

Cultural Appropriation

By Susanna Barkataki, Luvena Rangel, Kelley Palmer, Rina Deshpande, and Tria Blu Wakpa

INTRODUCTION

Yoga is one of the six darshanas (systems of Indian philosophy). It is part of a tradition steeped in a rich culture and civilization. The wisdom of Yoga comes from a land and time preceding earliest documentation, a period regarded as one that generated deep understanding of human philosophy, consciousness, and spiritual evolution. The exchange of wisdom and spiritual concepts between travelling scholars of other cultures is evident in the relics and remains of sculptures, temple art, and inscriptions in many other places around the world.

Culture is a fundamental element of human society and civilization. Society has evolved based on the movement of people across continents, settling, sharing, assimilating, and eventually moving across the globe. Culture, in its more primal form, is what binds a society together in its unique fabric. Cultural practices are a form of identity and belonging—rites and rituals that unify groups of people as they evolved through occupational communities and even spiritual and philosophical questioning.

The culture of Yoga coexists with the culture of the land it came from, India, and, although both are philosophies, its symbolism is closely connected with the ritualistic expression of Hinduism and Hindu practices. While Yogic culture has a largely ascetic flavor, the Hindu cultural expression is vibrant, symbolic, and ceremonial.

Traditions and rituals bear significance as they hold a powerful connection to indigenous wisdom and ancestral lineage. However, not all cultural assimilation has been peaceful. History is replete with wars and battles waged for the acquisition of land, people, and power. Inevitably, culture has transformed based not only on the natural evolution of communities but also due to the brutality of historical precedents.

The contemporary digital age and modernization has brought the world and its cultures closer to each other than ever before. This opportunity has allowed individuals and societies to get a glimpse into spaces and cultures beyond their immediate surroundings. The exchange of thought has developed over time to invite an appreciation of cultures beyond one's own. But the inevitable human need for power, land, and resource acquisition has led to imbalanced power structures and constructs of supremacy and dominance. In many

accounts, this resulted in the colonization of indigenous people, land, and communities as well as an unauthorized and often unethical and unlawful control over indigenous culture, rituals, and significance.

The appropriation of indigenous culture, wisdom, and artifacts, when it stood to benefit the needs of the colonizers and settlers, was an unfortunate consequence of this power matrix. These days existence and effects of cultural appropriation is still rampant, insidious, and entrenched in both sides of the equation.

In Yoga, we are currently left with not just a commercialized and capitalized practice, but also many generations surviving the trauma of colonization, reducing Yoga to a set of practices that the colonizer mentality approves, conforming to the Western understanding of what Yoga should be. On the other hand, the colonizers also have retained the sense of entitlement and nonchalant right over the intellectual property of those who were their colonized subjects or from the global south. This includes appropriating their imagery, symbolic attire, or language and oversimplifying and whitewashing traditional practices, erasing the trauma of the people who bear witness to their heritage and culture being appropriated. Indigenous voices and representatives of native culture systematically experience microaggression and oppression, and are often silenced in the face of a dominant and white supremacy. The need to decolonize the practice is pressing.

With the confluence of Yoga teachers of various lineages and cultures, the Cultural Appropriation Track at this conference invites practitioners to explore questions and nuances raised within the context of Yoga and cultural appropriation. We will consider the fine line between cultural appreciation and cultural appropriation. We will also assess the impacts within the Indian and South Asian diasporic context as well as within Black and Indigenous Native American cultures. Cultural appropriation involves a degeneration of primordial cultural rituals and wisdom, so we will also explore the depth, creativity, and richness of indigenous rites and practices that are often missing from Modern Postural Yoga practices. We will explore and practice restoration of ancestral wisdom and other Yogic cultural elements.

CONTEXTUALIZING CULTURAL APPROPRIATION IN YOGA

“What does it mean to engage in a practice from a different culture without engaging the

people from whom the practice originated and continues?”

Dr. Tria Blu Wakpa, Ph.D., scholar of Critical Race and Dance Studies and co-founder of Race and Yoga Journal, enriches our understanding of “cultural appropriation” in the form of a thought-provoking question.

Cultural appropriation, an increasingly mainstream topic of conversation, can be defined as the taking of cultural or indigenous practices from historically marginalized and colonized peoples without understanding or acknowledging their roots and meaning. In the context of Yoga, we recognize that it’s nearly impossible to separate today’s modern-day industry of Yoga from the history of colonization that comes with it. It isn’t a simple conversation. It isn’t a simple problem or solution. So what can we do about it?

First, let’s consider where we are and where we want to be. Within the context of such ancient practices as Yoga, a practice theorized to be at least 1,500 years old and originating in the Indus Valley (India), our understanding of cultural appropriation has relatively just begun. In our collective observations, we see initial seeds of change to eliminate cultural appropriation first by acknowledging it and now starting the shift.

The difficulty is that many of us do not know or realize what lives behind practices such as Yoga because their history is often hidden by those appropriating it and marketing is so adept at leaving it out. Kelley Palmer, Yoga Teacher and founder of Peace Filled Mama, also emphasizes the importance of studying different indigenous practices and lineages from around the world to recognize the movement of people and their sharing of practices beyond what we might understand from documentation today. It is therefore vital that we each take the onus to research and educate ourselves on the history and meaning of spiritual practices through dialogue, conferences, and independent reflection.

Let’s also consider what we see as being appropriated and misrepresented in Yoga. In the eyes of most Western practitioners, Yoga is seen as an elite “New Age” spiritual practice or a mostly physical practice. Representation of those who share the origins of Yoga is minimal at best, often sensationalizing the practice or land, or reducing it to exercise and business packages. Kelley Palmer and this very conference invites the question, “How has Yoga been made less accessible or inaccessible to the very humans who have ancestral connection to this practice?” Luvena Rangel, Yoga teacher and founder of The Curvy Yogi, explains that while the focus of Yoga in the West is currently is on asana the culture of Yoga is missing. We must create more exposure and more models of appreciation of Yoga culture.

INCLUDING TRADITIONAL WISDOM—HOW TO HONOR YOGA’S ROOTS

How do you feel about the inclusion of rituals, practices, and indigenous wisdom in Yoga?
What way do you wish modern Yoga included and honored them, if they were at all relevant?

As a group we have strong and varied views about the inclusion of rituals and practices, but we all agree that it is critical to include indigenous wisdom in the teaching, practice, and sharing of Yoga today. Yoga evolved from earth-based indigenous practice. The reverence and respect given to natural elements is an inherent part of embodying a Yoga practice that situates the self within an interconnected global context.

We feel that there is spiritual wisdom that we do not want to sterilize out of the practice of Yoga by removing the cultural and indigenous container it comes to us within. But we also do not want to glamorize the practices either and take them out of context. We are aiming to educate in such a way that there is a balance. We hope that modern Yoga practitioners learn enough to be able to identify for ourselves when we have wandered into either extreme and self correct.

Yoga was originally intended to prepare the body as a foundation for unity with the spirit. The limb of asana aims at strengthening the body. Asana, along with dhyana (meditation), aim to harmonize body with breath in order to attain deeper and deeper states of meditative awareness. The purpose of this kind of meditative awareness is to experience, practice, and live oneness of mind, body, and soul with the divine. This kind of freedom is called samadhi (liberation). It is ironic that practice meant to free us has becoming so confining.

As a group we wish that more people were connected to learning about their personal history and the practices that are a part of their lineage before attaching themselves to and ultimately selling the wisdom of indigenous peoples. In other words, connect to your own culture first, go deep and introspect on your own traditions before connecting to others.

We have a deep desire for us to lift up the wisdom and practices of all indigenous people, build understanding and respect for one another, and have deep understanding of why some wisdoms were completely destroyed and others were co-opted, and of what long-lasting impact of colonialism and white supremacy has been.

By including traditional, indigenous knowledge in our Yoga practice we are bringing in the pathway to invite respecting and honoring our varied lineages and traditions. This traditional, indigenous knowledge includes everything within the sutras, the texts, the full eight-limbed path, meditation (dhyana and dharana), mindfulness and focus, mantra, mudra, and all of the inherent and sometimes more esoteric practices within the tradition.

As part of honoring the roots of Yoga, we also suggest that all Yoga practitioners practice a “spiritual lineage acknowledgement” as a way of honoring and acknowledging the brown and black people from whom this practice has come. All individuals and organizations in spaces from Yoga classes to workshops, in all open public events in person or online, should begin with an acknowledgement of the traditional South Asian originators of the rich spiritual tradition of Yoga, recognizing the traditional and indigenous practitioners and teachers of this practice. For example, at the beginning of every Yoga-related event, we could say something that acknowledges the places and people from whom this practices have

come, highlights and uplifts our teachers, and connects us to the richness of this tradition.

The spiritual lineage acknowledgement should become protocol and policy as well as a land acknowledgement. At the same time, we perform our spiritual lineage acknowledgement, we should recognize and show respect for the indigenous people who were the traditional occupants of the lands on which we are currently dwelling or which we are currently visiting.

DECOLONIZATION AND YOGA

People have discussed “decolonization” and “decolonizing Yoga” in various ways. For some, “decolonization” is a new world order—outside of existing social structures—and cannot be defined. Others use “decolonization” or “decolonizing” to describe anti-colonial, anti-capitalist, and anti-heteropatriarchal maneuvers. Colonization, capitalism, and heteropatriarchy—which center the white, cisgender, able-bodied male as the normative subject—are inextricably interlocking. These social structures produce anti-brownness and anti-blackness, and otherize all non-dominant groups. Kelly Palmer explains that in contrast to colonial norms:

“To decolonize means to allow space for people of color to explore healing/wholeness without centering whiteness. It would mean equitably, centering underestimated people of color, providing resources and dismantling the systems in place that support gatekeeping. Folks holding power would need to be willing to give up power and resources that are being hoarded.”

At times, colonizers have prohibited Yoga and other indigenous movement practices, which have teachings that challenge settler colonial logics. Susanna Barkataki states that Yoga or “the practices that millions of Westerners now turn to for alternative health and wellness therapies were intentionally eradicated from parts of India to the point that lineages were broken and thousand year-old traditions lost.”

On the partition of Turtle Island (North America), often referred to as the U.S., colonizers have prohibited the movement modes and languages of enslaved Native American and Indigenous African peoples. Today, some Native Black peoples in the U.S. are drawing on Yoga as a way to (re)connect with their indigenous identities and heal from the ongoing trauma that settler colonialism causes.

Colonization also constructs humans as superior to our other than human relatives (for example, nonhuman animals, air, land, and water), which has resulted in the current climate crisis. Yet Yoga—as an indigenous, South Asian practice—can challenge colonial logics. As B.K.S. Iyengar writes:

“Whilst performing asanas, the yogi’s body assumes many forms resembling a variety of creatures. His mind is trained not to despise any creature, for he knows that throughout the whole gamut of creation, from the lowliest insect to the most perfect sage, there breathes the same Universal Spirit, which assumes innumerable forms.”

Here Iyengar reflects on the interconnections among humans and other than humans, which is an example of how indigenous practices, such as Yoga, can challenge colonial assumptions.

Challenges/impossibilities with the call to “decolonize Yoga” are the inability to escape existing social structures and the fluidity of the practice, which shifts each time it is taught and/or performed, has multiple meanings, and is being leveraged by people in contradictory ways, such as to combat and reinforce White supremacy and capitalism. Moreover, colonization is not only global, but also multilayered; as I have previously written, “decolonizing Yoga” narratives often overlook the native peoples on whose unceded lands Yoga is being practiced. Yet, native land acknowledgements—which recognize the original and ongoing caretakers of land—are also fluid. They can be enacted both as an important decolonial gesture that produces material consequences beneficial to indigenous peoples and as an attempt to detract from the enduring violence of settler colonialism.

CONCLUSION: CALLS TO ACTION AND NEXT STEPS

Culture is constantly changing. It evolves to the times we live in. Indian culture also constantly shifts within the boundaries of Indian communities. Cultural appropriation in Yoga, however, is a little more complex because it involves the after effects of hundreds of years of colonization and erasure by dominant groups. Although in various academic circles the conversation around cultural appropriation took place earlier, in our observation, the conversation has only just begun. It is only with the constant sharing of information and communication via social media that allows for more open sharing of thoughts on the matter.

Working around cultural appropriation takes a very strong internal axis to avoid perpetuating harm. It is easier said than done to ask for dominant groups to check their privilege. The awareness efforts are on, but the impact behind the intention is not necessarily being generated. Here are some next steps we can take:

1. Educate on language used to teach and discuss Yoga. It is important to share language as a Yoga community and to bring empathy and authenticity to the words we use.

To address this, we believe that the scope of educating around culture should be more vast.

2. Explore, learn, and cite correct cultural references.

As practitioners of Yoga we would love to see more of us citing cultural references as we attempt to understand and connect with the complexity, culture, and history from which this tradition comes. We are not suggesting people put on a watered-down, context-removed faux Hinduism. Commitment to deep practice, questioning, and learning is, perhaps, part of the answer.

3. Ask ourselves, and other Yoga teachers, the hard questions.

These tensions ask us to bring all of ourselves to the table. So what we are suggesting is for us to decolonize Yoga, we need to inquire deeply. We each have our unique story and gifts to share, as do all the practitioners we teach or learn from. Let's ask ourselves, "For whom is Yoga accessible today and how might that be a legacy of past injustices that we have the opportunity to address through our teaching practice and our lives?"

4. Live, know, share and practice all eight limbs of Yoga, not just asana.

Educate on Yoga beyond asana. Right now, the focus remains on Yoga as asana, but the culture of Yoga is missing. There needs to be more emphasis on non-native practitioners and teachers, especially, experiencing and understanding the diversity of Yogic culture as it is conveyed through its lineages across the Indian native, indigenous and diasporic culture. There needs to be a thorough and consistent exposure to and an appreciation of culture.

We can also decolonize Yoga by studying the depth of practice beyond the postures. In addition to asana we need to understand, practice, and teach all eight limbs of Yoga: yama or ethical conduct, niyama or personal practice, pranayama or working with the breath, pratyahara, awareness of the senses, dharana, meditation, concentration and insight, dhyana or being present with whatever arises, and samadhi, or interconnection with all that is.

5. A clear demarcation between appreciation and appropriation needs to be continuously reinforced through the lens of understanding privilege, dominance, colonization, and supremacy.

When we humbly and respectfully consider Yoga's history, context, and many branches and practices, we give ourselves a fighting chance achieving Yoga's aim of enlightenment of mind, body, and spirit.

6. Reparations.

The following is an excerpt from Susanna Barkataki's forthcoming book *Honor Yoga's Roots*:

Reparations are a powerful way to address cultural appropriation and are a key practice for Yoga practitioners to incorporate today. Reparations involve atoning for what has been stolen and returning many of the benefits, rights and profits of a culture's inheritance to its creators and culture.

Speaking of reparations campaigns, we have much to learn from the ongoing leadership of Civil Rights leaders like Patrisse Cullors, Co-Founder of Black Lives Matter.

"Reparations campaigns encompass a wide array of demands. Most commonly, reparations in our contemporary movements are justified by the historical pains and damage caused by European settler colonialism and are proposed in the form of demands for financial restitution, land redistribution, political self-determination, culturally relevant education programs, language recuperation, and the right to return or repatriation," writes Patrisse Cullors (2019).

The colonial oppression of Yoga practitioners in the past and continuing to this day demands the kind of repatriation that Cullors speaks of regarding Black Lives Matter. This critical work of liberation of black lives is part of what it is to honor Yoga's roots. Our work as Yoga practitioners needs to be solidarity and mutuality between the causes of all colonized and oppressed peoples in our work for collective liberation.

How can you create Yoga reparations?

Each of us needs to think and act critically and connectedly within our own culture and context.

Here are a number of suggestions for how we may make wrong right. Please add your own.

- Platform voices not usually heard in Yoga today.
- Donate, uplift and support black and brown leaders and organizations.
- Spend your money on those from whom this practice came. Hire South Asian/Desi Yoga teachers.
- Hire and consult with BIPOC race equity and Yoga teachers.
- Attend workshops and buy books written by South Asian authors.
- Learn and practice the full expanse of what Yoga can be.
- Build relationships across difference, challenge norms, celebrate and create diversity.

"All the suffering in the world comes from seeking pleasure for oneself. All the happiness in the world comes from seeking pleasure for others."

—Shantideva

As we are so gracefully benefitting from this ancient practice we need to consider and take action to return power, care, and integrity as we respect Yoga's roots.



Susanna Barkataki is a yoga culture advocate, trainer, writer and teacher. She is the Director of Education for Ignite Institute for Social Change and Yogic Studies. She is the creator of the Honor {Don't Appropriate} Yoga Summit and Framework and creator of www.honoryogacourse.com dedicated to bringing yoga and equity tools where they are needed most. She is the author of the book *Honor Yoga's Roots: Courageous Ways to Deepen Your Yoga Practice*. She has an Honors degree from UC Berkeley, a Masters in Education from Institute of Humane Education, and is an E-RYT 500 Teacher, Yoga Therapist and an Ayurvedic practitioner. She is honored to teach in the Sri Adi Shankaracharya lineage in the Hatha yoga tradition and is ordained into the mindfulness tradition of Thich Nhat Hanh. Susanna supports clients in expanding their leadership integrating authentic yoga through training, speaking, online courses, consultations for studios, companies and nonprofits. Learn more and get your free Yoga Manifesto gift with 15 ways to Honor Yoga at susannabarkataki.com.



Luvena Rangel is a body positive, Yoga Teacher Trainer with a background in Medicine and Holistic Health as well as teaching credentials in Ayurveda and Meditation. She is one of Bangalore's leading Yoga Anatomy & Physiology educators as well as thinkers in Philosophy. She is the founder of The Curvy Yogi, modeling inclusive and accessible yoga for everyone – regardless of body type, limitations or stereotypes. In her private sessions, she focuses on therapeutic and holistic management of spinal conditions, physiological disorders and thyroid imbalances and comes with a very high degree of positive client feedback. Luvena comes with years of study in philosophy, scriptures, holistic health, healing & wellbeing from some eminent thought leaders, spiritual advocates and holistic healers like Dr. Deepak Chopra, Dr. David Frawley (Pandit Vamadev Shastri), Yogini Shambhavi & Vianna Stibal. Luvena's fundamental values of inclusion and conscious culture allow her to frequently participate in panel discussions and conferences on these topics. Through her input on Diversity, Equity, Accessibility & Inclusion she has offered workshops to organizations like eBay, Amway & HP as well as Bangalore Police and BHEL in India. She has also served as an advisor to Yoga Alliance for the Standards Review Project.

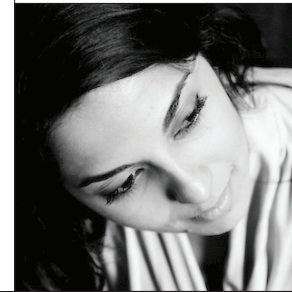


Dr. Tria Blu Wakpa is an Assistant Professor of Dance Studies in the Department of World Arts and Cultures/Dance at UC Los Angeles. She received a Ph.D. and M.A. from the Department of Ethnic Studies at UC Berkeley and an M.F.A. in Creative Writing from San Diego State University. Blu Wakpa is a scholar and practitioner of Native American dance, North American Hand Talk (Indigenous sign language), martial arts, and yoga, and performs and publishes her poetry in a variety of venues. She is also a co-founder and Co-Editor-in-Chief of *Race and Yoga*, the first peer-reviewed journal in the emerging field of Critical Yoga Studies. For her scholarly and

creative writing, she has received prestigious fellowships from the Ford Foundation, the Fulbright Program, and the UC President's Postdoctoral Program, and grants from the American Philosophical Society. Blu Wakpa has also taught a wide range of interdisciplinary and community-engaged classes at public, private, tribal, and carceral institutions. She is married to Dr. Makha Blu Wakpa and the mother of their two children.



Kelley Palmer is a writer, wellness advocate and community organizer committed to using the tools and philosophies of yoga to cultivate liberation, joy and peace for herself and others. Her connection to the living practice of yoga, a path of mindful wellness and self realization fuels her work, impacts her life and propels her to want to share it with others through her writing, events and guest teaching opportunities. She remains focused on making this healing practice accessible to all, connecting to communities that are normally excluded or ignored in mainstream wellness circles. Being a mother of two liberated souls has created a point of focus that brings these tools to the way she is mothering them and also calling her to share this with all parents. Through in person and online offerings, she centers her work on making these connections with authentic and sustainable tool building. Her writing, offerings and more about her can be found at peacefilledmama.com.



Rina Deshpande, Ed.M., MS.T., ERYT-500 is a writer, artist, and teacher of yoga and mindfulness. Rina grew up with Yoga as a first generation Indian American in Florida, at times taught through lectures and mantra led by a guru invited into her home or Temple to share with the community, at other times indirectly, such as waking up with morning practices she still observes in her parents of not talking until the mind has been cleared and gratitude has been offered. As a new public school teacher in NYC in 2004, she suffered from severe stress and found herself in a Yoga class where she was happy to reconnect with Ujjayi breath, for the first time in a class and on a mat. For 15 years, she's taught academics and pedagogy to kids and teachers in the U.S., helping to found Relay Graduation School of Education. Concurrently, she practiced Yoga and completed her 500-hr Yoga teacher training at ISHTA yoga while learning from her parents and gurus brought by the Indian community in Tampa, Florida and Bangalore, India. In 2015, she graduated from the Harvard Graduate School of Education Mind Brain and Education program, where she has since designed meditation and yoga research curriculum for the Marines and Massachusetts General Hospital. Her first published book of handwritten, hand-illustrated Yoga-inspired poetry, *Jars of Space*, comes out in 2020. Learn more @ [rinathepoet](https://www.instagram.com/rinathepoet) and rinadeshpande.com.