [their] integrity and privacy, not to intrude into areas that the narrator has chosen to hold back" (Gluck and Patai 1991: 25) - and

using my interview questions as a guideline¹⁹. In the life histories that I recorded, I opted to interview those that I felt I would be able to be honest and frank with about my research and the relevance of their life story for my investigation. This was entirely a personal choice; I ultimately interviewed my colleagues with whom I had good relations – purposefully to avoid the risk of falling into an awkward situation where I felt there was tension regarding questions asked or personal information at stake that the participant perhaps did not want to share. I also chose to carry out three life history recordings with those that I knew had had interesting personal backgrounds in yoga and had been in the ‘yoga scene’ in Lebanon for some time. Therefore two of the teachers that I interviewed were over 50 years old.

Of the 22 interviewees, there were 11 students and 11 teachers of yoga. This included two male teachers, and nine female teachers, revealing a proportional ratio of male to female yoga teachers inside Lebanon. I interviewed five male yoga students and six female yoga students, at least half of which were my own yoga students who had attended weekly classes for between six months and two years. Although the ratio of male to female students seems to be increasing inside Lebanon, the majority of yoga classes are still primarily filled with women, something that is not perfectly reflected in this sample.

I will offer a brief demographic breakdown of those interviewed here:

Student 1: British male of 32 years. He was born and raised in the UK with no religious upbringing. He is married to student 4. He is educated to graduate level and fluent in three languages: English, Arabic and Spanish. He currently works in the region in Development. He lived in Syria for four years, and Lebanon for two years. He has also

¹⁹ See Appendix.

been a yoga practitioner for two years. This interview was carried out in my home.

Student 2: Lebanese male of 38 years. He was born and raised in Beirut, Lebanon. He has explored multiple religions in his adult life, particularly in relation to the various schools of yoga. He is educated to graduate level and fluent in English and Arabic. He currently works in academia. He has practiced yoga for nine years. This interview was carried out at a mutual friend's house in Beirut.

Student 3: Lebanese female of 21 years. She was born in Lebanon and was raised between Lebanon and the United Arab Emirates. She is currently a student and is fluent in English, French, and Spanish. She has practiced yoga for three years. This interview was carried out in the Beirut Sivananda Centre after a class that my husband taught.

Student 4: British female of 32 years. She is married to student 1. She was born and raised in the UK. She is fluent in English, Arabic, and Italian. She works in journalism. She has been a yoga practitioner for five years. This participant answered my questions on her own and emailed her responses.

Student 5: Lebanese male of 22 years. He is currently studying at the Graduate level. He was born and raised in Lebanon to Lebanese and Filipino parents. He is fluent in English, Arabic, and Tagalog. He has been a yoga practitioner for six years. This participant answered my questions on her own and emailed her responses.

Student 6: Italian female of 29 years. She is fluent in English, French, and Italian. She was born and raised in Italy. She is both a Child educator and dance therapist, and is undergoing a yoga teacher-training programme in Lebanon. She has been a yoga practitioner for four years. This interview was carried out in NOK Yoga Shala, where we both worked.

Student 7: Lebanese female of 30 years. She is fluent in English, Arabic, and French.

She was born and raised in Beirut. She is a Graphic Designer and business owner. She has been a yoga practitioner for six years. I attended her home in order to carry out this interview.

Student 8: Lebanese male of 34 years. He is fluent in English and Arabic. He is an Academic. He is new to yoga. This interview was carried out in a mutual friend's home in Beirut.

Student 9: Canadian female of 27 years. She is an English Editor and PhD Student. She was born and raised in Toronto. She is fluent in English, Arabic and French. She has been a yoga student of five years and was recently awarded a recognized teaching qualification by a Lebanese based teacher. This interview was carried out through email correspondences.

Student 10: Lebanese/ American male of 40 years. He was born in Beirut and raised in London. He is a semi- retired economist. He is fluent in French and English. He has been a yoga practitioner for seven years. This interview was carried out in his home in Beirut.

Student 11: Swiss male of 30 years who was born and raised in Switzerland. He is a professional barman. He is fluent in English, German and French. He has been a Yoga practitioner for eight years. This interview was carried out in my home in Badaro, Beirut.

Teacher 1: Lebanese/ Italian female of 33 years. She was born in Beirut and relocated to Italy when she was very young. She is educated to graduate level and fluent in English, Italian, and Arabic. She has been a yoga practitioner for 11 years and teacher for one year. This interview was carried out in NOK Yoga Shala, after the teacher taught a class in the center.

Teacher 2: German female of 31 years, born and raised in Northern Germany. She is fluent in English and German. She has been a Yoga teacher and practitioner for seven years. The teacher attended my home in Beirut for the interview.

Teacher 3: Lebanese/ Armenian Female of 34 years. She was born in Belgium and raised in the United Arab Emirates. She is educated to graduate level and is a city planner. She is fluent in Armenian, French, and English. She has been a yoga teacher and practitioner for seven years. This interview was carried out in the teacher's own studio in Beirut.

Teacher 4: Lebanese female of 29 years old. Born and raised in Beirut, she is currently studying in Europe for her PhD. She is fluent in Arabic, English and French. She has been a teacher and practitioner of yoga for 11 years. The interview was carried out through several email correspondences.

Teacher 5: Jordanian/ Swedish female of 50 years. She was born and raised in Jordan. She has been a United Nations Civil Servant for 27 years and has lived in various cities across the world. She is fluent in Arabic, English, and French. She has been a yoga teacher and practitioner for 14 years. I attended the home of this teacher in Beirut for this interview.

Teacher 6: Lebanese male of 33 years. He was born and raised in Beirut. He is an academic and has lived in the UK for several years. He is fluent in Arabic, French, and English. He has been a yoga practitioner for 15 years and teacher for six years. This interview was carried out in my home.

Teacher 7 Amanda: Life History recorded. British female of 61 years. She was born and raised in North London. She speaks English and Arabic. She is yoga teacher and healer. She has been a yoga practitioner for 42 years and teacher for 15 years. I

attended this teacher's home in Khalde, south of Beirut, for the interview.

Teacher 8: Lebanese male of 51 years. He is a yoga teacher, guest house/ restaurant owner. He was born and raised in Beirut, Lebanon, but has spent a significant portion of his adult life in the United States of America. He is fluent in Arabic, French, and English. He has been a yoga practitioner for 18 years and teacher for 14 years. This teacher came to my home for this interview.

Teacher 9: Lebanese female of 34 years. She was born and raised in Beirut. She is an Actress and drama teacher. She is fluent in Arabic, French, and English. She has been a yoga practitioner for five years and teacher for one year. This interview was carried out through email correspondences.

Teacher 10 Aya: Life History recorded. Lebanese female of 26 years. She was born in Beirut but raised in Kuwait. She is fluent in Arabic and English. She is a Yoga teacher, Musician, Graphic Designer and photographer. She has been a yoga practitioner for seven years and teacher for three years. This teacher attended my home for the interview.

Teacher 11 Valerie: Life History recorded. Greek female of 51 years. She was born and raised in a city near to Athens, Greece. She is a meditation teacher and a country leader for the Brahma Kumaris for 26 years, and in Lebanon for the past six years. She is fluent in Greek and English. I attended the home of Valerie, simultaneously the meditation center, for this interview.

I chose those that I interviewed for varying reasons. Most of all, I interviewed those that I believed would have something to say about yoga in Lebanon, or something to bring to the subject that would add colour or character to my study. There were also those who had interesting personal narratives; sometimes those I was familiar with

already, although other times I learnt a lot through the interview. I think that if there is one interesting element about the encounter of people with yoga at our time in history it is that it is often a personal choice, something comparable with a religious or spiritual conversion²⁰. Few people, although of course there are some, are raised in a family of yogis. This was certainly reflected in the interviews, and more explicitly in the life histories that I recorded.

Although no study is excluded from claims of bias, I would argue that my speakers do have something to say of the collectivity of yoga practitioners in Lebanon. It is certainly a movement influenced by foreigners living in the country, or at least those who have been influenced by life outside of Lebanon, i.e. those having dual nationality parents, or those who have lived, worked or studied abroad. Although the majority of those interviewed have Lebanese origins (eight out of 11 teachers and six out of 11 students interviewed), the inclusion of other nationals in this study highlights Beirut as a cosmopolitan city, while also allowing a basis for comparison with other national and religious backgrounds. There are also a significant number of British participants in this study, which although not aimed for, must in some way reflect the fact that I am also British and either have more British contacts at my disposal or that I perhaps felt more comfortable in approaching them for an interview. Undeniably, yoga in Lebanon is a majority female led movement, although male teachers are notably popular amongst both male and female students. It is also a movement of educated, multi-skilled, and multi-lingual people inside of Lebanon. Yoga practitioners in

²⁰ By religious or spiritual conversion, I refer to individuals that identify with a particular worldview that is not necessarily one that they have been educated or accustomed to. However, in some cases, individuals may be Christian for example, but after an event, meeting, crisis or loss may discover new strength of conviction in their previously beliefs.

Lebanon certainly do not reflect the stereotype of ‘wanderer’ or those that do not have a role within society; quite the contrary, yoga practitioners and teachers in this study reflect the fact that these people often play multiple roles within society, carrying out numerous jobs, only sometimes owing to economic reasons as many high earning professionals in Lebanon also teach yoga simply because they enjoy it²¹. Others, such as Aya²², noted that she enjoys the variety of roles she undertakes and the freedom that comes from such self-employment. Moreover, we cannot claim that Yoga practitioners and teachers are exclusive among the upper classes, as could be speculated based on the high cost of yoga sessions in Beirut. Arguably, those who primarily teach yoga for an income are more likely to come from the middle classes and have seen an opportunity for employment, and perhaps an elevated social status based on yoga being in vogue.

Contrary to some stereotypes, such as the claim that yoga in Lebanon is practiced mostly by the Druze community, a claim frequently backed up by the Druze and Hindu faiths shared belief in reincarnation, yoga in Lebanon is practiced across faiths, with students and teachers coming from all of the countries faith backgrounds. In fact, although my sample is representative of the multiple faiths that exist in Lebanon, I did not interview anyone from the Druze community.

All those that were approached to be interviewed for this study accepted with enthusiasm, with the exception of one prominent teacher who simply never got back to me and later excused herself for being overwhelmingly busy. Although, some people spoke very little in the interview and didn’t give much away, appearing to not want to be pushed further. Owing to this, several interviews did not go beyond 15 minutes of

²¹ I support this claim with reference to the diverse range of jobs listed above. Few teachers teach yoga as a sole means of employment.

²² Pseudonyms are used throughout this thesis.

time.

All interviews for this study were performed on their own, and I embarked on no group interview or focus groups. This was largely as a result of my past attempts at recording oral histories in which I had often struggled to pin individuals down to be interviewed, and later felt tension between friends and families and what they disclosed throughout the interview. In two previous studies carried out for oral history courses, it became obvious that the presence of family members made individuals assume their family role, as mother, brother or sister for example, which came loaded with limitations on what could be said.²³ I therefore chose to interview each participant for this study alone, and was mostly uninterrupted in doing so.

At times, I also felt that my position as a friend or teacher had limited what was said, and the speaker felt uncomfortable about divulging too much personal information or feared of being judged. This was especially the case amongst those that I did not personally know so well. I also felt at times that people didn't want to say anything that may appear as "un-yogi": things that could be construed as judgemental or selfish, or not open-minded or forgiving. Remembering this from previous investigations and reading its potentiality in the literature on interviewing, I was aware of its common occurrence: "... the respondent may deliberately try to please the interviewer or to prevent the interviewer from learning something about the respondent" (Gluck and Patai eds. 1991: 69). As the community of yoga practitioners in Lebanon is fairly small and teachers do know or at least are aware of one another, I certainly felt this tension. In one interview, a teacher actually made an accusation towards another teacher, and immediately afterwards insisted, even making me promise, that I would remove that

²³ This was especially the case during interviews for a project investigating the stories of Palestinians from among Lebanese families.

part of the interview completely. In several instances of awkwardness or unease, I did not insist or ask any further questions based on my position as a researcher, but also because of my position within the community itself that I did not want to jeopardize. This is reminiscent of Anderson and Jack in their article “Learning to Listen”, who note that the “...ability to listen... suffered from the constraints of internalized cultural boundaries” (Gluck and Patai eds. 1991: 69). In my case I was not only affected by internalized cultural boundaries, but also by the established roles and boundaries of my regular interaction with the speakers.

At other times, my position as a friend certainly encouraged others to talk openly and freely, and this was especially the case during the life history interviews. Moreover, I felt that there was a kind of comradery between practitioners or friends and myself in that they genuinely wanted to help. The majority of those interviews concluded with the speaker asking something resembling: “Was that helpful? I really hope so.” or “Are you sure that this has been helpful? You can interview me again if you need to!” One teacher spent several hours being interviewed, helped to comfort my young son, and later revealed that she had to leave promptly as her sister was arriving at the airport and she was also going to be interviewed that evening on LBC, the Lebanese Broadcasting Channel. In fact, she had gone out of her way to be interviewed at a time that was very inconvenient for her, but as she had concluded, it must be convenient for me.

The various yoga communities in Lebanon are certainly comprised of groups with strong social ties, while they also create and foster a sense of belonging. I recall a remark of one yoga teacher who after arriving at one yoga centre from her own home studio for the interview, commented that she was “home from home” (Teacher 3:

October 2013). Another teacher commented that upon her arrival in a foreign city, a yoga centre would be her first port of call, knowing that she would instantly feel comfortable and find herself within a network of like-minded people (Student 9: September 2013). This subject will be elaborated on further into this thesis.

Overall, my interviews went well and according to 'plan'. The relatively large number of interviewees was chosen in order to account for the inevitability that some interviews might reveal fairly little material for my study or that they may be short and sweet, as I have experienced in the past. For example, one practitioner told me that as a Muslim they had found similarities between the Islamic prayer and yoga postures, and between the themes and dialogues of their teachers, however, they were unable to elaborate on the subject when questioned. Despite the fact that the speaker appeared willing and that I prompted them several times to go further on the analysis, they were simply not able to. I guessed that the speaker had not given much thought to the subject herself, other than making a connection. If this is the case, it is certainly out of the ordinary; as if there is one thing that ties my interviews together it is the detail and thoughtful elaboration on the practice that was given overall. Yoga practitioners are certainly reflective of their practice, and thoughtful of what they are doing. If there is anything that my interviews do show, it is the encouragement that yoga practices have upon individuals' reflexive capabilities. Significantly, the eloquence of those interviewed, regarding both students and teachers is clear. Not only do we find that those interviewed are highly educated, achieving Bachelors degrees, Masters, and in some cases even PhDs, but also participants, increasingly so amongst teachers, have developed a certain eloquence in the way they speak about their yoga practice - their bodies, emotions, and feelings. Alike the observances made by Saba Mahmood

(Mahmood 2005), the individuals that I have spoken with have notably spent a great deal of time making themselves acquainted with what they are doing – what they are experiencing, their feelings, sensitivities, emotions – even world views.

CHAPTER THREE

BODY AS A SITE OF SPIRITUAL AWAKENING

A great deal of attention has been paid by anthropologists to the study of body rituals in religion and society. Victor Turner writing on the Ndembu in Zambia (Turner 1969) argued that ritual processes reveal a great deal more about society than previously thought. By studying rituals and symbolism, we can have a glimpse of the wider social structures at play, he argued (Turner 1969). Moreover, bodily rituals are not simply a rite of social conformism but can also be understood as “micro-development processes” (Ortner 1984:159), to refer to Sherry Ortner, who argued that micro-developmental processes are the small transactions that contribute to the making of our society.²⁴ This mirrors Saba Mahmood, who through studying a women’s piety movement in modern-day Cairo, argued that rituals “...cannot be read simply as a social imposition that constrains the self but rather (under certain rehearsed spontaneity conditions) as the means by which the self is realized” (Mahmood 2001: 828).

In this chapter, I argue that through yoga the individuals that I have interviewed learnt to relate to the body as a “divine” subject, and contrary to the ideals of our modern global culture (that perhaps contributed to individuals starting a yoga practice in

²⁴ Ortner describes “microdevelopmental processes” as transactions, careers and developmental cycles, which are related to a view of history as something that people make, despite the powerful constraints of the system in which they are operating.

the first place), individuals further developed inherent dispositions of acceptance, positivity, and self-love. Rather than a means of acquiring the “perfect body”, individuals revealed that they became the perfect “self”. It is on this basis that I argue that yoga practices are a vehicle through which individuals use the body to overcome the societal pressures that they face.

A. On the inside.

Yoga practices in Lebanon are multiple and diverse, but we can say that there are similarities among yoga practices. Yoga is certainly largely a physical practice in Lebanon, and the enactment of yoga through physical movement and postures (*asana*) is popularly perceived to account for what yoga actually *is*. Even smaller circles of yoga practitioners in Lebanon who do not carry out an aerobic practice as part of their “yoga” maintain an emphasis on the stillness of the body, for example, in order to promote the best results²⁵. Distinct from society’s contemporary attitude towards the superiority of the mind and its reflexive capabilities, yoga proves itself to be an experiential practice that advocates quite the opposite. Yoga encourages a distinct attitude towards mind and body consciousness that resembles those of religious rituals²⁶ equal to its modern physical counterpart, i.e. a fit and healthy lifestyle. In modern forms of yoga, the body is taken as the vehicle of experience, only through which we

²⁵ Raja Yoga, as practiced by the Brahma Kumaris inside Lebanon is one example of this.

²⁶ Although “no experience is too lowly not to be taken up in ritual and given a lofty meaning” (Douglas 1976: 114), I evoke Bobby Alexander on *religious* ritual in this case: “Traditional religious rituals open up ordinary life to ultimate reality or some transcendent being or force in order to tap its transformative power.” (Alexander 1997: 139)

come to understand the true nature of the mind, our surroundings and moreover, can find peace, happiness, and in some cases, arrive closer to God.²⁷

Yet, most people today do not come to yoga searching for a spiritual practice. They come because they are told that it will help them physically, they are recommended by doctors, or they want to lose weight and to look better.²⁸ This was evidenced in my interviews, with all male participants, and many female participants, explaining that they started practicing yoga for health reasons. Among respondents, a “health condition” (Interview: Student 5) and commonly “back problems” (Interviews 2013: Student 1; Student 9). were given as the reasons that practitioners were originally advised to take up yoga.

Yet spirituality and health consciousness have become inextricably linked through the modern day enactment of yoga, and I argue this is more so the case in Lebanon than other familiar contexts, such as Europe or the US. This is because Lebanon has existing strong faith based communities, and practitioners regularly come to yoga already having a belief in God, a point that will be discussed in the following chapter in greater detail. Beirut equally has a visible culture that emphasizes the physical body, its appearance, beauty and care – a statement that is particularly relevant for its women.²⁹

²⁷ This is based on responses from my interviews carried out in the summer of 2013, which mirrors a fairly generic dialogue that has developed amongst yoga schools, teachers, and practitioners globally.

²⁸ This was evidenced in my interviews carried out in the summer of 2013. As the manager of NOK Yoga Shala, I frequently received calls from people asking about yoga classes – the majority of these calls began with the question: “Is it true that yoga makes you lose weight?”

²⁹ According to a 2010 study, Lebanon has the highest rate of plastic surgery in world, with one in three women having had surgery of some sort. Plastic Surgery Statistics: World Wide Web Edition, Fanoos Encyclopaedia: http://www.fanoos.com/research/plastic_surgery_statistics.html

This chapter seeks to question how we understand yoga as a bodily practice or ritual in the Lebanese context? How do practitioners use and relate to the body through yoga, in its various manifestations? Is there something unique about how yoga utilizes the body in our modern day context, how are yoga practices talked about or internalized? I will address these questions with reference to my own immersion in the yoga community over the past two years, as well as interviews carried out amongst the yoga community in Beirut in recent months as a precursor to this thesis.

B. Entering the space.

Entering a Beirut yoga space is similar to entering any yoga space in the world. The yoga studio has established itself firmly within a globalized culture to the extent that it is recognizable in any particular context - just like a Church or Mosque maintains its marked character all over the world - as does the modern yoga space. The interior of a yoga space is open plan in architectural style and is purposefully unfurnished. The practice room is near to bare, but always contains a small table or perch with items loosely scattered upon it, ranging from burning incense and candles, to icons, bronze statues or pictures from the Hindu tradition, commonly the Dancing Shiva or Ganesh, as well as images of notable teachers from the last century. I found this style of shrine to be similar to those found in Hindu homes in Southern India, and not similar to those inside India's religious buildings or temples. The former are much smaller and more intimate, with only one or two precious items often accrued during notable instances throughout the collector's life and proudly displayed. When asked³⁰, the same applied to Beirut's yoga studios, with owners remembering the precise moment when they

³⁰ I have asked the owners of four of Beirut's largest but locally owned Yoga centres this question over the course of my research.

received or collected the items that they display. The lines of the room are always clean and simple, painted in often pale, block colours. The windows are emphasized by their starkness alone, left without curtains or blinds, allowing the natural light to come through. Common to any yoga studio in Lebanon is the absence of chairs to sit. Instead, students and teachers are welcomed to rest on floor cushions, maintaining a very Indian custom. Similarly and without exception, practitioners are required to remove their shoes upon entry into the building or at least the practice space itself. Again, this practice is typically Indian and I have witnessed it amongst family households as well as religious houses in Southern India, yet we must also note its prevalence among so many religious traditions, where shoes are removed before entering the sacred space, and certainly before prayer, in all Abrahamic traditions, as well as many major world religions, such as Buddhism, Sikhism, and of course Hinduism.

If you walk into any yoga class around the world, and Beirut is no exception, you will find all kinds of bodies in tight Lycra costumes, shorts and t-shirts, leggings and sweat pants, tank tops, sports bras, whether revealing or not - but all of these bodies will be moving, sweating, stretching, bending, moving again - until finally you will find the whole class resting completely still, in a pose named *Savasana*, translated as corpse pose. A class usually lasts at least one hour but is commonly one and a half hours from start until finish.

It is sometimes accompanied by Indian music, whether new or old, sometimes pop music³¹, sometimes by “New Age” music or even a Western version of a Sanskrit chant, and sometimes albeit rarely, a class will be accompanied by silence.

³¹ The Jivamukti Yoga school commonly play modern popular music in their classes. Also, one of Beirut’s most well known yoga teachers is notorious for her trade mark “Pop and Rock Yoga” classes. See Union Square Yoga for details: <http://usyoga.wordpress.com/>

Significantly, the only classes taking place in Beirut currently that are practiced without music are those that are more closely following an established Indian Lineage. Of these, the Sivananda style is not included, as the school gives no “rules” or restrictions and encourages teachers to develop their own styles of teaching and music is commonly an expression of this. The Ashtanga Yoga school, which follows the South Indian lineage of the late Pattabhi Jois³² and Raja Yoga as taught by the Brahma Kumaris³³ located high in the mountains of Rajasthan and following the lineage of the late Dada Lekhraj, are the only Beirut based classes that systematically do not use music.³⁴

Most classes of yoga in Beirut open with a Sanskrit prayer, chant, expression of words, the teaching of what I will call “yoga philosophy” - or a *dharma* reading, meaning a kind of moral lesson or story. Frequently, “yoga philosophy” is drawn from Hindu or even Buddhist texts, such as the Bhagavad Gita, or the writings of Dalai Lama, for example, but readings can also be taken from anywhere the teacher finds inspiration. The extent to which this features in classes varies greatly, with some discussions taking up to a third of the total class time, and others lasting for only several minutes. Interestingly, these introductions to class are significantly more prominent within the American schools of yoga than in various Indian traditions, as mentioned above. Notable teachers of these traditions, such as the late Pattabhi Jois or his grandson Sharath, frequently offer no verbal explanation of their teachings, and Lebanese based practitioners follow suite. Whilst the former style of class are often

³² For more information please visit the website of the Sri K Pattabhi Jois Ashtanga Yoga Institute, currently headed by his grandson, Sharath Jois: <https://kpjayi.org>

³³ For more information please visit the website of the Brahma Kumaris: www.brahmakumaris.org/

³⁴ Interestingly both classes also emphasize points of focus in their teachings, encouraging the eyes to focus on specific gaze points during practice. In yoga, we call this *drishti*, and it aims to induce better states of concentration.

among the most popular, suggesting that many students are also searching for moral or life guidance within yoga classes³⁵, some students do take offence and I have witnessed people leaving a class almost insulted by what was being said on numerous occasions, expressing remarks such as “I don’t agree with what was being said in there at all!”, “It just wasn’t for me...”, or asking questions such as “Do you know if there is another style of yoga where there is not so much bullshit talking?”³⁶

C. “Liberate your *jiva!*”³⁷

One American yoga school currently growing in influence inside Lebanon is the Jivamukti Yoga School, and Beirut currently has two yoga teachers who belong to this tradition.³⁸ Every month, the international yoga school, founded and run in New York City, features a “Focus of the Month”³⁹. In September 2013, I attended a yoga class at NOK Yoga Shala in which the focus of the month was “*Asana* and *Bhakti* – what does love have to do with it?” (Gannon 2013) I choose to highlight this class because I believe that it paints a picture of yoga in Beirut and the dialogue, language, and symbolism that is commonly used. In this particular class, the teacher introduced the class by presenting the simplicity of love, the need to surrender to God, and the all-

³⁵ Bachelor, Charlotte. 2010. In this thesis, Charlotte argued that yoga practitioners in New York paid more money for classes that included a significant portion of “yoga philosophy”, contained more self assuring dialogues, and those that spoke of God.

³⁶ Comments received and recorded during my time working at NOK Yoga Shala, Beirut.

³⁷ *Jiva* meaning “Self” in Sanskrit. This was the name of a Jivamukti workshop held at NOK Yoga Shala in April 2013.

³⁸ Note, only one teacher of this school was available to interview.

³⁹ Jivamukti Yoga School, NY. <http://www.jivamuktivyoga.com/teachings/focus-of-the-month>

redeeming quality of selfless love of the divine. She went on to read part of a statement by Sharon Gannon, cofounder of the Jivamukti Yoga School.

The teacher read:

“Why is it so difficult for us to surrender to this eternal love? *Avidya* is the cause of our reluctance. *Avidya* means ignorance of who we really are. Instead of remembering our true nature as eternal joy, we instead insist on a mistaken identity, one that revolves around our body, emotions and minds, as well as the unresolved issues with others, frustrated ambitions, complaints and blame that are housed in our mortal bodies. Our bodies are the storehouses for our unresolved karmas—all of our unfinished business with others — all of our small self concerns make up our individual self or *jiva*, whereas our true Self, the *atman* is eternal, bliss-filled — free from all suffering.”⁴⁰

This language is commonly used during yoga classes, especially the most popular styles of yoga in Lebanon. As the passage explains, the body is taken as a site that houses all old stored emotions and sensitivities. The article also claims that such sensations are illusory but what lies beyond them, the *atman*, to use the Sanskrit term for the unchanging soul within all creation, is the single truth where all suffering ceases to exist.

As a qualified yoga teacher, I am well versed on these notions, which were explained to me during my own teacher-training course that took place in London spanning the years of 2009 and 2010⁴¹. At the time, this was explained to me as information found in yogic texts, that as a yoga teacher I should be aware of. Furthermore, yoga *asana* were explained as ancient bodily practices meant to induce states of higher consciousness and lead to the liberation of the self, mirroring the findings of afore mentioned Mark Singleton in his thesis *Yoga Body*. The course

⁴⁰ When asked the teacher provided the source of her discussion: Gannon, Sharon. September 2013.

⁴¹ Yoga Alliance Yoga Teacher Training Course, authorized by Rebecca French of Yoga London. 2010.

leader, possibly aware that in the UK, such a kind of “spiritual” dialogue may be off putting to a majority secular educated audience, continued to explain that yoga did not have one meaning, but could mean different things to different people. She concluded that if you choose to practice yoga to “keep fit” and “look good” - then that is also perfectly okay.

However, some schools of yoga are more specific on what yoga *asana* should evoke, and we find this practice increasingly in Beirut yoga spaces. Returning to the Jivamukti yoga class of 2013, the teacher effectively presented the body as a site for personal transformation to occur, and the possibility to enter into a state of divine love. Only in selfless devotion to God in body and mind, could we ultimately find peace, she claimed. Concluding her introduction to the class, the teacher asked us to think of our loved ones while we practiced yoga that day and to send them love.

On reading Sharon Gannon’s passage on the theme of the month, I realized that the teacher had borrowed this idea from her senior. What Gannon presented in full was even more enlightening (for my study). She claimed that yoga *asana* is always a divine activity. She explains:

“Someone recently asked me if *asana* practice could be a *bhakti*⁴² practice. *Asana* practice must be a *bhakti* practice; it must be done with love and devotion to God if the ultimate aim is to be reached. The ultimate purpose of *asana* practice is to purify the body, to purify one’s negative karmas so that you can open up to Love, which is God. You cannot love God and hate God’s creation. When we can love all beings and things, the veil of ignorance will be lifted and we will be able to see clearly the Truth—the omnipresence of God. When we can let go of negativity, we can let God love us.” (Gannon 2013)

In this passage, Gannon argues that all *asana* are a way of spiritual purification and a form of devotional worship of God; they are *bhakti*. Significantly, Gannon is an

⁴² *Bhakti* translates as the way of devotional worship, or selfless love, of the supreme.

influential figure in the yoga community worldwide and this statement is revealing of the culture of yoga and its teachings. Moreover, it reveals that yoga in Lebanon participates in the global communion of modern yoga. I specifically chose to highlight the theme mentioned by Gannon because I have heard it repeatedly within the yoga community in Lebanon, but also in the UK, the US and in India. To date, I have not met a yoga teacher who does not consider that physical yoga, or *asana*, is ultimately a spiritual practice. They may not advocate the aspect of spirituality in their class, but it is held in their personal sentiment. Every teacher interviewed for my study conformed to this argument. Moreover, all teachers interviewed for my research explained that yoga had strengthened or “deepened” (Interview: Teacher 4) their faith in some way.

When I asked one well-known Beirut yoga teacher whether yoga had impacted her thoughts on God or her faith, she replied: “Yes. Yoga has deepened my spirituality, and has contributed in strengthening my faith in God by allowing me a wider lens through which to practice my religion. I have always been tolerant of others’ faith, however yoga has helped me see the connection and ‘oneness’ of all seeking a higher purpose or understanding of religion and spirituality” (Interview teacher 3).

Another teacher even claimed that yoga had allowed her faith to come alive, explaining: “...I began to believe again. Now I see that the world is not just black and white but that there is a spiritual fiber in a gamut of colors holding it all together... and that fiber is very real because I can feel it, it has always been like that I was just blind to it...” (Interview Teacher 2).

This “oneness” or “fiber” is a recurring theme in circles of yoga practitioners, and is also evidenced in the way teachers and students talk about their yoga practice. Many people claim that they are “reconnected” to the “true self” (Interview teacher 1)

through practicing yoga. One teacher interviewed explained, “I feel that yoga stating that ‘we are spiritual beings having a human experience’ only completes what I already felt deep in my heart” (Interview teacher 1). Others claim that for them, yoga’s philosophical teachings complimented their own faith. Notably, all participants of Middle Eastern origin, i.e. born in Beirut or Amman for this study, confessed a belief in God. Where as only half of participants interviewed for my study born in Europe or the US confided the same belief. Several of those of European origin were even reluctant to answer questions on the subject of God or their faith.

D. “Practice, practice, and all is coming.”⁴³

Yoga equally emerges as a practice that increases faith through experience – it is *practice* based. While numerous scholars have highlighted that “an understanding of practice is central to understanding the role yoga has come to play in the lives of its advocates” (Strauss 2005:10; Mark Singleton 2010: 89), rarely have these writers clarified what may constitute their own “understanding” of practice. Moreover, despite the fact that practice became a central area of scholarly consideration due to the works of key thinkers from Bourdieu (1972; 1978) to Geertz (1973a, 1973b) - it appears that many more recent yoga scholars are reluctant to integrate such theory into their explorations, including myself. Perhaps this is because approaches to practice are so diverse or even - as Ortner has proposed - because practice is neither a theory nor a method in itself, but rather an abstract symbol, in the name of which a variety of theories and methods are being developed (Ortner 1984: 127).

⁴³ Famous quote of the late Sri K. Pattabhi Jois.

The subject of practice was introduced directly by one student that I interviewed for this thesis, implying that the concept of practice is even more relevant than I previously thought. When asked how yoga had impacted his thoughts on God, spirituality and religion, he replied: “Yoga has made me much more appreciative of spirituality that manifests itself through ritual rather than through intellect, in the way that, say, types of Protestant Christianity do... I wouldn’t say that it has changed my views of spiritual reality, of the existence of God or the truth of religious texts like the Bible, but I do think that it has made me realize that spiritual knowledge is not something gained entirely through intellect, it is also through practice, however hard that is to grasp as yet...” (Interview: Student 1)

In this study, yoga practices emerge as a medium. People talk more of how their practice has changed their lives, than what the practice is or how the practice allows the transformations that they describe. As the speaker above highlights, this is likely because they don’t know why these transformations occur; they just know that they do. This mirrors Foucault, who said: “People know what they do; they frequently know why they do what they do; but what they don’t know is what what they do does” (Dreyfus and Rainbow 1982:187). What we can conclude, however, is that Yoga *asana* for at least some of those who practice, reveals the body as a site of spiritual awakening.

E. The physical body.

While the majority of the yoga world claims its authenticity through reference to a document known as Patanjali’s Yoga Sutra - a string of 196 sutras that together are often described as the foundational text of yoga - it is important to note that the only mention of physical postures or *asana* within this whole works is a single sentence,

which reads “*sthira sukham asanam*”, meaning that the seated posture should be steady and comfortable (Hartranft 2003). Yet, the focus on the physical body and its manipulation in order to reach specific states of higher consciousness are well established within the modern form of yoga, both in the West and in modern India today. In response to this, I find myself mirroring Singleton who dismisses this question of authenticity (Singleton 2010: 1), because regardless of when *asana* became a primary component of Indian yogic practices, what is more interesting for this study is how yoga *asana* is utilized and evoked and has created a new form of spirituality, perhaps what Baier referred to as a ‘post-religious’ form of religiosity” (Baier 2012: 2).

Many religious rituals, albeit less physically demanding, seek the same spiritual end. In Mahmoud’s study on the Egyptian Women’s Islamic Piety movement, she explains: “...the women I worked with understood the body as a developable means for realizing the pious self” (Mahmood 2001: 828). She continues to argue that we can no longer view ritual as something constrained by social norms and “rule governed conventions” (Mahmood 2001:828). If we are to perceive yoga as a modern bodily ritual, and I argue that we should, then we must also see that ritual is socially conditioned, as well as socially conditioning.⁴⁴

The body is treated in a specific way within the yoga space, and at least the “Western Yoga” approach towards the body resounds within the vast majority of classes that I have witnessed in Beirut. The most encapsulating description that I can use to shed light on this phenomenon is ultimately an attitude of self-acceptance, which is voiced and encouraged throughout classes in a myriad of ways. Students are

⁴⁴ See also Victor Turner in *The Ritual Process* (1969) where he argues that understanding communal rituals is key to understanding wider social dynamics and processes.

encouraged to feel calm, to forget their worries, and to focus on relaxing their bodies and releasing pent up feelings for the duration of the class. It is also common within the practice room to hear phrases such as “yoga is the time for *you*” or “listen to your body” and “be kind to yourself”, “love yourself” and “don’t push yourself.” Such dialogue equally affirms the self and body as an object to be nurtured. The above illustrations are merely examples of this.⁴⁵ It was also strongly evidenced within my interviews, for both teachers and students, who all noted an improved relationship with the body since starting yoga. One practitioner’s response was poignant. She explained:

“Yoga makes me conscious of my own physical and emotional strength, spiritual depth and sexual power. It acts as a kind of therapy and replaces critical and judgmental inner monologues with confidence and a sudden awareness of my body’s wondrousness. I am often amazed by my body’s capacities and its effectiveness as an instrument. Through yoga, my body becomes a channel for releasing negativity, expressing emotion and channeling divine energy” (Interview: Student 9).

There are two important reflections that stem from this statement. The first must be to affirm that an attitude of “self-love” reflects the needs of modern society much more than it is present within supposed ancient teachings of yoga or Hinduism. When we consider that a Beirutee lifestyle frequently includes long hours behind a desk, working in fairly estranged environments due to the increasing size of hiring corporations (Marx 1845⁴⁶), coupled by a lack of manual (physical) labour, and either an absence of religious life in an increasing secular society, or the constraints of family and confessional expectations, then we can easily estimate that yoga emerges as its remedy. Yoga is a modern day ritual in every sense of the word. In our high paced, over-stimulated, accelerated lives, yoga has marketed itself effectively as a space for

⁴⁵ In reference to the aforementioned personal interviews and the observation of a Jivamukti Yoga class.

⁴⁶ In reference to Karl Marx’s concept of alienation.

relaxation and rejuvenation. The tranquil, physical surroundings of yoga practices reflect this, as does the dialogue that surrounds it. Yoga practitioners also seem to internalize this. The aforementioned student was not the only one interviewed to reiterate such transformations. Other practitioners remarked: "...I have certainly learned to be calm and difficult to shake" (Interview: Student 1), "I feel healthier, less stressed and happy" (Interview: Student 4), and going further, one teacher remarked: "Yoga makes me feel great and in tune with myself, present to others and the surrounding, insightful but yet down-to-earth, open minded and disciplined, and sometimes very sensitive, constantly letting go of deeply rooted patterns bringing them up to the consciousness, recognizing habits, feeling equal and united with the beings by experiencing similarity and instinctive understanding" (Interview: Teacher 4).

The second observation is the vision of the body "as it is" as a thing of wonder (Foucault 1985). We must place this interest in the physical body in its rightful context. Many scholars have commented on what Asad deems the "preoccupation with 'the body' (which) is itself linked to a noticeable ideological development in contemporary life: the urge to aestheticize modern life. The body as image- in advertisement photographs, on television, and in the flesh..." (Asad 1997:43)⁴⁷. This is no less visible within advertisements for yoga in Beirut, which only adds to an existing culture of the body in Beirut. Yet yoga in its finality does not fall into the category of creating carbon copies of "perfect bodies" or perhaps what Michel Foucault referred to as "docile bodies", practitioners instead relayed the confidence that was instilled in their natural selves. (Interview: Teacher 3). Moreover, it is through a language of assurance as mentioned

⁴⁷ By comparison, Foucault makes a similar diagnosis in *The History of Sexuality* (1985: 56) Foucault argues that the emergence of contemporary medical thought and practice coincided with a "particular and intense form of attention to the body."

above, that the body is accepted “as it is”. As one teacher concluded: “Yoga helps me understand myself better, therefore I am able to accept myself as I am – body and soul.” (Interview: Teacher 3).

CHAPTER FOUR

THE SEARCH FOR MEANING

I have mentioned earlier in this thesis that beginning a yoga practice is comparable with a religious or spiritual conversion because it is most often a personal choice to begin, especially as very few people in Beirut can claim to have been raised by a family of yogis. This was certainly evidenced in the life histories that I recorded. This chapter therefore seeks to illuminate the life experiences of individuals who have come to yoga, how they understand this ongoing practice, and what belief systems they advocate based on their yoga practices.

Although I only used a small sample of life histories, being three in total, they are both rich and revealing. In this chapter I continue to argue that yoga is a vehicle through which practitioners can challenge the ‘norms’ of their society, while also demonstrating some commonalities between their ‘worldviews’, as well as life experiences. The three life histories are also telling of the conviction of people in ‘yoga’, and the confidence that they have in speaking about not only their yogic practices, but also their personal lives and own experiences, adding weight to the previous chapter’s claim that individuals became more comfortable with who they were, or their ‘true self’ to use a yogi expression.

A. Initiation.

Two out of the three speakers recorded began their life histories with stories of ‘other-worldly’ experiences – they emphasized that they had been strongly influenced by an experience that was outside of their everyday, ‘three-dimensional’ existence. Perhaps not coincidentally, both of these incidents were recalled quickly with reference to the death of a parent at a young age.

The youngest of the speakers, Aya, told me that at the age of ten she was overcome by the feeling that she had lived in a human body before, and that this feeling returned to her at the death of her father. She explained:

“I literally stopped and looked and asked, I have been in a three-dimensional space before, in a human body before, why am I repeating this again? ... And then I stopped and I continued to play... So we moved (back to Lebanon) in 2001 and a year later my father passed away. When he passed away, all the questions came again, the question was that I thought we were immortal, no one told me there is death, if you told me there is death I would have done other things... I would have been more responsible, more awake, asking and searching for something. But I was reckless sort of... just as a child... you’re not aware of many things. So when death came I was fourteen and a half; I asked why is everyone crying around me, why do we cry when there is death, what is death, does that mean we go somewhere else that is not here? So it is true that especially when I go to sleep I go to other places, and that life is not only happening here in this dimension. So that was another awakening. And all of my questions of philosophy, god, what is religion, what are these many religions came again....” (Interview Aya 2014)

Another speaker Valerie recalled something similar when I asked how she would like to begin her life history. She began: “There was this incident that happened with my mother... she passed away when I was 11 years old. So someone who stands there for security and protection, love, was not there anymore... And somehow, subconsciously it is registered as someone who is always going to be there. Internal – that’s how you want your parents to be. Because security is something that it doesn’t

finish... so it is a shock to see that this person is not there anymore. And these act like a mirror, a mirror which I saw from a very young age that everything is temporary and can finish... and I didn't have answers to where she went... but my mind started wandering about these questions, like what's happening after death that could happen to any moment to each one of us, what's the purpose of a life that's going to finish at that moment like I'm going to do this, I'm going to do that... and then you never know if this tomorrow will come. So we are very weak in front of these unexpected scenes of the drama life. Weak, that is if you cannot control anything, really anything, we can control nothing... starting from our body. We can lose it at any moment. So these are the reasons why I started thinking about there must be something higher, but I didn't have any clue how to find it. There must be higher purpose for living.” (Valerie 2014)

Both speakers highlight their unanswered questions in this life, but in so doing both speakers make a reference to their physical body. Both note the vulnerability of their physical body in connection with the daunting unknown that lies before them, in this case in relation to their helplessness over the immortality of the body. Valerie continued to describe a powerful experience that brought her towards yoga, something that was equally unprovoked. She explained:

“So one morning, it was in 87, it was a nice spring morning and I had a very lovely flat in Athens, I was enjoying my life with my friends. I had forgotten my existential agonies for sometime, they were there but I was not interested that much at the time. So I attended the course⁴⁸ after a friend of mine insisted for me to attend and from there I took a few leaflets and I came back after the weekend and I started reading one about truth. Truth is what doesn't change –it's always the same. And another extract from the Sufi reading that said all is love and god is love. And I was not particularly interested in God, not at all actually. God was not in my life. My background...I was raised as a Christian but my parents were more science orientated. They didn't impose anything, very light upbringing in terms of this. No fanaticism. We were free to choose. So I was at home and while reading this I just felt looking in front

⁴⁸ The course was taught by the group of Brahma Kumaris in Athens that Valerie later joined.

as if there was something pulling me... I had a balcony and I look beyond the balcony and in front of the sky and I just feel as if there is a power, the same way you have the physical sight. There is some light and some warmth and some power there. I felt the same but this light that I was seeing was physical, it was of another element. I felt as if there was a source in front of me that was emanating light. And as if this light was living, as if this light was thinking, as if something was in front of me in the form of a light and was communicating to me directly to my mind, as if my body was not necessary for this connection. And actually I had forgotten my body. And I felt that the body was not important, I was not aware of my body anymore and I realized I was the one who was thinking and there was someone there was also thinking but did not have a body. It was a communication through thoughts. And this someone had perfect thoughts, a kind of perfect consciousness. Someone whose embodiment was of the perfect thoughts. The source of peace, the source of love, and it was as if this someone knew me sooo well. My distant past... my distant, internal past, and future... as if he was having a full picture of me.” (Valerie 2014)

This wonderfully poignant caption describes the speaker's encounter with what she felt was another world, while it also emphasizes the physical body as something that was forgotten or overcome through this encounter, leading to a belief in something 'higher' that exists beyond the physical body or perhaps without the physical body.

Aya insisted that she had always questioned things all her life, which equally applied to the third speaker, Amanda, who although not recalling a death or higher experience, similarly spoke of unanswered questions that she had about life, death, and religion. Aya explained to me that she had always brought up questions of philosophy to her parents: “Like what is god, who is god, who said we have to do it this way, who said we have to fast, where do all these rules and regulations come from...?” She explained:

“So questioning everything basically... Anything that would come to mind about religion, about the Qur'an... And I felt, when death came I felt I was living a big lie, a big fantasy actually, because from zero to 14 no one told me there was death. I would have lived in a different way, that's what I felt. I felt like I was being robbed from something very important about life. So I went elsewhere to seek knowledge by doing research, personal research online, reading many books... So I did a lot of research, after deep seclusion and entering into dark spaces in myself, really stepping away from everything that I've learned, everything that was about beauty and joy...” (Interview Aya 2014)

This passage highlights not only what the speaker was questioning but also what she was stepping away from, the seeking of information from outside of her own norms or what she had been told. This was something that was reiterated by Amanda, although revealing of her own upbringing in North London. She explained to me about her upbringing and her interests in what was ‘different’:

“I guess we were Church of England but no one ever enforced it and nobody ever went to church. I went and found it myself on the street corner with the Salvation Army when I was about five. I was always out somewhere, wandering around with the dog. North London... right outside the Odeon, and they were standing outside bashing on their tambourines singing, Jesus wants me for a sunbeam. And I remember coming home singing Jesus wants me for a sunbeam and I was filled with love, then filled with all of this. And my sister turned round and said, “You must be joking, Jesus would be off his head, he doesn’t want you for anything! Let alone a sunbeam.” So that was a bit disappointing, I wasn’t encouraged into religion in any way.” I interrupted... “But you were interested...?” She continued: “Very much so... I think that by the time that I was 13, I was very interested in Judaism. It was the first one that got me, I don’t know why – I guess because it was different – when I was younger of course, you didn’t really know what was going on in the country and there was very few foreign people, even in London, but I used to notice that every morning when I went to assembly at school, putting our feet and legs together, that half a dozen people sat outside. And one of them was my best friend Marylin, and she always used to get to the Assembly hall and sit on a bench and we’d all go in. And I could never understand this – why was she allowed to sit on a bench and I wasn’t? You know I don’t want to go in there singing all this silly shit, I want to sit on the bench! So I remember going home and asking why Marylin had to sit on the bench and my mum said, well what’s her name? And I said Marylin Balasca. And so my dad said, she sits on the bench because she’s a Jew. So I said, what is a Jew? What is one of them! That has got to be interesting, at least it’s different from everybody else. So I started looking and by the time I was 15, I was reading a lot about it, I was purposefully making a lot of Jewish friends. And then, I dropped off that for some reason, and went into Catholicism. I think I actually ploughed my way through every religion, trying to find why it was that people were a Jew or Catholic or a Buddhist. So every time I met someone, I used to read... so I read and read and read. And I remember wanting to be a Jew at one point, and to be a Catholic. I don’t think I ever wanted to be a Church of England – because that was pretty boring to me. I didn’t mind being in the Salvation Army except I didn’t want to wear the uniform. Because that would make me look like everybody else, and I couldn’t cope with that either...” (Interview Amanda 2014)

This description is certainly less ‘other-worldly’ than the previous speaker but it does reveal that the speakers’ initiation to the world of yoga came after a quest or

seeking of information from outside their immediate sphere of influence, away from what was deemed as 'boring' or 'like everybody else'. Moreover, in the case of Amanda, the passage is telling of a desire to belong, although it is a desire to belong to a different part of society than where she came from.

B. The encounter with society.

Although the initiation to a yoga practice itself varied greatly between speakers, with Amanda beginning a physical practice at a young age and being fascinated by her teachers' bodies and skills, Aya first being taken by alternative healing practices such as Reiki, and hallucinogenic drugs, and slowly arriving at a yoga practice, and Valerie giving her life to the Brahma Kumaris and following its ascetic teachings from her mid twenties, which significantly do not emphasize physical yoga but instead a practice of silent meditation.

Amanda recalled her teachers with awe, remembering the abilities of the physical body in all its glory. This is similar to others interviewed who marveled at the abilities of their bodies and what they were able to achieve physically through yoga practices. She explained about one of her first teachers in yoga, her 'mentor': "...she was incredible. So she stopped doing ballet and stopped teaching ballet and went into yoga. I remember the first few classes with her... she fascinated me. You know putting her feet and her hands underneath her legs, and running her fingers across the floor... she was amazing. She was incredible... I loved her." (Interview Amanda 2014) It was following this meeting that the teacher interviewed initiated a teacher training programme in yoga, again demonstrating the desire to 'belong' in the community that she was learning from.

Yet at the same time the teacher asserted that she does not consider herself as belonging to the yoga community. When I asked her about this sense of belonging, she replied:

“No. No. No. I don’t have a community. I am probably completely on my own. I don’t have a group of friends that all do the same thing, I don’t have a group of friends that come to my yoga class, I don’t mix with people just because they do Reiki or homeopathy! No, I do it all on my own. And it is all my own stuff, my own research and I do it for my own pleasure. But if you want to come and learn, welcome, I don’t have any secrets and I’m not holding anything back. I am not afraid of telling everybody anything of what I’ve learnt, read or what I do. I don’t want anybody coming to me and telling me you’re the master. I would die. I would die. I would hate it.” (Interview Amanda 2014)

In the same recording, Amanda was critical of a particular style of yoga called Isha Yoga based on its strange practices, describing it as ‘culty’, ‘twisted’, ‘sick’, and their groups’ seemingly blind devotion to a ‘little tin God’ (Interview Amanda 2014). Moreover, the speakers’ rejection of common societal norms is fairly explicit in the interview, and she has a tendency to view society as a web of conspiracies, although some of the information that she reiterates is undeniably cliché. She confided:

“Well I think all societies are restrictive; it’s just that some pretend to not be. But all societies are restrictive... and they want to control the masses, and you know if you don’t control the masses, how are you going to get everything done the way that you want it to be done. How are you going to keep order, keep finances, and all in one place! And how are you going to do that if you can’t keep the masses running around doing what you want to do! That to me is what religion is, but it’s not what yoga is. Unless it’s something like Isha yoga! Or unless you are joining an Ashram where there is a little tin God over you telling you what to do! Then you’ve gone straight back to the old process of “I’m god and you’ll do what I say”. I think that’s why I don’t belong to anything; I don’t want to belong to anything. I don’t want to belong in any society, in any club, or one trial of thought. Because all of it to me... I’d suffocate!” (Interview Amanda 2014)

This passage highlights well what I have previously called a desire to belong to the ‘alternative collective’; yoga practitioners commonly believe that they are ‘freeing’ themselves from what they are obliged to do, from the society they are born into, from

the world as it is thought to be, only to ‘fit’ into another part of society that is viewed as different, ‘liberated’, or ‘free’. Amanda confirmed this notion by answering my question on how her life has been affected by her introduction to the practice of yoga.

She said:

“Yes I am free! I am free to go as I like, as best I can. Within society! There are certain things that I don’t have a choice about, I have to live within society. You have to be a certain way to live inside society but yoga it helped me – it helped me to stand outside the game. I see life as a game, I see all of this like a game of ‘Snakes and Ladders’, or ‘Risk’, or ‘Monopoly’, every body is running around running around playing the game. And I see it all as a game and yoga helped me to step away from the world and see it all as a game. Yoga helped me to learn how to watch and not to participate. Yoga taught me how to lose my attachment to things... yoga taught me that if I lose all this tomorrow it doesn’t matter, it’s not important. I can go and live on a tent on the beach. It serves the same purpose, I have something to eat, something to drink, somewhere to sleep! That’s what yoga taught me, I can have all this... but I don’t have to have all this. None of it matters, its just part of the game that I am living in. The only important thing is that I am not inside the game. I can watch the game. Sometimes, I have to slip in... I have children... I get pulled into the game. And I have to focus a lot to withdraw myself and to remind myself that it is all an illusion.” (Interview Amanda 2014)

Aya’s belief that the physical realm is an illusion runs even deeper, as was evidenced when recording her life history where she affirms her belief in higher states or other realms of consciousness. From her teenage years, Aya began to experiment with hallucinogenic drugs. This was initiated in some way with the help of her mother who had taken the family to meditation in order to help overcome the death of their father. She was there directed towards certain drugs, such as acid, and she began her own ‘research’. Later, she reveals her family traveled to Peru and under her advice, the entire family took the drug Ayahuasca; an herb that is known to induce altered states of consciousness, meditation, and is renowned for personal transformation. Aya was certainly looking for something ‘higher’ from all of her endeavors. When I asked how she felt about the yoga community in Lebanon, and whether she felt a part of this community she revealed that she had actually never felt to fit in anywhere, recalling a

story of how her childhood eczema had resurfaced when she had started practicing yoga intensely. She recalls:

“It’s a very interesting question because me personally, going back to the eczema, why it came into my life from zero to six years of age was because I always felt like I don’t fit in, like I don’t belong to a circle... so to feel like I am part of a yoga community in Lebanon, I feel like I am not part of a yoga community.... The yoga community that I feel I would be part of or connected to would be one that is deep in its essence that is beyond commercial yoga, and unfortunately in Lebanon there is a lot of commercial yoga, and its all about physical movement and it as a sport than as a worship, a prayer, a dance, a connection to yourself... yes let’s move the physical body and get this great beach body. Oh yes, they love to advertise yoga before summer comes in.... I would love to be part of something deep here in Lebanon, but unfortunately its very complicated, I feel the citizens here are a variety of identities in chaos.... And they want more and more to be identified with whatever that is out there, and nothing is satisfying for them, what we live in is always hell and outside is always heaven and so, this throws me away from feeling connected to any social circle, cause we are always identifying but actually Lebanese people have lost identity in their own culture and tradition.” (Interview Aya 2014)

This passage raises many complexities about Aya’s interaction with yoga and society. Firstly, she is critical of yoga in Lebanon based on its commodification, but also as she sees in it reflections of aspects of Lebanese society that she does not like, or want to identify with, such as consumerism, body image, and the loss of “tradition”. Aya longs to be associated with something deeper than what she perceives of the superficial aspects of Lebanese society, not only longing for something ‘different’.

For Valerie, her immersion in the yoga community is somewhat complete and has been since its inception. Her dedication to the lineage of the Brahma Kumaris meant that she has moved, lived and taught in places around the world according to the orders of her director based in India. She has also abstained from personal and sexual relationships since she joined the movement at the age of 26, ensuring a life of abstinence, vegetarianism, and strict daily meditations. Valerie reiterated to me that during more than 27 years of membership within the Brahma Kumaris she has not once skipped waking up at 3am in order to practice meditation. Meanwhile, her sense of

belonging to the community of yogis was profound and unshakeable. When I questioned Valerie on whether she felt that she had missed anything owing to her life choices, she confided to me:

“Never. I just feel it’s such an amazing life. I feel that it was the best use of my time. Life... if I had the choice I would do the same things, I feel like such a fruitful life... what is a life if you are not of use to others? It was a very conscious choice not to have a family, because I think it takes time, your resources and I also believe that we are in a transitional period... now the world needs world mothers and I remember when they told me in the center in Athens, you know, they asked me... are you getting married? There’s no problem with that, people are already married... they have to fulfill their specific duties. But we don’t necessarily encourage it like just go for it like society does. But to be a mother is so natural, ... and it is but then what they told me is that you can be a world mother, to be a mother doesn’t mean that you have to have a physical child, a quality of a mother, like caring for other, like sustaining them, being there for many. Sometimes people ask me don’t you miss your family, don’t you have family... yes, I have family and sisters and brothers. But I don’t miss a family, not at all. I just feel like the world is my family, it is another consciousness. I love you. I feel you are my family. Ok maybe you don’t feel me as much, but I feel you and I feel my feelings. We feel our feelings. So if you feel me as a foreigner, then that’s what you feel, but what I feel is that you’re my sister, and I feel love. So we feel what we have in our heart and our mind we can’t feel anything else. And even the situations are how we interpret them, which are what we feel. Very clear. Things are very clear...” (Interview Valerie 2014)

Valerie confides that she identification with the yoga community extends to the notion that she feels that the whole world is her community. The genuineness of her speech and gestures described throughout the interview only encouraged my conviction that this was the case.

For Valerie, Aya, and in fact all of my speakers interviewed in this thesis, yoga is certainly something meaningful to them, while it is also loaded with personal impressions, histories, and associations. Yoga has certainly been transformative to the individuals interviewed, especially highlighted in the life histories recorded. Specifically, yoga is argued as not what others think it is. For all speakers, yoga is

beyond the physical, it is a 'connection' with something greater that occurs through the physical practice.

D. The physical practice.

When I asked Amanda how she differentiated yoga from other sports or aerobics she replied: "Running... the gym, it's all good stuff! But yoga is complete. It's put all of this together for you! The workout, the introduction of the breath, the water, the cleansing, the physical body is being cleansed by everything in the earth. By the water and by the breath... Once the body is clean, you have got rid of the clutter, the heavy stuff, by getting rid of the tensions, tensions created by the thought system. So you release the tension in the body, in the cells, and they are released. And once you've got flexibility in the physical body, you have flexibility in the mental body. In the emotional body, flexibility bringing all of this together so that the energy can flow through you, around you, over you. It's a whole package." (Interview Amanda 2014)

Yoga practices in Beirut, and elsewhere, are certainly believed to be good for you. Amanda emphasizes this notion well as she tries to explain what yoga does physically. Yoga practitioners commonly believe that they are 'cleansing mind and body' through the physical practice of yoga and they validate this by referencing the 'consciousness' or 'awareness' that is brought to what they are doing. Additionally, many students of yoga mentioned this, including one student who explained that yoga had taught him to approach multiple aspects of his life and specifically physical work or sport with a yogic attitude. He describes that one Lebanese teacher was extremely

important in helping him to come to this understanding. When asked how yoga had made him feel, he replied:

“Complete. Serene. Effortlessly going through life... In terms of relating to my body, I do not find yoga to give me any characteristic feeling or relation. I get the same with martial arts (karate-do) and other physical exercises... But this is not because physical yoga is just another physical exercise, but because I have learnt to approach physical activity... running, swimming, karate... with a yoga attitude. This is hard for me to explain (and to do!), but you can run with such engagement and awareness that effectively speaking you are doing yoga. Similarly, you can go to a yoga class and be so dispersed and fragmented that this 90 minutes are merely an exercise.” (Interview Student 2) Amanda expressed a variation of this opinion, explaining: “It doesn’t matter what you’re doing in your life, you can be baking a cake, doing the washing, but it all becomes part of that meditation. The meditation that you can only move into that state because you don’t have tension in your body!” (Interview Amanda 2014)

One peculiarity of physical yoga or yoga *asana* is the linking of ‘health’ and ‘spirituality’, which is fairly well expressed by the speakers above. It also says a lot about the labels that are given to the things we do, and I have often wondered why the Islamic prayer is rarely if ever evoked as a ‘health’ practice. One speaker did elaborate on this subject, when asked about how she had understood yoga as a body ritual, she explained:

“This is very interesting for me because in the Muslim prayer, I’m just going to bring this connection, it is extremely important for so many reasons because some religions, maybe Christian or Islam will say yoga is a Hindu practice, it’s devilish... Well actually if you look at the prayer of Islam, they have the same postures that look like sun salutation, the repeating of certain mantras or phrases... and so if they, in Islam are doing it five times a day according to the hour and energies of the day – the changing of energies in the day- then I would totally understand why in Hindu or other religions that brought the physical yoga postures, why they also wake up early in the morning to do the same practice over and over again, especially sun salutation, doing their prayer, meditation and chant before the movement. So this is extremely important for them, for Islam as well, because it actually continuously makes sure that your body is moving, that energy is flowing, that there is not congestion of energy anywhere, so you are able to take in the energy of the day, energy of the people... and the environment around you, and you are also able to heal and to transform the energy that you are generating because you are also a conductor of energy, and share this pure energy now, because of your practice with the people around. Whether you’re sharing them as teaching them something or sharing it as having a discussion with someone or giving them a hug. That’s why it’s important. Movement on its own... I read this earlier today, “Motion is the source of color and sound”. Before anything happened in this

world, or before the creation, there was a small motion or a small vibration, which gave rise to color and sound, which then gave rise to everything in life. So this is why motion and movement are so important for the human body, like the animals they stretch like the trees, they continue to move on a cellular level, even though they appear not to move they are still moving. So we should not be motionless.... sitting in front of TVs or doing routine things, and that why yoga I think became a little bit popular, oh yes you want to relax come move around, actually we should be moving non stop, we should be moving, dancing, singing and praying non stop as part of yoga.” (Interview Aya 2014)

Practitioners of yoga frequently refer to the term ‘energy’ when explaining things from their practice, life, even the world or creation. The majority of those interviewed had something to say about ‘energy’ and in all the life histories recorded, individuals’ worldviews were each time explained with reference to this ‘energy’. In the yoga community, there is the tendency to view the world as a web of energy, that is the source of all creation. Importantly, all of the life history interviews referred to this energy as something ‘pure’ (Interview Aya 2014), ‘good’, or ‘perfect’ (Interview Valerie 2014). These results do highlight an argument of De Michelis that was presented during my literature review: De Michelis argued that Vivekananda had shifted the focus of a spiritual practice from “God” to “Self-Realization”. In many ways, this shift is made explicit in my research results, while it also helps us to understand how the link between ‘health’ and ‘spirituality’ is compounded. While many individuals revealed that they are suspicious of society, of the rules and customs that they found themselves in, always questioning, prior to their engagement in yoga practices, they also revealed the physical body was the site of their spiritual awakening. For some, this was explicitly a self-awareness, while for others it was an awareness of energy or God.

Aya continued her discussion of the importance of movement and motion with spirituality by discussing her faith. She, similarly to Amanda, expressed that she no longer needed to belong to a collective, but that through self-discovery and self-love,

was able to find strength in her faith, and also expressed a belief in the ‘purest creator’.

(Interview Aya 2014) She explained:

“Well, my faith became stronger actually.... through the many experience that opened different dimensions to me, and through the practice, the yoga, itself... I discovered first what it means to be in the house of God, realizing that if God is everywhere, god is within me as well. And that means that the house of god is also my body, the house I live in is the road and is the nature around me. That is the house of God. Thinking deeper in a way, that everything is divine and to remember that everything is divine is to remain on such a frequency, and to keep the faith. And so before, when I started to question religion, I actually had no faith – I sort of became an atheist thinking there is no God. What God anyway would create heaven and hell and then make you fear him, all religious propaganda. Any type of religious propaganda - not just in Islam... Because I went and I did brief studies, especially when I entered into the yoga and into their Hindu, Christian, some Jewish studies...and just saw that all the religions have the same message actually, and we are lost in the tools saying that my tool is better than your tool. Just like the many schools of yoga... my yoga is much better than your school of yoga, I do it this way.... Okay but we are still forgetting the deep truth behind all of this is the connection with the divine, the peace, honouring this connection and being able to channel the purity of this connection through first the vessel, that is the body I am living in, and the heal the world around me because now we have reached disaster - we have reached chaos. My faith became stronger and stronger, and there is no way to contain the faith and say it is the faith of Islam or the faith of this religion, it is a universal faith, it is universal love. That’s what it is. It has no name.... once we label it and start to identify it... it loses its essence.” (Interview Aya 2014)

Re-reading this passage I am reminded of the conviction of speakers, and especially teachers, when they relayed their experiences regarding yoga to me.

Individuals spoke with a conviction that comes from faith and from experience, as Aya explained, her faith became stronger and stronger through the practice. The physical body is important because it is the site of these experiences, but importantly, speakers did not describe how they favored a certain yoga pose, or mentioned details about their physical practice. The body was a vehicle, and a ‘divine’ vehicle simply because it belonged to the universe, instilling a belief in ‘universal faith’ and ‘universal love’.

CHAPTER FIVE

MARKERS OF IDENTITY IN BEIRUT SOCIETY

This chapter seeks to present yoga in its materiality, established within both monetary and social economies, and how they intertwine. I present yoga in relation to themes of class and poverty, business and profit, and gender. Moreover, I develop Benedict Anderson's seminal work in *Imagined Communities* and argue that a sense of belonging to a "yoga community" is profound in Beirut – but rather than nationalism being the collective that connects people horizontally (Anderson 1983), amongst Beirut's simmering sectarianism, yoga with its naturalized and secularized imaginings (De Michelis 2001: 143) unites those from various religious backgrounds under imagined ideas such as being 'alternative', 'healthy', and 'enlightened', as well as rejection of an individual's existing creed. At the same time, the social sphere of yoga in Beirut reveals a sort of emptiness of yoga's claim to universality and "oneness" in modern-day capital economies, as it mostly includes the rich of society.

A. The social space.

With reference to Victor Turner's seminal work on ritual, we understand that ritual activity is key to understanding wider social structures (Turner 1969). As well as

being “socially prescribed...”, yoga is “a means of, and space for, channeling and divesting the antisocial qualities of powerful emotions” (Turner 1969). This will be evidenced further in the next chapter by the way practitioners describe their practice and its relation to the physical body. Yet yoga in Lebanon is also a social event. This is evidenced by the volume of discussion before classes, the number of people who arrive at yoga classes in groups among friends, the lengths of discussion after the class – and the peculiarity of practitioners wanting to take part in anything “yoga” related, such as yoga gatherings to mark seasonal festivities like Christmas, Thanks Giving, Full Moons, and even Hindu holidays such as Diwali, all of which take place routinely among Beirut yoga spaces.⁴⁹

There is certainly a social cloud that surrounds yoga that practitioners enter into, sometimes briefly, sometimes vaguely, and sometimes it appears to consume them almost entirely. Many students come and go, and perhaps years later when I bump into them on the street, in deep apologies, they express their regret on having stopped coming to class. They explain to me that they are still regularly going to the gym, for example, a gesture that I have taken to assure me that they are still “keeping fit”.⁵⁰ For some students, practicing yoga on Wednesday at 7pm becomes as routine and necessary as going to work, or mirrors an attitude of devotion similarly required for all kinds of worship or prayer. For others, it becomes “a path” – these people may become stringent about performing a daily yoga practice or they may even believe that yoga is a calling for them and go on to teach (Interview: Student 2). One teacher commented on this during my interview with him when I asked him what yoga had taught him, he replied:

⁴⁹ This applies to Beirut yoga spaces such as NOK Yoga Shala, Union Square Yoga, Shiva Lila, Houna Centre, to name a few.

⁵⁰ I relay this based on the significant number of times that it has occurred over the past three years.

“I should mention here that part of me keeps on pushing me away from yoga... It is as if I am afraid from it... Afraid to abandon material life and become a sort of ascetic... That is not a bad thing, but I do not want this to happen to me yet... Of course it might never happen, and I might not be cut for it... but I do have that fear or worry, or maybe a call that I am trying to ignore by labelling it fear” (Interview: Student 2).

For those who do continue to attend yoga classes in Beirut, I have witnessed a well-established path. It begins with health concerns or frequently a desire to lose weight, as I have mentioned before – they are somehow “sold” by yoga and decide that they will come back. They are then slowly drawn into the yoga world, through its physical highs or the feeling of ‘ecstasy’ (Interview Aya: 2014), the feel good lingo, and tranquil environments. I frequently have found that individuals are “impressed” by yoga in Lebanon, by things that other people in the class perhaps can do, by the teacher (Interview Amanda: 2014), or by the physical environment that they find themselves in. This is mirrored by a process of socialization – in Beirut’s small city, they recognize familiar faces, they find themselves surrounded by people of the same social class, they make acquaintances with people going through similar experiences and perhaps wondering the same questions, and yoga becomes not merely a physical exercise as they first thought but a social activity⁵¹. For serious practitioners, and I have witnessed that all those who practice regularly to some extent will experience this, as was evidenced in my interviews – they slowly start to talk about yoga as a spiritual practice. They claim that they feel “healthier” (Interview student 4), more alive, in tune with the “true self” (Interview student 8) – as I will detail in the next chapter – they start to internalize states

⁵¹ The same could surely be argued for any communal sport, yet I am not able to find relevant literature on the subject.

of being that they are told to feel in the yoga class. Yet the socialization process maintains a fundamental aspect of this path, as well as its finality.

B. The commercial space.

Significantly, yoga in Lebanon is a commodity; and it is marketed towards a certain section of the social fabric. Moreover, based on the relative high cost of yoga classes in Beirut⁵², it is practiced only by those who can afford it. Over the past ten to 15 years, yoga studios frequently emerged as home-based in Beirut, which given the scale of its practice, is a phenomenon peculiar to Beirut. Teachers designed one room within their home (notably the largest) to accommodate their yoga students on a regular basis, and the teacher lived within their own workspace. Many of the well known teachers in Beirut today set up yoga studios in this way, while some have now transformed and changed, others still exist as before. Until recently, H(O)me Yoga Studio was one of the most popular home-based yoga studios in Beirut, situated in Mar Mikhael, receiving up to 30 students for any given class. However last year, the teacher gave up the centre and moved her yoga space into a stand alone centre, namely Union Square Yoga, located in Ashrafieh. The decision was largely based on her neighbours' discontent with the lack of parking in the vicinity during the hours of evening classes⁵³, but will surely have opened up the space to receive more students.

Interesting, yoga studios in Beirut, as throughout the world, are often denominational, i.e. they encourage the practice of one style of yoga and pay respects to

⁵² With prices for classes ranging from \$10-\$20 per hour or hour and a half session, making yoga a regular practice in Beirut when most salaries do not exceed \$1000 per month, and many fall well below this range, is costly. Moreover, the price likely excludes migrant workers from all destinations.

⁵³ The teacher sent a detailed email describing the neighbour's complaints of her yoga space. Unfortunately, I haven't saved the email.

one teacher, lineage or method. They are also distinct in their clientele, with students being notoriously loyal to their teacher and yoga practice. The Sivananda Yoga Centre in Beirut was one of Beirut's first yoga studios, established 13 years ago, and as the name suggests, the studio holds daily classes of Sivananda style yoga. However, that is not to say that such centres will exclusively offer only this style of yoga. As yoga has become ultimately known as a profit-making business, hotels, gyms and more and more independent yoga studios have emerged offering yoga classes. As yoga centres in Beirut, as elsewhere, are entirely self-funded, the competition amongst centres to succeed has increased in recent years and many studios have upped their marketing and advertising campaigns, launching Facebook pages, blogs, distributing flyers and schedules, and seeking to maintain a constant presence amongst the lives of their students. Yoga centres, like a majority of businesses in an oversaturated market, have adopted a "whatever works" approach, and many Beirut centres open their doors to classes beyond the realm of yoga, such as health and healing workshops, trainings, alternative therapies and even dance. In this way, we cannot parallel the sanctity of the "yoga space" with a religious building, at least not within Beirut or the region of the Middle East more generally where religious buildings are well preserved and in many cases, still represent a symbolic, if not actual, sacred space of a local community.

The year 2012 also saw the arrival of Beirut's first large "non-profit" yet commercially orientated yoga studio, which fairly drastically changed the landscape of the yoga community in Beirut, as well as pushed other yoga studios into a more competitive market zone. For example, Union Square Yoga launched their stand-alone centre approximately one year after the opening of NOK Yoga Shala. The creation of this huge space also likens the city of Beirut to other international cities, where

commercial yoga centres have become commonplace. NOK Yoga Shala is owned by a Lebanese Hedge Fund owner who resides in the US, and who is among other things “a yogi”⁵⁴. The space is located in the central district of Saifi Village in a large, old, and most of all beautifully restored building. The chance of using such a space for yoga is only made possible by the presence of significant capital investment. The “non-profit” orientation of the centre has meant that students are able to practice yoga in a “prime”⁵⁵ location at ultimately no extra cost to them, as the studio has kept prices in line with other Beirut spaces. The relative lack of difficulty in financing the space and its teachers (as compared with local teachers who do not have huge capital to invest) has also allowed the centre to fill up their schedule with classes, so that today the space offers between 45 and 50 sessions of yoga and meditation per week, several of which are also referred to as *Seva* classes, a term which stems from the Sanskrit meaning “selfless service”, i.e. they have no fee. There is also the possibility to support senior yoga teachers from outside to come to Beirut, exposing Lebanon’s yoga scene to a greater array of experiences, practices and possibilities. For independent teachers in Beirut, the space offers an ideal opportunity for teaching as the space itself attracts many students, and can also hold a greater number of students per class. Yet for independent studios in Beirut, the space presents a challenge and to a great extent competition, not only for students but also for teachers. In fact, many studios have complained about losing their teachers over losing their students, as I have found that students are more likely to remain loyal to their routine of practice. The popularity of this new yoga space in Beirut is evidenced by the sheer number of people that pass

⁵⁴ For more information on Nigol Kouljian, see:
<http://www.nokfoundation.com/>

⁵⁵ By “prime” I mean not only centrally located but also luxurious in furnishing, equipment, and facilities.

through its doors each week⁵⁶, yet it has received criticism based on what some perceive as a business orientated attitude to a spiritual practice. Several studios have even pitted themselves against NOK Yoga Shala, disagreeing with any kind of collaboration, such as joint events, workshops and gatherings.

C. “Liberate your *jiva!*”

I will relay an instance of a *Jivamukti* yoga class in order to highlight the tension that exists in Beirut between the rich and poor, meanwhile questioning the applicability of a language of universal love and perhaps the inevitable contradiction of a commercialized ‘spiritual’ practice.

On one morning in Beirut, I was at NOK Yoga Shala for the routine Wednesday morning *Jivamukti* Yoga class.⁵⁷ The class had twelve participants, all female, and all aged between 35 and 50 years old. It was hot outside and all the women had arrived in sports clothes, many had arrived late and rushed past the desk into the yoga room without introduction or payment. The desk of the Shala faces an enormous glass entrance door and another door sits opposite, behind the desk, and opens into a small courtyard shared by several shops and unused by all of them.⁵⁸ Around 45 minutes into the yoga class, a young Syrian girl aged between eight and ten years old entered through the front door of the space. She approached the desk and asked me for money.⁵⁹ Her

⁵⁶ Averaging 400 students a week by December 2013.

⁵⁷ July 2013.

⁵⁸ NOK Yoga Shala is located in Saifi Village, Downtown Beirut. The neighbourhood is notoriously empty, see “Downtown Beirut: A City of Ghosts?” (Al-Akhbar January 7 2012: <http://english.al-akhbar.com/node/3130>)

⁵⁹ This is a fairly common occurrence at NOK Yoga Shala, especially since the onset of the Syrian Revolution/ Civil War that started in March 2011 and has seen more than 600,000 Syrian refugees cross the border into Lebanon, according to official statistics (http://syrianrefugees.eu/?page_id=72).

face was animated and obviously impressed by the décor of the building, which includes large gongs, wind chimes, and a prominent spiral staircase. Apologetically, I explained that I didn't have any money. The young girl kept asking. I walked with her to the water cooler and offered her water. At this point, she noticed that there was an open glass door behind the desk and a water fountain outside; she ran the ten meters distance quickly and headed out of the door. Once there, she could see through another glass door directly into the yoga space itself, where the entire class was seated in rows holding a posture called *Marichyasana C*, a pose that involves twisting the torso around the body 180 degrees. The young girl immediately bolted through the open glass door into the yoga room, looking briefly at me to gauge a response. I followed her steps and watched as she approached several of the women in the room for money, passing and jumping between mats, looking curiously around her as she held her hand out before each woman. By this stage, I was in the yoga room, just inside of the door. There was American pop music playing, and the yoga teacher was staring at me with eyes wide open, although she continued to guide the class through movements, breath and yogic philosophy. Several students appeared to be completely ignoring the young girl who stood next to them, as they continued to count their breath, focus on the posture, breathed more deeply, and stared over their shoulder towards the back of the room. Others had stopped and were simply sitting there staring at me. I gestured to the girl to come to me, without approaching her or raising my voice. I can't remember exactly the words that I used but I think I said something along the lines of "*ta habibi*, come with me..." I was fairly non-threatening, mostly out of my own unease with the situation, and she did not move towards me but instead went deeper into the large room. I remember that I repeated that she should come with me, and at this stage the girl started

reluctantly to move towards me, where I still stood by the glass door. I suddenly noticed that the teacher was looking at me and that she was quickly approaching the girl. She spoke in English and said: “No you have to go, you have to leave. Now, let’s go, let’s go...” On seeing the teacher approach her, the girl decided to run and dodged her, until the teacher firmly caught the young girl by both shoulders and more or less forced her from the room. At once, both the young girl and I found ourselves standing outside in the small courtyard. The teacher locked the glass door immediately, walked away and continued to teach the class. The girl ran back inside towards the desk, and attempted to re-enter the yoga hall from the inside. By this stage she seemed upset, frustrated and more than anything else, confused. I asked her to sit down, she didn’t want to, I offered her water, but she refused it. Out of my own desperation at the thought of the girl re-entering the yoga room and facing the situation all over again, as I was now blocking the walkway with my body in order to prevent her from entering, I walked to my purse and offered her 5,000 Lebanese Lira, roughly three US dollars. She took it quickly, but didn’t seem to want to leave. I opened the front door and gestured for her to leave. Upset, she left the Shala, lingering behind and staring through the glass windows, first at me, and then walking away, pausing to look at the women who were continuing the yoga class. Neither the teacher nor the students mentioned the incident when the class later ended, and as they made their exits out of the space at around 11:15am.

This incident was one of the most striking that I experienced in Lebanon and it revealed a lot about the sociality that surrounds yoga, perhaps in a more sinister way than most. I would not argue that the people who practice yoga or the practice itself is completely devoid of meaning, or empty, in the way this story could be interpreted, but

it is telling of the awkwardness or contradiction that surrounds the practice of yoga in Lebanon, which I will explore further.

D. Women.

Firstly, the above story coincidentally introduces one area of consideration: the prevalence of women in yoga classes in Beirut, and worldwide. One author tried to situate this as a result of a so far unmentioned important figure in the history of yoga's transnational development, Mollie Bagot Stack (Singleton 2010: 151).

Stack founded the most far-reaching women's gymnastic organization in pre-WWII Britain: the Women's League of Health and Beauty. During a sojourn to India she learned *asana* and incorporated elements of this teaching into her programmes of gymnastics, though never referred to these practices as 'yoga' (Stack 1988: 68). By 1935, the organization had almost 100,000 members, and was a founding member of the Central Council of Recreative Physical Training, which had the support of the Board of Education. So unlike the practice that Strauss describes as being originally the domain of Hindu men (Strauss 2005), for a time, it seems that *asana* practice became gendered in association with women in Britain and America. Perhaps the currently disproportionate number of female practitioners in the west (allegedly 72.2% of American yoga practitioners are female⁶⁰) owe a partial debt to this history. Yet, according to Mauss, gendered practice is nothing new since 'techniques of the body' are frequently divided and vary by sex (Mauss 1979: 106).

In Lebanon, this also reflects the culture of the body – a preoccupation to possess a certain aesthetic, body, and beauty. Nail studios, hair salons, and fashion

⁶⁰ Without access to reliable enough statistics, my estimation of the ratio of female to male participants is even higher in Lebanon.

boutiques are on every street corner throughout the small city of Beirut and owing to migrant workers, are largely affordable. Lebanon was further one of the first countries in the world to initiate a loan solely for the purpose of undertaking plastic surgery.

Yet more interestingly, the spaces for yoga practices, especially those during day time hours, are also a public space for recreation and socializing, a space to consider spirituality and God, as well as life and its meaning. This is all the more relevant for Beirut's women who have historically been excluded from participating in issues of governance, regarding both matters of religion and state. Through yoga, women are able to speak freely about their spirituality, emotions, fears, and perhaps relevant for the case of yoga, their feelings and anxieties towards their religious affiliation. One yoga teacher in her fifties approached this subject in my interview with her. Brought up in a Muslim family in Amman, Jordan, she explained: "Yoga is a safe place for me to practice my spirituality in freedom, without constraints, demands or pre-requisites. The *yamas* and *niyamas* are my religion and I am very happy with that. I don't need to follow a dress code or restrict my freedom in any way. I am critical towards the way my faith is being interpreted and manipulated and that is why I can never develop my spirituality within my faith" (Interview teacher 5). Many of the women that I met through my experiences working in the world of yoga expressed similar sentiments towards their existing faith. Importantly, these were generally woman older than the majority that I interviewed, most of whom lived in Lebanon throughout the civil war.

The women attending yoga classes are likewise united by these views, by the rejection of certain cultural and social norms, such as marriage and dress. At times, they

have even claimed that they are escaping from local gossip by coming to yoga.⁶¹ We cannot argue that women simply attend yoga more frequently than males because they are more vain, in Beirut especially, we must see this as an entry into the public sphere, where they are able to be heard, as well as to feel that they are accepted “as they are”⁶². Moreover, there is a dominant perception regarding the “freedom” of yoga, and its values or ethics, which attracts women from all religious backgrounds. This not only applies to the rejection of cultural norms but also includes the positive affirmations of being ‘healthy’ and ‘trendy’.

In another conversation with the aforementioned teacher, she explained to me that humanity needs spirituality, but that in modern life, we are not able to believe in God, like before. When asked for an explanation of this she revealed that we are no longer able to “do as we are told” (Interview teacher 5)⁶³. The yoga space for women especially reveals an alternative to what is believed to be the ‘norm’.

E. Feeling united.

Remembering that most Lebanese participants also commented on the fact that yoga had made them more tolerant of others’ faith, expressing sentiments such as... “It has deepened my faith, helped me share my faith with others and believe that we are capable of gaining faith even if it seemed to be lost at times...”⁶⁴ (Interview: Teacher 4), we must also briefly consider the subject of communality.

⁶¹ This was not evidenced in my interviews but on more occasions at NOK Yoga Shala than I can count have women expressed the feeling of entering a “positive space”, free from the judgements, pressures and gossip of Beirut society.

⁶² As was detailed in chapter three.

⁶³ This mirrors the narrative described by De Michelis (2001) on the modern transformation from a belief in God to a belief in the “true self”.

Yoga classes in Lebanon are practiced in sync and classes frequently hold 20-45 students in a room. There is an illusion of being equal in a yoga class, as bodies are all moving in unison, copying the teacher's movements and ultimately as my colleague opposed, they are doing as they are told. It is an interesting contradiction that yoga attracts so many people based on the "freedom" of its practice and value system, as evidenced by the teacher's statement rejecting doing "what they are told", yet in reality, students in a yoga class are all in lines moving their bodies exactly as they are told to do, receiving moral guidance and rules, and the vast majority of the time without question.

In my immersion in the yoga community in Beirut, I have witnessed people from every creed, and most of the time I have not been aware of the teacher or student's religious background or affiliation. On a personal level this reflects the fact that I did not grow up inside Lebanon but in "multi-cultural" Britain, and I do not necessarily perceive sectarian affiliations like others born and raised inside Lebanon may. However, I maintain that many students attend yoga to take part in an "alternative" collective. Borrowing from Anderson (1983), they identify themselves with an imagined community, not of nation or faith, but the very contrary – as a space outside of existing divides, where they feel comfortable without weighted labels such as "Muslim", "Christian", "Sunni", "Shi'a", "Orthodox", "Maronite", etc. Instead they choose to adopt labels such as "universal", "global" (perhaps globalized), and "free".

Practicing yoga in Lebanon has also become a mark of distinction amongst women especially, who firstly take pride in looking after themselves and appearing well groomed, something for which Lebanese women are famous, but also includes those who can regularly afford to practice yoga and who moreover, identify with a global

culture of the body and of liberalism and secularism, categories which are far more *a la mode* than some of those found inside Lebanese social circles. Yoga is affordable only to a certain section of society, based on the fact that Lebanon possesses such a large gap between the rich and the poor⁶⁵. *Seva* classes exist but are few given the vast scale of yoga practices in Beirut.⁶⁶ Practitioners are aware that when they practice they will be meeting those who are largely highly educated, who live in central Beirut, and who can at least afford to attend yoga classes.

There is an undeniable complexity to the practice of yoga in Lebanon, one that I was not so acutely aware of before I undertook this research. There are so many layers to this practice, which in turn affect the society in which it operates. On the one level, yoga has undeniably brought profound meaning and transformation to the individuals that have encountered it. The ‘self-awareness’ that individuals claim makes physical yoga a spiritual practice is also evidenced in the way practitioners speak about their practice; the reflexive capabilities, the confidence in which they speak, as well as the eloquence of their descriptions. I cannot claim that yoga is doing anything bad in society; it is surely a positive thing for those who have encountered it. Moreover, if my argument holds that yoga is a vehicle through which the physical body is manipulated in order to overcome the social norms that individuals are confronted with, then I conclude that yoga is doing something good in Beirut society.

Yet at the same time, with Beirut being a city that has seen so much conflict and turmoil in the course of the last century, and situated in the middle of a small country that continues to house millions of refugees dispersed from the region as well as a silent

⁶⁵ Credit Suisse Research Institute. 2013: Although this gap is fairly universal and growing wider globally.

(although sometimes erupting) continuation of the long civil wars, the universality of love that is so often talked about and internalised, as evidenced in my research results, must be questioned. Importantly, despite one of my research aims being to consider how yoga practices in Lebanon have been talked about and internalised amid often erupting violence, the subject was not raised in any of my interviews. During the life history recordings that I undertook, both the Greek and British ladies interviewed did raise Beirut as a city of conflict but not as something that impacted the way yoga in Beirut was practiced. Valerie mentioned that she had been asked to volunteer as a meditation teacher in Beirut based on the country being one of ‘peacelessness’ (Interview Valerie: 2014). Amanda actually went as far as to say that she believed that people are often suspicious of yoga based on it being “far too peaceful” for “Arabs” (Interview Amanda: 2014), although this is something that I have chosen not to give too much importance to in this thesis.

However, this is only to highlight that I have not interviewed anyone that said that they were drawn to yoga because of the conflict of their city, the violence that surrounds them, or the uncertainty of a conflict erupting inside Lebanon, especially since the outbreak of war in Syria in 2011. It is hard to deny that this does not reflect the dominance of an individualistic culture that promotes self-sufficiency and reliance, and one that has enshrined the individual right to the pursuit of happiness. One idea that is frequently spoken about in yoga is that change must begin with oneself, and accordingly, that is where we appear to be up to in Beirut.

CHAPTER SIX

CONCLUSION

I. Part one.

This thesis has sought to investigate what yoga is doing in Lebanon and what meaning it is given by those individuals who practice it from close up. Whereas yoga is typically viewed as a ‘peaceful’ reflection of our society and its needs, yoga in this thesis emerges as the way in which individuals use the body to challenge, and to find their space in their immediate surroundings.

In chapter one of this thesis, I traced the literature that addresses the expansion of yoga in the modern world. I trace the arrival of yoga in the West and the transformation of yoga from an elitist, caste-based practice to a popular, universalised discipline that can be practiced by anyone for a fee (Strauss 2002). I further highlight yoga as a modern practice that reflects the multitudes of a globalised, individualist culture, and not as an inherent legacy of something traditionally Indian or Hindu (Baier 2012), despite many practitioners believing this to be the case. In so doing, I enter into the debate of what we deem as ‘traditional’ or ‘modern’ and insist that all traditions and

practices are amid processes of transformation, although this does not make them less ‘authentic’ (Singleton 2010). I finally trace a brief genealogy of studies in the anthropology of the body until I arrive at Foucault’s argument that the social body constrains the way the physical body is perceived (Foucault 1985). In this thesis, I reveal that yoga is a disciplined body practice that has liberating effects on the individual’s place in and view of society.

In chapter two of this thesis, I introduce the methods used for this thesis and explain my choice in using qualitative methods of research and in particular my emphasis on narrative in order to address a previously unanswered question from close up: what does this practice mean to the individuals that have taken it up? I continue to evaluate my experiences as a researcher for this project, detailing the unease that I have felt researching and writing about my own community, as well as the community that I was employed within. I concluded that writing about the ‘other’, although loaded with its own problems, is perhaps easier to do.

In chapter three I address the physical side of yoga practices. Beginning with a description of yoga spaces, I continue to explore the language and symbolism that is evoked by yoga practitioners through the treatment of the body. Taking evidence from my interviews, I reveal that although yoga practices were almost exclusively taken up for physical reasons, all practitioners reported that they felt more at ease with being their ‘natural’ selves after practicing yoga. Rather than acquiring the ‘perfect body’ as dictated by the forces of societal pressure, yoga practitioners reported that instead they became the ‘perfect self’.

In chapter four of this thesis, I take this argument further through looking at the life histories of three of Beirut's female yoga teachers. After detailing some commonalities, such as the tendency from a young age to have held questions of life's meaning and the reasons behind commonly held beliefs or customs, I look at the initiation into the world of yoga, the 'alternative' and often experimental worldviews that individuals uphold, and explore notions of belonging to something that they believe is 'deeper' than what they find around them. All speakers further recalled a sense of belonging to the "universal".

In chapter five I choose to highlight the tensions that exist in the yoga community in Beirut based on its commodification and market value in Beirut society. Without aiming to deny the significant meaning that practitioners report that yoga has brought to their lives, I illustrate an example of a yoga class that speaks of universal love at the same time as ignoring and shunning a young Syrian refugee that walked into the practice room. I continue to explain that the Lebanese civil wars or the arrival of Palestinian or Syrian refugees in Lebanon was not addressed by speakers interviewed for this research, despite this being one of the initial aims of my research. In some ways, I conclude that the "universal love" appears to go no further than the self and its immediacies.

B. Part two.

I have found writing this thesis to be a difficult process. Perhaps this reflects my own position as someone who has grown up inside of a yoga community and someone who still has unanswered questions about the place of yoga in the modern world. One of my great difficulties was in deciphering what was relevant, what was common

knowledge or not worth telling, and what I completely take for granted about yoga practices but that would need to be told. This difficulty in writing also reflects an unfamiliarity that I had with a lot of the anthropological literature that has been relevant for this thesis and a lot of time spent understanding how I could “fit” my thesis within anthropological studies of the body and of society.

In the end, I am convinced of my central argument in this thesis, while I also feel that I have highlighted the main concerns that a study of yoga in Beirut should take into consideration, albeit imperfectly. In hindsight, there are many things that I would have done differently to enrich this thesis, although they would have perhaps been better suited for a longer thesis, such as including a greater number of life history recordings and seeking out only Lebanese yoga practitioners in order to address more local concerns. However on this note, the interviewees do reveal that yoga reflects a global practice, and the increasing commonalities between individuals from far reaching societies.

My position as someone ‘known’ within the yoga community also affected my research results, as I certainly was more willing to get more information out of those I knew well, rather than those that I was only acquainted with. This project has revealed a somewhat unresolvable conflict of the researcher who cannot feel entirely comfortable writing about any community, neither their own, or another.

What my results do reveal is the meaningfulness of yoga practices in Beirut to practitioners. This was also rewarding, as both a researcher and a teacher, to see that individuals felt a greater sense of self-worth through practicing yoga. Despite yoga appearing as though it could be an extension of society’s increasing pressure to look and behave in a certain way, the majority of individuals interviewed reported that they had

gained greater inner strength, greater self-awareness, as well as confidence to be as they are, rather than the way that they are expected or told to be. This engagement with and controlling of the physical body was a vehicle through which these ‘freeing’ dispositions were achieved.

Although yoga is in itself secularized in many ways, an argument that is highlighted by De Michelis who explained that we have witnessed yoga become secularized through the transformation of a belief in the God outside, to the God inside (De Michelis 2005: 143), yoga equally reveals itself as “a response to the problem of living piously under conditions that have become increasingly ruled by a secular rationality.” (Mahmood (2001: 830) The searching, the questioning, and the desire to belong to the “universal”, along with the increase in spiritual convictions reported amongst interviewees work to support yoga as a ‘post religious form of religiosity’, which perhaps leads to an idea that students of yoga are trying to find “new” ways of finding God or at least meaning, outside of what they have deemed as ‘boring’ or ‘restrictive’.

Yoga’s position in Beirut is certainly far from simple, and yet I argue that many of the findings of this thesis could be applicable outside of this fieldsite, based on Beirut’s cosmopolitan atmosphere and the multitude of nationalities living and spreading the seeds of yoga across the capital. While this thesis seeks to say something of the growing gap and tensions between Beirut’s wealthy inhabitants and the increasing number of migrants that share the city, witnessing the practice of yoga in Beirut, the positivity of its teachers and students overall, I must conclude that Beirut is undeniably a city with a lot of hopefulness. Valerie has volunteered to teach meditation in Lebanon for the past eight years, teaching without receiving any kind of payment and

living humbly from donations. As she explained to me as I was concluding the recording of her life history:

“It is time for the world to change and I want to take part in it. And the way to change is to change human consciousness, and in order to change we have to understand, and this is what we study here, we are studying the human consciousness, the positive qualities, and how to help them grow and how to allow the negative qualities to shrink. And bring to this change within and change the world... and this change will come.” (Interview Valerie 2014)

APPENDIX I

Interview Guide for Yoga Teachers

Age/ Place of Birth

Education background/ Employment

When did you start practicing yoga?

How were you first introduced to yoga?

What does your personal yoga practice consist of? What makes you continue this practice?

How does yoga make you feel? How does it make you relate to your body?

What has yoga taught you? How did yoga teach this to you?

Has yoga changed anything in your life? If so, how?

Has yoga impacted your thoughts about Religion, God, your own faith, or the faith of others?

Has yoga changed your relationship with other people? Your family, friends? Strangers?

What made you decide to start teaching yoga? How did you gain qualification to teach yoga?

Do you have someone that you consider to be your “teacher”? Where is this person? How often do you see them? What does this person or teacher signify for you?

How do you continue to “train” as a yoga teacher?

What kind(s) of yoga are you now practicing/ teaching? Where? How often? And why?

What makes you return to your yoga students?

What changes do you see in your yoga students through practicing yoga?

What are your thoughts about how yoga is practiced in Lebanon?

APPENDIX II

Interview guide for Yoga Students

Age/ Place of Birth

Education background/ Employment

When did you start practicing yoga?

How were you first introduced to yoga?

What kind of yoga are you now practicing? Where? With who? How often? Why do you practice this kind of yoga, at this location, with this person, on these occasions?

What makes you return to yoga? To this teacher?

How does yoga make you feel? How does it make you relate to your body?

What has yoga taught you? How did yoga teach this to you?

Has yoga changed anything in your life? If so, how?

Has yoga impacted your thoughts about Religion, God, your own faith, or the faith of others?

Has yoga changed your relationship with other people? Your family, friends, strangers?

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Alexander, Bobby. 1997. Ritual and current studies of ritual: overview. In Stephen D. Glazier (ed.), *Anthropology of Religion: a Handbook*. Westport, CT: Greenwood Press.

Anderson, Benedict. 1983. *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origins and Spread of Nationalism*. London & NY: Verso

Asad, Talal. 1993. *Genealogies of Religion*. The John Hopkins University Press: Baltimore and London.

Asad, Talal: Interview. 1996. Modern power and the reconfiguration of religious traditions, with Saba Mahmood. Stanford University: SEHR, volume 5, issue 1: Contested Politics. [<http://www.stanford.edu/group/SHR/5-1/text/asad.html>] Last accessed: 19 April 2014.

Asad, Talal. 1997. 'Remarks on the Anthropology of the Body'. In Sarah Coakley (ed.). *Religion and the Body: Comparative Perspectives on Devotional Practices*. Cambridge: University of Cambridge Press.

Alter, Joseph. 2004. *Yoga in Modern India: The Body Between Science and Philosophy*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

Appadurai, Arjun. 1996. *Modernity at Large: Cultural Dimensions of Globalization*. Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press.

Bachelor, Charlotte. 2010. 'Buying a Balance: The 'Individual - Collective' and the Commercialised 'New Age' Practices of Yoga and Sufi Dance'. Unpublished Masters Thesis. Oxford University.

Baier, Karl. 2012. "Modern Yoga Research: Insights and Questions". University of Vienna.

Bell, Catherine M. 1992. *Ritual Theory, Ritual Practice*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Bourdieu, Pierre. 1978 (1972). *Outline of a Theory of Practice*. Richard Nice, Trans. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Bourdieu, Pierre. 1991. *Language and Symbolic Power*. Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press.

Bourdieu, Pierre. 1977. *Outline of a Theory of Praxis*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Collier, Stephen J. and Ong, Aihwa. 2005. *Global Assemblages: Technology, Politics, and Ethics as Anthropological Problems*. Blackwell Publishing Ltd.

Credit Suisse Research Institute. *Global Wealth Databook 2013*:

[<https://publications.creditsuisse.com/tasks/render/file/index.cfm?fileid=17711FFC-0524-76AB-CEB0FE206E46C125>]

Criscuolo, Tony. 'The Ancient Roots of Modern Yoga', in Deborah Bernstein and Bob Weisenberg (Eds.), *Yoga in America*. New York: Lulu Press.

Byrne (Eds.), *Yoga in the Modern World: Contemporary Perspectives*. New York: Routledge.

De Michelis, Elizabeth. 2001. *History of Modern Yoga: Patanjali and Western Esotericism*. London & NY: Continuum

Durkheim, Emile. 2001. *The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life*. Trans. Carol Cosman. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Dreyfus, Hubert and Rabinow, Paul. 1982. *Michel Foucault: Beyond Structuralism and Hermeneutics*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Eliade, Mircea. (1958) 1973. *Yoga: Immortality and Freedom*. Trans. Willard Trask. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

Foucault, Michel. 1985. *The History of Sexuality, Vol. III*. New York: Pantheon Books. 1985.

Foucault, Michel. 1977-92. *The History of Sexuality, Vol. I, II, III*. New York: Pantheon Books.

Foucault, Michel. 1979. *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*. New York: Vintage Books

Gannon, Sharon. September 2013. "Asana and Bhakti – what does love have to do with it?" <http://www.jivamuktivyoga.com/teachings/focus-of-the-month/p/asana-and-bhakti-what-does-love-have-do-it>

Geertz, Clifford. 1973a. 'Thick Description: Towards an Interpretive Theory of Culture'. In Clifford Geertz, *Interpretation of Cultures*. New York: Basic Books.

– 1973b. 'Religion as a Cultural System'. In Clifford Geertz, *Interpretation of Cultures*. New York: Basic Books.

Hall, Stuart. 1991. 'The Local and the Global: Globalization and Ethnicity', in Anthony King (Ed.), *Culture, Globalization and the World System: Contemporary Conditions for the Representation of Identity*. Binghamton: State University of New York Press.

Hannerz, Ulf. 1992. *Cultural Complexity: Studies in the Social Organization of Meaning*. New York: Columbia University Press.

Hartranft, Chip. 2003. *The Yoga-Sūtra of Patañjali: A New Translation with Commentary*. Shambhala Publications, Inc.

Mahmood, Saba. 2005. *Politics of Piety: The Islamic Revival and the Feminist Subject*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

2001. Rehearsed Spontaneity and the Conventionality of Ritual: Disciplines of "Ṣalāt". *American Ethnologist*, Vol. 28, No. 4.

Mauss, Marcel. 1979. 'Body Techniques'. In Marcel Mauss, *Sociology and Psychology*. London: Routledge and Kegan Paul.

Marx, Karl. 1985. *The German Ideology*. Marxists Internet Archive: www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1845/german-ideology

Miller, Barbara. 1996. *Yoga: Discipline of Freedom*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press.

Mitchell, Timothy. 1998. *Colonizing Egypt*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

"Introduction" in *Questions of Modernity*. 2000. ed. Timothy Mitchell. *Contradictions of Modernity*. Vol. 1. Minneapolis MN: University of Minnesota Press.

"The Stage of Modernity." in *Questions of Modernity*. 2000. ed. Timothy Mitchell. *Contradictions of Modernity*. Vol. 1. Minneapolis MN: University of Minnesota Press.

News 24 Archives: 21.10.2004. "Egypt: Yoga is a sin".

<http://www.news24.com/Africa/News/Egypt-Yoga-is-a-sin-20041001> (Link valid December 2014)

Ortner, Sherry. 1984. 'Theory in Anthropology since the Sixties'. *Comparative Studies in Society and History*. (Jan.) 26, 1: 126-166.

Philip, John. 2009. *Yoga, Inc.: A journey through the big business of yoga*. Toronto: The Penguin Group.

Said, Edward. 1979. *Orientalism*. Penguin Books: London.

Singleton, Mark. 2008. 'The Classical Reveries of Modern Yoga: Patanjali and Constructive Orientalism' in Mark Singleton and Jean Byrne (Eds.), *Yoga in the*

Modern World: Contemporary Perspectives. New York: Routledge.

Singleton, Mark. 2010. "Yoga's Greater Truth". In Yoga Journal, World Wide Web Edition. <http://www.yogajournal.com/wisdom/2610>

Singleton, Mark. 2010. Yoga Body. Oxford University Press: Oxford.

Smart, Ninian. 1998. Dimensions of the Sacred: An Anatomy of the World's Beliefs. Berkeley: University of California Press.

Stack, Mollie Bagot. 1931. Building the Body Beautiful: the Bagot Stack Stretch-and-Swing System. London: Chapman and Hall.

Stack, Prunella. 1988. Zest for Life: Bagot Stack and the League of Health and Beauty. London: Peter Owen.

Strauss, Sarah. 2002. 'The Master's Narrative: Swami Sivananda and the Transnational Production of Yoga. Journal of Folklore Research, 39, 2: 217-241.

Strauss, Sarah. 2005. Positioning Yoga: Balancing Acts Across Cultures. Oxford: Berg Publishers.

Swami Sivananda, *Autobiography of*. A Divine Life Society Publication: Himalayas, India. World Wide Web Edition: 2000

Taussig, Michael. 1993. *Mimesis and Alterity*. New York: Routledge.

Taylor, Charles. 1991. *The Ethics of Authenticity*. Cambridge (MA): Harvard University Press.

Taylor, Charles. 2007. *A Secular Age*. Harvard: Harvard University Press.

Turner, Victor. 1969. *The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-structure*.

