Body, Mind and Spirit: A Therapeutic Turn in Muslim-majority Kosovo

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Abstract: Yoga, meditation, guru movements, and alternative healing that combine elements from a variety of religious traditions are gaining ground all over the world. Also a lot of Muslims and people with a Muslim background are currently practicing health and body practices informed by non-Islamic traditions and contemporary New Age spirituality. Over the last years, “mind-body-spirit”-oriented activities and discourses have become more widespread also among Muslims in the Balkans. In Kosovo, which has more than 90% Muslims, a lot of people with surnames Mehmeti, Bajrami and Ramadani, indicating a Muslim family background, are using alternative body techniques and therapies involving controlled breathing, mindful meditation, and prescribed postures. Their motivation can vary: subjective wellbeing, health benefits, spiritual self-awareness and/or personal growth. To what extent people emphasise the spiritual and religious dimensions of their practice can vary considerably, and be situational (Gilhus 1999, 45). Based on available electronic sources and fieldwork data, this article provides a snapshot of this field in contemporary Kosovo, and discusses the local reception of yoga, meditation, and neo-Hindu guru movements. This shows we are witnessing the development of a “holistic milieu” in a traditionally Muslim population.

Keywords: Yoga – Kosovo – Meditation – New Age

INTRODUCTION

Studies of Islam in contemporary Kosovo tend to focus on Wahhabism, Salafism, and Jihadism: fundamentalist, strict and “loud” forms of Islam with hard boundaries. At the same time, a silent, “invisible” change is taking place in the traditionally Muslim population. A variety of people with a Muslim background are currently practicing health and body practices informed by non-Islamic traditions and contemporary New Age spirituality, such as yoga and meditation. Drawing on a well of religious and secular traditions, an increasing number of courses, literature, public events, social media groups, homepages,
training and festivals in Kosovo have emphasis on alternative corporal techniques and therapies involving controlled breathing, mindful meditation, and prescribed postures.

McGuire notes that “the body should be an important component of the social aspects of religion” (McGuire 1990, 284). The focus of this article is the prevalence, profile and reception of some typical “mind and body”-oriented activities as found in yoga, meditation, and neo-Hindu guru movements in contemporary Kosovo. A common denominator is that they revolve around notions of health and subjective wellbeing, and that they are not necessarily recognisable as “religious”. As Brown (2015) points out, people who “think of ‘religion’ in terms of doctrines, creeds, and institutions may not recognize as ‘religious’ non-verbal bodily practices” such as breathing techniques. The purported goal is usually to obtain some form of healing, mind-body unity and transformation of the self, and the discourse frequently appeals to the authority of science (cf. Frøystad 2011). A part of this includes alternative or spiritual healing which can be seen as “complementing or competing with conventional medicine” and represents a form of “magical self-care” (Koch 2015: 431-432).

In the following, I will provide an overview of some of “body-mind-spirit” endeavours that are active in and around Kosovo. The focus is on transnational networks, activities and goals, and the local reception. First I will briefly describe the religious background before I discuss some characteristic examples of meditation, yoga and guru movements in context, and the relationship between them. In the end, discuss the findings in a wider theoretical framework and compare the preliminary findings to relevant studies of Muslims elsewhere.

OLD AND NEW RELIGION IN KOSOVO

Kosovo is a secular state with a Muslim majority and Christian minorities. Until it was conquered by Serbia in 1912-1913, Kosovo was a part of the Ottoman Empire, and under Islamic rule, most of the local Albanians converted to Islam. Today, around 95% of Kosovo’s Albanians are Muslims (Clayer and Bougarel 2013, 10, n4). There are also some small pockets of Turkish, Roma and Slavic Muslims. On the whole, at least 90% of Kosovo’s inhabitants define themselves as Muslims (IPSOS 2011: Kosovo, question 66).

Kosovo is still war-torn (1998–1999) country, with ethnic tension simmering among the Albanian, predominantly Muslim majority and the shrinking Serbian minority, who are Orthodox Christians. Religious symbols and identities remain
strong, and religious institutions have a strong ethnic character. At the same time, there is a tendency among Albanians to downplay religious differences, at least among themselves (Clayer 2007; Endresen 2012). The level of religious attendance is low (IPSOS 2011: Kosovo, question 67).

In the Ottoman period, Kosovo’s Islamic landscape became very complex, and still is (Popovic 1986; Clayer 2007). One may argue that secularisation processes among Albanian Muslims started with the demise of the Ottoman Empire and the gradual loss of Islamic authority in the European possessions. Before World War II, Muslims in the Balkans were often drivers of secularisation. The dominant forms of Albanian nationalism have been secular in character, downplaying the importance of religious boundaries among the Albanians (Clayer 2007). Communist secularization, privatization of religion and globalization (cf. Clayer and Bougarel 2013, Duijzings 1999, 106-131), combined with an increasing individualism after communism and the fragmentation of religious authority have contributed to erode Islam’s role in public life and created the conditions that normally facilitate the spread of alternative religious ideas (Bria 2019).

Most of the analyses of alternative and emerging forms of spirituality are based on studies of Christian and post-Christian societies in the USA and Europe (see e.g. Sutcliffe and Gilhus 2014). However, a therapeutic turn is noticeable also in many non-Christian societies (cf. Clarke 2006). Regarding Muslims in the Balkans, there is little information available about “lived religion” and individualised systems of meaning among Muslims, and available survey data do not divulge the reception of neo-religious ideas and practices. With some exceptions (Clayer 2006, Endresen 2016 and 2018), we do not know how the practitioners with a Muslim identity or Islamic affiliations make sense of neo-religious beliefs and practices, or if they combine them with traditional forms of Islamic healing and magic. What seems safe to assume, however, is that practices and ideas are becoming more popular among people who have a Muslim family background, indicated by surnames such as Mehmeti, Bajrami and Ramadani, and/or statistically register a “Muslim” affiliation in surveys and censuses.
The books of the Indian guru Osho (Bhagwan Shree Rajneesh, 1931-1990) are bestsellers in Kosovo and Albania. At least thirty of them have been translated into the Albanian, most of them over the least five years, which seems to coincide with a surge in interest for yoga and meditation. The picture shows a number of Osho’s books in Albanian translation in a bookshop in the capital city of Prishtina, placed in the psychology section.

Photo: Cecilie Endresen

The new bodily practices in Kosovo here under scrutiny are closely related to New Age spirituality, an eclectic mix of new and old ideas and practices from Indian, Chinese and other Asian traditions synthesised in different combinations with elements of Western science and culture, in particular occultism and
esotericism. The harmonisation usually rests on a belief in a common core of Truth in all religions.

Before World War II, Eastern religious influence on Western culture primarily took place through encounters between Western and Asian intellectuals. Also in the Ottoman and post-Ottoman space there was intense intellectual dialogue and cultural translations, and one may assume that the Turkish networks represent an important factor in disseminating ideas from Asia in Southeast Europe. However, such connections remain understudied, and it seems premature to affirm that Turkish networks transmitted ideas from the Indian subcontinent to Balkan Muslims, although the question is worth exploring.

In most of the 20th century, influence from “Indian” religion and culture in Yugoslavia came from the West via Catholic Slovenia and Croatia, which had universities with a tradition for Sanskrit studies and made Hindu texts available in Yugoslavia. In the 1950s and 1960s Yugoslav Indologists published selected Indian philosophical texts such as the Rig-Veda and Indijska filozofija (Indian Philosophy). During the cold war, Tito’s Yugoslavia nurtured good relations with India due to the non-alignment that emerged among countries that did not want to be allied with either the USA or the USSR, and many Yugoslavs developed a fascination for India.

The main religious and philosophical backdrop for the interest in yoga, meditation and alternative healing methods has been Theosophy. The Yugoslav Theosophical Society, established in the 1920s, translated the Bhagavadgītā and texts by Vivekananda and Krisnamurti, who introduced yoga and Hindu ideas to the West. The Society’s work was banned between 1947 and 1966. Although the Society is barely active, its impact on neo-religiosity and spiritualism has been massive.¹

¹ http://www.teozofija.net/drustvo/teozofija-u-srbiji/
Yoga usually refers to a system of bodily postures (asanas), often acrobatic, used to promote well-being. It often involves meditation and breathing techniques, and sometimes a guru affiliation. In Sanskrit, yoga means “yoking” or “union”. In its original religious context, based on the text Yogasutra from around 400 CE, attributed to Patanjali, yoga was one of the six philosophical systems of Hinduism. The original yogic system involved a methodic control of the body and mind, with emphasis on salvation, envisaged as liberation of the self. The road to salvation involves eight stages, such as discipline, bodily positions, control of the breathing, concentration. Through this method, one can reach a state in which one has stilled the fluctuations of the mind, reached a higher state of consciousness and acquired knowledge about the ultimate reality.

Modern yoga differs: The yogic techniques of controlling the body and mind have become a goal in themselves. What most people today associate with yoga, is not an original Indian product, but has been tailored to the needs of secular culture and modern people in the West. While contemporary yogis also refer to Yogasutra, yoga as we know it now combines body-centred sports and gymnastics on the one hand and parts of Indian hatha yoga traditions on the other.
From the 1950s, modern yoga with focus on the body, wellness and health, became a global phenomenon and immensely popular in the West. Tito’s Yugoslavia was not detached from the 1960s counterculture, associated with the hippie movement, which popularised various modernised forms of meditation and yoga. In this period, more organised missionary movements adapting Eastern religion to Western culture, such as Transcendental Meditation, Ananda Marga and the Hare Krishna movement (ISKCON) also contributed to teach people in Europe and USA new bodily practices.

In Yugoslavia, yoga seems to have been introduced in the 1960s, when yoga manuals such as “Yoga for everyone: a sports book” by the ballerina and yogi Jasmina Puljo (1961) were published. Puljo’s guide to basic hatha yoga explained the “wisdom” of yoga with emphasis on the health benefits, displaying photographs of different asanas (yogic postures, from Sanskrit “āsana”, manner of sitting) demonstrating how people could perform them at home.

In Macedonia, yoga classes were organised from the 1970s, and yoga generally seems to have become known later in the southern parts, in particular in the ethnic Albanian and Muslim-dominated areas.\textsuperscript{2} While Hindu publications were translated and circulated in Serbo-Croat in Yugoslavia, people in Albania did not have access to them. It is very unlikely that there were any relevant material available in Albania or in Albanian before the end of communism, and the time when the New Age movement prospered in the West and entered Yugoslavia, was the most intense anti-religious period in Albania, and all forms of Western cultural “imperialism” were forbidden. To a certain extent, the transnational yoga networks reflect such ethnic, linguistic and socio-political divisions between “Serbo-Croat” and Albanian-speaking networks. The impact of new religiosities disseminated through Turkish networks after communism are also worth exploring, but no studies about possible connections are to date available.

**GLOBAL GURUS, THEIR FOLLOWERS AND BODILY PRACTICES**

A number of transnational guru movements which to different degrees involve meditation and yoga as part of the practice, are active in the region, so also in Kosovo. As mentioned, yoga and meditation sometimes have a connection to a lineage of gurus, often very indirectly, while guru movements usually involve some form of meditation and yoga developed by the guru.

Traditionally in Indian religion, a guru (“venerable”) was a religious guide teacher tutoring his disciples the road to salvation. In the later *bhakti* movement, gurus were often seen as embodiments of the truth and identified with a personalized deity. Contemporary Hindu-inspired guru movements are often, like yoga, adapted to modern people in secular societies who are often attracted to specific techniques developed by the guru Teacher, who offer their distinct “brands” of yoga and meditation on the global market. The participants may be attracted to the guru, his teachings, or just a specific set of practices. In some cases, the guru factor is so remote and the teachings presented in such a secularised and “scientific” language that the participants might not even be aware that they are involved in a guru movement.

\textsuperscript{2} Cf. Endresen’s chapters on Kosovo, Albania, Montenegro and Serbia in Handbook of Hinduism in Europe (Jacobsen and Sardella 2019), and the chapter on Macedonia by Endresen, Risteska and Risteski in ibid. Parts of this article are based on these country studies.
To assess to what extent people who in one way or the other follow a guru are attracted to the religious dimension of the endeavour or not, or see the gurus as god-men, is currently not possible. In any case, the profile of such movements illustrate the problematic analytical distinction between the secular and the religious in complex post-modern societies (cf. Frisk 2014). People involved in their activities can be motivated by many different factors, to obtain health benefits or to attain spiritual self-awareness and personal growth. As we will see in the following, some of the more secularised aspects of the guru movements have a certain influence in the political sphere and in the health sector, and mediation is promoted e.g. by former guerrilla members for stress relief.

The tantric-inspired Ananda Marga (The Path of Bliss) is a yoga and meditation school started by guru Prabhat Ranjai Sarkar (1921-1990) in 1955 in the Bihar province, and asserts that “the human body is a biological machine.” In Yugoslavia Ananda Marga was introduced in 1972 (Ramet 1995, 171), and continued its mission in the 1980s. It often presents itself as a non-commercial, “social and spiritual organization” and claims to have been active in Albania since 1995, engaged in meditation, yoga, philosophy and social service. When hundreds of thousands of Kosovar refugees during the Kosovo crisis in 1999, Ananda Marga and its Universal Relief Team (AMURT) took part in relief programmes.

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Ananda Marga emphasises rituals and frequent reciting of mantras. The meditation techniques rest on a specific “science” called “biopsychology”, which is clearly inspired by Hindu concepts and described as follows:

The mind controls this body-machine through its direct connection and interaction with the glands via the hormones and nerves [...] The human body is composed of the same five fundamental factors as the rest of the universe (the physical body is a part of Saincara, whereas the mind is a part of Pratisaincara). Every factor is distributed throughout the body, but is controlled by a controlling nucleus, or cakra.5

In Indian traditional yoga, and especially in the Tantric tradition, cakra or chakra (from Sanskrit “wheel”) refers to idea of energy centres that up and down in the body along the spine, and that these control and balance the energies. In Ananda Marga’s discourse, chakras are defined as “substations of the mind” which (magically) function through “their own physical counterparts” – i.e., the “glands and the hormones they secrete”, believed to the mind.6 Bodies have, according to biopsychology, a “sleeping divinity” that rests in the “lowest cakra”.

6 Ibid.
This is the *kundalini*, a “psycho-spiritual force”, and as a person progresses spiritually, kundalini “rises up the spinal column”.\(^7\) Ananda Marga has also integrated basic Hindu concepts such as *dharma*, a complex concept referring to right behavior in relation to the cosmic order, which in biopsychology is translated as “psycho-spiritual longing”.\(^8\)

The guru movement *Sathya Sai Baba International*, which teaches that “the haven of peace is in yourself”,\(^9\) had in 2016 two centres in Macedonia and four in Serbia.\(^10\) In Kosovo and Albania, there are sporadic references to the guru, for example in an article in the “curiosity” section in a Kosovo newspaper from 2011, reporting on the deteriorating health of the “Indian oracle”.\(^11\) The article provides a short description of his ideas, for instance that “God is an inner reality which can be given the name of Allah, Jesus or Jahve”\(^12\) – thus opening it for adherents from other religious traditions.

According to Sai Baba’s teachings, human beings are a “triune composite of body, mind and spirit (Atma)”, with “three natures in his make up: A low, animal nature, A human nature, replete with worldly knowledge and skill, [and] The genuine nature of humans, the divine Atmic nature”.\(^13\) The purpose is to be aware of this “third nature and establishing oneself in that”.\(^14\) The different natures are also explained as follows: An individual is “not entirely the body; he/her has, in the gross body, a subtle body, the mind and another body too, more subtle than the mind the Individualized Atma or Self. This last has neither beginning nor end, nor does it have any trace of death or decay”.\(^15\) This is another example of how many of the new bodily practices are based on a specific religious worldview, although many of the practitioners are not interested in or familiar with that aspect.

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\(^7\) Ibid.
\(^8\) Ibid.
\(^11\) The newspaper article “Orakulli indian, Sai Baba numëron orët e fundit të kësaj bote” is available at: http://kosovain.eu/sq/KURIOZITETE/3849 (accessed 10 January 2019).
\(^12\) “Zoti është një realiztet i brendshëm që mund të marrë emrin e Allahut, Jezusit apo Yaveh-ut”. Sai Baba quoted in ibid.
Some of the Indians temporarily working in Kosovo have been Sai Baba devotees; for example, an Indian woman who worked for the UN civil police and credits her guru for miraculous events that occurred during her mundane work.\textsuperscript{16} Another Kosovo connection is found in a Serbian newspaper article which symbolically integrates the guru into a Serbian nationalist and anti-Islamic narrative. With the headline “SAI BABA: Kosovo has been under the curse of Satan since 1389 and the Kosovo Battle!”,\textsuperscript{17} the article echoes a nationalist myth in which the Serbs’ loss of power is invoked as a national tragedy and Kosovo is defined as essentially Serbian Orthodox. The story’s new twist is the integration of the myth into the Sai Baba paradigm through references to the guru’s alleged prophecies about Kosovo’s curse. According to \textit{Telegraf}, “the most famous mystic of the last century” said that the devil had been in power in Kosovo since 1389, which was when the “Turks” (Christians in the Balkans often used this as a pejorative for local Muslims) took control, and they introduced a reign of terror that would last until 2389. Sai Baba had, according to this news story, foreseen more bloodshed. Here, the Serbian

\textsuperscript{16} Her accounts of her experiences are available online: http://media.radiosai.org/Journals/Vol_04/01APR06/me_to_myself.htm (accessed 10 January 2019).

\textsuperscript{17} See the article on the \textit{Telegraf} website, available at: https://www.telegraf.rs/veshti/501495-sai-baba-kosovo-je-pod-kletvom-satane-jos-od-1389-i-kosovske-bitke (accessed 10 January 2019).
myth of suffering is given a new religious twist that demonises the Muslim population and the current political authorities in a new way, thus illustrating how new religious elements are combined with local narratives of war and peace.

The International Society of Krishna Consciousness (ISKCON), probably the most successful of the new Hindu movements in the West, had a “firm foothold” in Yugoslavia already by 1984 (Ramet 1995: 172), and publications by its founder and guru, Swami Prabhupada, circulated. Today, Serbia has several ISKCON centres and Macedonia one, but in Kosovo and Albania there has only been missionary efforts. Footage from an ISKCON tour to Kosovo in 2011 shows relatively enthusiastic bystanders joining in, chanting, and dancing, and there is at least one devotee from Kosovo, who has translated Ṛṣiṣopanīṣad in Albanian. In Albania, mission started in the late 1980s with monks from Yugoslavia. In 2019, orange-clad monks from the Czech Republic held a harinām chanting outside the old Et’hem Bey mosque in Tirana, a couple of hours after the end of the Friday prayer, but received no complaints from the mosque or its visitors. According to the monks’ impressions, the local Muslims and other Albanians were friendlier to them than people back home (ibid).

![Photo: Harinām with Czech ISKCON missionaries in the centre of Tirana, outside the Et’hem Bey mosque. Photo: Cecilie Endresen.](image)

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20 Saṅkīrtan dās, interviewed by the author, Tirana, 12.10.2018.
A movement with more impact in Kosovo is Transcendental Meditation (TM), founded by Maharishi Mahesh Yogi (d. 2008), who introduced this form of mediation to the West in the 1950s.\textsuperscript{21} A TM teacher from Vlora, Justin Goçi, represents TM both Kosovo and Albania, and was himself trained by Mahesh Yogi in Thailand.\textsuperscript{22} “Transcendental meditation” is a form of relaxation technique loosely based on Indian practices and involves an initiation ceremony referring to the main Hindu gods (Gilhus and Mikaelsson 2016, 88), in which the individual receives a personal mantra which s/he is to repeat in silence for 20 minutes two times a day, with the eyes closed in order to cancel the mental noise and lead to a deep sleep (cf. Garrett 2001, 332-333). The idea is that TM can produce a spiritual and material self transformation through repeated physical practices (cf. Garrett 2001). In Goçi’s word, the goal is to “increase the physical, mental and spiritual welfare of the individual in every city in Albania, Kosovo or wherever they are”, and “everything needed to achieve [that] is within oneself”\textsuperscript{23} – a tenet of the spiritualised parts of therapy culture. Given enough TM practitioners, he claims, “the level of collective consciousness” will increase, and “implement the science of creative intelligence, higher knowledge in schools, so that children grow up healthy and happy and naturally stronger and more intelligent” (ibid.).

TM has also been promoted in Kosovo through a 2018 bestselling book about “health and success through meditation” and Indian Ayurvedic medicine (Starc and Ramadani 2018), the latter an integral part of TM’s mission since the beginning. The book is co-authored by two TM practitioners: the cardiologist Radovan Starc, who provides alternative therapies in Slovenia, and Hetem Ramadani, who is presented as an engineer and successful businessman from Kosovo who fled to Slovenia in 1990 and founded a Ljubljana-based company dealing in oil-based products. Ramadani is profoundly inspired by Mahesh Yogi and credits TM for his health and wealth (Starc and Ramadani 2018, 124, 144). Ramadani firmly believes that TM is “based on scientific methods” and the purpose of meditation to connect with the cosmic “energy field” (ibid., 150–151). As far as Ramadani is concerned, ancient Hindu texts and East Asian techniques like Tai Chi, reiki, and Ki Gong are based on the same cosmic principles and contain “scientific” truths about the mind and body (ibid., 136–137).

\textsuperscript{21} Available at https://al.tm.org/ accessed August 30, 2019
\textsuperscript{22} Available at https://tmhome.com/learn-to-meditate/kosovo-trancendental-meditation-tm/ accessed August 30, 2019
\textsuperscript{23} Available at https://tmhome.com/learn-to-meditate/kosovo-trancendental-meditation-tm/ accessed August 30, 2019
Ramadani’s arguments are a typical illustration of the metaphysical premises of so-called “integrative” or “holistic” medicine which presupposes that a higher, cosmic “spiritual energy” exists and can be manipulated (cf. Brown 2015), in this case through TM and Ayurveda. The authors furthermore testify of miraculous healing: In 1999, they assert, the famous Kosovar dissident Adem Demaći24 was cured from angina pectoris through alternative treatment with TM and āyurvedic medicine (Starc and Ramadani 2018, 136–137). While references to miraculous events are key ingredients in New Age discourse globally, Ramadani’s miracle stories about Demaći and himself also let him endow Kosovo heroism and experiences with alternative religious meaning.

The proliferation of Ayurvedic references in the Balkans over the last years, sometimes centres with Indian doctors present,25 is in itself noteworthy. This kind of “life knowledge” (from Sanskrit āyus, life, and veda, knowledge) in this traditional Indian medicine has roots in Vedic medicine from 3-4000 years ago was seen as given by the Hindu god Brahma. Within the Ayurvedic paradigm, the body is analysed in terms of doshas: kapha (earth and water), pitta (fire and water), and vata (air and space). The concept of the doshas underpin the cosmology as well as the idea of the unified mind and body. Illness is explained as the doshas being out of balance, and the human body should be treated as a “whole”, i.e. on the spiritual, emotional, physical and mental level. Such are the principles of Ayurveda, and the concept of doshas underpin Ayurvedic diagnosis, pathology and treatment. Today, Ayurveda is officially defined as a medical system in India and Sri Lanka.

An important propagator of Ayurveda in the West in the last part of the 20th Century was TM, and Ayurveda is also integrated in ISKCON lifestyle. Support for Ayurveda has over the last years acquired a political dimension. In 2018, the Indian vice president commended the Serbs’ “growing interest and increasing popularity of Indian culture, especially in Yoga, Ayurveda and Homeopathy”,26 which the Indian Embassy in Belgrade actively promotes. This is related to the establishment of the Indian Ministry of AYUSH27 in 2014, under the Hindutva BJP government. AYUSH’ purpose is “to guide” the international practice of Āyurveda,28 and “train” people who want to work with the “clinical application

24 Demaći was an author and politician who spent a total of twenty-eight years in Yugoslav prisons between 1958 and 1990. In 1991 he received the Sakharov Prize for Freedom of Thought, and in 1998 he joined the guerrilla KLA and became the leader of its political wing. When he died in 2018, there was a three-day period of official mourning in Kosovo.
of Ayurveda in the health centres”\textsuperscript{29} - i.e. working to implement Ayurvedic practices as part of regular health care programs.\textsuperscript{30}

Elements of Ayurvedic ideas and practices have permeated parts of the New Age spirituality in the West in less recognisable forms. In the Balkans, the interest in Ayurveda includes people generally interested in other forms of “integrative” medicine like homeopathy,\textsuperscript{31} or in local folk medicine, such as a medical doctor in Albania who considers Ayurveda and Albanian herbal traditions complementary and works to influence decision-makers to include it in public health programs (Galanxhi 2015). When the media occasionally features articles like “the Ayurvedic diet”\textsuperscript{32} in the health and lifestyle section, its magic-religious dimensions are nevertheless downplayed, and the focus is on the “psychological and mental” advantages.

The meditation-oriented guru movement The Art of Living Foundation of Sri Sri Ravi Shankar, the disciple of TM’s Mahesh Yogi, offers people the possibility to “master your mind & live your best life with evidence-backed breathing techniques, authentic yoga & effortless meditation”\textsuperscript{33} and “experience the unparalleled bliss of connecting with your higher self”.\textsuperscript{34}

At present, the Art of Living Foundation has programmes claimed to have a “documented impact” in several Balkan countries.\textsuperscript{35} In Albania, it was introduced in in 2008, through its “sister organisation”, International Association of Human Values, which organised a youth programme called YES!+, defined as an “innovative and dynamic educational and life skills programme” for young people, under the tutelage of Prime Minister Sali Berisha from the Democratic Party.\textsuperscript{36} Its official goal, formulated in highly secular terms, was to bring “its globally acclaimed self-development and stress elimination programmes that promote ethics, human values and social responsibility” (ibid.).

In Kosovo, The Art of Living Foundation has been active since 2000, and is important for its promotion of meditation in the country,\textsuperscript{37} partly through

\textsuperscript{29} Available at https://www.artofliving.org/no-en accessed 20 January, 2019.
\textsuperscript{30} Available at https://www.classlifestyle.com/d/8/131/27/dieta-ayurveda-mision-i-mundur-edhe-ne-shqiperi/ accessed December 15, 2018
\textsuperscript{34} See the Art of Living Foundation Kosovo website, available at: https://www.artofliving.org/ke-en/kosovo (accessed 10 January 2019).
meditation-based trauma-relief programmes for war veterans from the Albanian guerrilla movement (the Kosovo Liberation Army, KLA). One of the main ideas of Sri Sri Ravi Shankar’s master Mahesh Yogi was that the peace yoga offers could eradicate criminal violence in society. Shankar took this to a new level, using meditation to eradicate war. In the Kosovo context, the Art of Living Foundation primarily promotes itself as a non-profit NGO that is recognised by the UN and offers “physical exercises to eliminate tension and depression” and breathing techniques that “reinvigorate practical knowledge for living a happier life” and help “develop […] mental potential.”

The proclaimed purpose of the programmes in Kosovo is therefore to “eliminate stress and traumas from the war to live in peace,” and anti-stress courses are aimed at “all segments of society that suffered during the war in Kosovo [and] who have experienced genocide and different massacres.” In this way, the ideas and practices are explained in a way that resonates with Albanian experiences, and it promotes them as the solution to individual and social ills. The alleged health benefits

38 The KLA emerged in 1996 and fought back against the Serbian military and police. In 1998, Serbian counter-insurgency campaigns developed into a full-blown war, with forced expulsion, massacres, and ethnic cleansing, and it forced around 800,000 Albanians to flee the country. In March 1999, NATO intervened to stop the attack on Albanian civilians, and after a three-month bombing, Serbian forces withdrew. Kosovo came under the interim administration of the United Nations (UNMIK) and was controlled by NATO peacekeepers, and the KLA was dissolved.

39 For an in-depth study of The Art of Living, see Jacobs 2015.

40 See the Art of Living Foundation’s documentary, available at: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4yl8AqvSdZg (accessed 10 January 2019).

41 Ibid., at the 27:15 minute mark (accessed 10 January 2019).
are framed in a secular, medical discourse, and the guru’s spiritual leadership and the movement’s religious underpinnings are barely noticeable.

The director of the Art of Living Foundation in Kosovo is the former director of the Association of Disabled KLA Veterans, Vehbi Rafuni, who experienced relief from “anger, irritability, sleep disorders and depression” after the war and became involved after attending a programme for war veterans in Durrës shortly after.\textsuperscript{42} In 2001, an Art of Living Foundation trainer came to Kosovo. The Foundation received support from the Ministry of Health and has different agreements with prisons and certain clinics.\textsuperscript{43} An important supporter is the well-known paediatrician, poet, and women’s rights activist Flora Brovina, who offered the meditation programmes space at her clinic.

In 2007, Sri Sri Ravi Shankar visited the country and held a public talk in Prishtina, which was attended by war veterans and a few Kosovar politicians.\textsuperscript{44} The guru also emphasised that India would bring “the benefits of yoga and its ancient spiritual knowledge, which is much needed in Kosovo today.”\textsuperscript{45} In 2011, Kosovo’s minister of culture, youth, and sports gave a speech at a cultural festival in Berlin that was organised by the Art of Living Foundation in connection with its thirtieth anniversary. He lauded the movement for working “for the benefit of mankind” and “making a better world for all”.\textsuperscript{46}

Another important personality who has promoted the Art of Living Foundation is the above-mentioned Adem Demaci, who reportedly showed an interest in New Age spirituality and alternative diets already in the early 1990s, at least after he had visited the USA. In a television programme about the Art of Living Foundation, he claims to have some “theoretical knowledge” about meditation, which has made him “more dedicated to meditation.”\textsuperscript{47} The “basis of this philosophy [he does not use the term religion] is love” for oneself and others. You must, he says, “understand yourself as part of the universe and humanity, and humanity as a continuation of our physical body and of our soul … Our soul is an embryo of the cosmic soul”\textsuperscript{48} – ideas with unmistakably Hindu origins that

\textsuperscript{43} See the 4:53 minute mark at: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4yl8AqvSdZg (accessed 10 January 2019).
\textsuperscript{45} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{46} See a recording of Memli Krasniqi’s speech, available at: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nSLqbbjIRsk (accessed 10 January 2019).
\textsuperscript{47} See the 8:00 minute mark of the Art of Living Foundation documentary.
\textsuperscript{48} Ibid.
underpin New Age systems of belief. Demaçi emphasises that this “philosophy” will be especially helpful for “our society” (i.e., Kosovo), which suffers from so many problems and lacks people who “understand life, people and themselves properly.” His hope is therefore that new groups of people who are “dedicated to this philosophy” will spread it in Kosovo. This echoes the Art of Living Foundation’s proclaimed goal of helping “individuals find peace within, which becomes the wellspring for peace and harmony in society.”

The idea is that, to heal society, one must first heal oneself, which resonates with those in Kosovo’s yoga community who promote yoga “to find a balance within and trigger social change.”

**Yoga Culture and Events**

Yoga and meditation are not disseminated only by guru movements. The guru factor seems practically absent from most of the yoga and meditation activities, particularly those offered in most yoga studios and gyms, by regular yoga instructors. Over the last few years a handful of yoga studios have appeared in the biggest cities in Kosovo, offering a wide variety of techniques and orientations. An important yoga institution is the Kosovo Yoga school, which promotes *hatha* yoga “as a motor for social change” and offers a 200 hour training programme for yoga instructors, described as an “opportunity for inner growth through self-development and a journey into self-discovery.” As such, inner growth through bodily techniques is seen as having a communal dimension and in itself be the key to creating a more harmonious society.

The most common approach to yoga seems to be to see it as a form of physical exercise with little attention to the “spiritual” side. Sometimes yoga articles discuss its religious and philosophical aspects, for example by uncritically referring to “energies” or ancient Hindu wisdom, or stressing that yoga is not a “religion”. There are no studies or statistics to help assess the number of organisations, members or practitioners, but information and photos on yoga webpages and in social media suggests that yoga primarily appeals to young urban professionals, middle-class women. Many are tired of ethnic and religious

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49 See the video, available at: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4yl8AqvSdZg (accessed 10 January 2019).


tension, political bickering, patriarchal culture and unhealthy lifestyles. In this situation slogans like “the real revolution is to transform yourself, not society” probably have a certain appeal,\textsuperscript{52} while yoga culture offers the individual increased control of one’s own body and mind in the daily life. From this perspective, yoga culture is also likely to have certain counter-cultural aspects and appeal to people who do not find traditional religion satisfying. One influence is media articles about celebrity lifestyles.

While yoga has its critics, there is hardly any “yogaphobia”, and the religious communities have generally been silent about the phenomenon. Opposition to yoga nevertheless seems stronger in the Orthodox Christian hierarchies in the region than among the local Islamic communities. In Kosovo, Serbia, Macedonia and Albania, Orthodox representatives occasionally warn its flock of the dangers of yoga and define it as pagan, Hindu, mysticist, Buddhist, and/or anti-Christian (Faktor Portal 2015; Smisao život 2017; Çako 2017). That, however, does not necessarily mean that Christian yoga practitioners distance themselves from Christianity or the Church, but “like both the Church and yoga”.\textsuperscript{53} While data is missing for the Muslim side, it seems that yoga enthusiasts with a Muslim background or identity consider yoga and Islam complimentary rather than conflictual, or, most probably, do not even think about it.

The idea that yoga is “un-Islamic” (Qazi 2019) probably exists in Kosovo, but is rarely expressed. Unlike Islamic institutions in Egypt, Malaysia and Singapore which have declared that yoga is forbidden in Islam,\textsuperscript{54} Islamic authorities in Kosovo do not seem to have any negative reactions, at least not in public. As long as yoga is understood as just a secular form of gymnastics and not some kind of “Hindu worship”, it does not seem to create much controversy. At the same time, there are no indications that Muslim leaders are promoting it as good for Muslims,\textsuperscript{55} not to mention integrating it in religious service, such as some Protestant churches in Western Europe and the USA occasionally do.\textsuperscript{56}

\textsuperscript{52} Available at https://www.facebook.com/pg/AshtangaYogaMakedonija/about/?ref=page_internal accessed September 20, 2018.
\textsuperscript{53} According to a middle-aged yoga enthusiast who sells new age books in Skopje, interviewed in May 2018.
\textsuperscript{56} E.g. a “yoga service” in the Church of Norway, https://kirk.no/mm-NO/fellesrad/askerfellesrad/menigheter/askerkirke/forsideoppslag/yogagudstjeneste/
There are, however, some examples of yoga enthusiasts explicitly linking yoga to the war experience, and the local cultural and religious heritage. On the webpage www.yogainalbanianlands.com, some young women proudly perform asanas in various locations to integrate these different aspects, for example with a “tree pose” (vrikṣaṇa, a balancing asana) in front of a waterfall, in order to “reclaim their lost balance during the war”. The asanas are “inspired by historical landmarks, monuments and rituals”, including many Ottoman objects. In Prishtina, for example, a woman is depicted performing a “Half Moon Pose (Ardha Chandrasana Modification) — to symbolize the crescent moon in Islam” in front of the Jashar Pasha Mosque. In the same vein, a photo taken in front of the Haxhi Bey Hamam shows a woman kneeling on one knee stretching her arms upwards. This is described as a “modified Virabhadrasana II pose: To commemorate our ‘spiritual warrior’ and the art of cleanings from self-ignorance”. In Peja, a city with a “dark past”, referring to the war, one can “feel the sensitiveness of the streams of the souls of the people who live here”. The hamam, as a public bath adjacent to the mosque, is associated with a form of

“spiritual” and “ritual cleansing”. The Hamam Mosque is used to describe how Kosovo’s mosques and churches coexist “in mutual respect”, and connected to “religious tolerance”, a “defining feature of Albanians, among whom you can find Muslim Catholic and Christian Orthodox believers”. Again and again, www.yogainalbanianlands.com portrays yoga as a constructive form of healing the wounds of war, create a better future, and in perfect harmony with the religious and cultural legacy Albanian identity and values.

An important event for spreading yoga culture is the annual Shanti Yoga Fest Kosovo, which is co-organised by some of the yoga studios and promoted as an “empowering” experience for “body, mind and spirit.” Three summers in a row, local and international yoga practitioners and curious newcomers have gathered for a few days in the countryside, and is promoted through social media with harmonious and colourful photos of yogis posing in scenic surroundings. The programme includes a variety of yoga classes, music, meditation, philosophy, and a programme for children. The Shanti Yoga Fest initiative seems to appeal to the public, because tickets were sold out almost immediately.

The Shanti Yoga Fest actively uses Indic terms and concepts to formulate its values and guidelines. Śānti means peace, and the purpose is to unite people, who have a shared interest in yoga, to “promote peace and spread yoga” and to celebrate “inner and outer peace.” The message is underlined by photos participants sitting peacefully in groups in e.g. lotus position. The first rule of conduct at the festival is āhimsā (non-violence), which is understood as a dismissal of both physical and physical violence, as well as of discrimination in any form. The festival is vegetarian since āhimsā includes animals, and there is a strong focus on environmental concerns. The second guideline is that of “loving kindness,” which is presented as a Buddhist concept and related to respecting one’s own body and boundaries. This leads people to interact in a “non-harmful” way with each other and creates a “safe space for everyone.” Another guiding principle is santoṣa, which refers to “contentment and satisfaction”: the key to a happy life is

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positivity. *Satya*, in turn, means “truthfulness in communication and action” and encourages attentive listening, integrity, and honesty among the participants.\(^67\)

One of the stated goals of the Shanti festival is to “nourish and blossom the divinity within you”,\(^68\) and the programme offers various methods to help people achieve that goal. The participants can for example attend courses on “Shakti energy: awake the divine goddess within”, learn about “healthy receipts”, “natural health hygiene”, “pranayama intensive” (i.e., techniques to regulate the breath), or acquire “the most powerful personal transformation tools”.\(^69\) There is also focus on bodily control and movements, with classes called the “movement clinic” or “body flow and balance”, in addition to the part of the programme dedicated dance and music (e.g. “Indian dance”, “contemporary dance workshop” and “Tibetan singing bowl sound bath”).\(^70\) Above all, the festival offers its participants the chance to test a wide range of yoga methods, such as yin, vinyasa, acro, “gentle flow”, “yoga for kids”, “hatha yoga with alignment”, “mountaineering & yoga”, or “movement therapy for female yoginis”.\(^71\) On the whole, the festival programme demonstrates the prominence of corporal techniques in obtaining peace, harmony and personal fulfilment, according to the Shanti mission.

The festival is nevertheless not just about immersing oneself in techniques to cultivate one’s own body and health for individual purposes. The communal dimension is just as important: People at the festival are referred to as the “shanti tribe,” i.e., a new community delineated by common values and a commitment to peaceful coexistence. Within this, yoga is envisaged as a powerful tool that, in words similar to those used by the Art of Living Foundation, helps people “find a balance within and trigger social change.” This is similar to the discourse of yoga practitioners other places, for example a yoga teacher in Afghanistan who says that “you cannot establish peace in this society if you are not at peace within yourself” (Afghan yoga teacher quoted in Qazi 2019). The Shanti fest addresses the question upfront with a discussion on “Yoga & Peace Building”.\(^72\)

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\(^{69}\) Ibid.

\(^{70}\) Ibid.

\(^{71}\) Ibid.

So far, yoga impulses come from both east and west: from central and western Europe, through old Yugoslav cultural “Serbo-Croat” networks, ethnic Albanian networks, and diasporas in the in Western Europe, as well as from Turkey. Yoga and meditation involves international networks, but is to varying degrees also linked to local yoga communities and neo-religious actors. The yoga and meditation studios that pop up also illustrate a form of "New Age capitalism", part of the "new economy" that includes both personal development and "self-work ethic" (Mikaelsson 2014, 163-164). The organizers often have an international background, experience or networks and create new hybrid products, tailoring global phenomena to local interests and concerns.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

As Jeldtoft duly notes, by focusing only on the “vocal, activist and visible” aspects of Islam and Muslim lives, we run the risk of “reifying ‘Islam’ as the principal identity for Muslims and making Muslims ‘all about Islam’” (Jeldtoft 2010, 1135) and overlooking other important developments, such as the proliferation of alternative ideas about mind and body. Further studies are needed to determine how self-identified Muslims in the Balkans who are involved in alternative corporal practices and influenced by neo-spiritual ideas about mind-body unity make sense of them in their daily lives and which role they play in their identity formations. We also lack data on what role Islam plays in individual, pragmatic reconfigurations of religious practices. One preliminary observation is nevertheless that the relationship between the neo-religious activities on the hand and Muslim identities or Islamic traditions on the other so far are rather absent, indirect, and uncontroversial. A remarkable feature is the almost complete absence of discussions about the relationship between the new therapeutic techniques and ideas on the one hand, and Islam and being a Muslim on the other.
Studies of Muslims elsewhere show that they sometimes “Islamise” practices like yoga, mindfulness and meditation in different ways, for example associating it with Islamic ritual healing and cultivating the personal relationship to God (cf. Dessing et al. 2016, 19). Others discuss what they see as the Islamic aspects of yoga and meditation. One example is two Indian doctors in Saudi Arabia who consider yoga a therapeutic tool positively related to “health, happiness and longevity” (Sayeed and Prakash 2013). They compare yogic practices with Ṣalāh in Islam, which they claim also activates certain chakras, and seek to develop a powerful “psycho-spiritual methodology” by combining the two (ibid.).

In her research on privatised, non-institutionalised religiosity among Muslims in Denmark and Germany, Nadia Jeldtoft (2010) finds that many Muslims relate other ideas and practices to “Islam” on an abstract level and as a value system, a tendency we also see among Muslim minorities for example in Norway (cf. Sandberg et al. 2018). Many of Jeldtoft’s informants, for example, “use meditation practices instead of actual performance of praying five times a day” (Jeldtoft 2010, 1143). One woman with a Turkish background, who is also a Reiki healer, i.e. practising a Japanese form of mediation, believes she inherited her healing powers from her pious Muslim grandmother in Turkey and associates the healing energy of Reiki with God as a universal power (Jeldtoft 2010, 1142). The point is that people practice Islam on their own terms and use traditions in a way that makes sense to themselves. It is fair to assume that new data will reveal similar tendencies among Muslims other places, such as in Kosovo. It is likely that some engagement with Islamic references and the Muslim heritage is already taking place in the neo-spiritual discourse in Kosovo, and there is some degree of hybridization and assimilation traditional Islamic therapeutic practices, for example related to Sufism and magic. However, more research is needed to document how it unfolds.

The proliferation of ideas and practices originating in Indian religions and New Age spirituality are indicative of a therapeutic and subjective turn (cf. Rieff 1966, Heelas and Woodhead 2005) in an overwhelmingly Muslim population. This is related to what Heelas (1996) has called a “celebration of the self”, and represent a form of “alternative modernity” (Koch 2015). In the comparative study of religion, the mind-body-oriented ideas and practices described in this article can be seen as a “floating” and diffuse forms of religiosity or spirituality, “spread thinly” in culture and society, and the impact is hard to assess. My study nevertheless indicates that we are seeing the development of a “holistic milieu” in Kosovo, and that a small “spiritual revolution” (cf. Heelas and Woodhead 2005) is taking place also among Muslims.
Modern guru movements of the organised kind are small, but growing. The interest for yoga and meditation is more notable, and is fast growing. The numerous Westerners present in Kosovo after the war have probably contributed to spread ideas about yoga and meditation, but diaspora networks in Western Europe and ethnic Albanians in neighbouring countries also seem important for transmitting new ideas and practices. Occasionally, there are points of contacts with the political elite. So far, it seems that the most popular products seems to be secularised and health-oriented versions of yoga and meditation, and its appeal lies in its individualism and increased control of one’s own body and mind in the daily life. To what extent people emphasise the spiritual and religious dimensions of their practice can vary considerably, and be situational (Gilhus 1999, 45). Many are mainly interested in those aspects related to health and human potential.

One noteworthy finding is that meditation is often disseminated through guru movements, including in organisations for war veterans, where mediation is understood primarily in secular, therapeutic terms and where emphasis is placed on breathing techniques and trauma relief. It can be assumed that the affiliation with former guerrilla members (KLA) is an efficient legitimising strategy among Albanian men. The yoga culture, on the contrary, is dominated by women (cf. Heelas and Woodhead 2005).

The ideas of wellbeing, peace, and harmony conveyed are, for obvious reasons, appealing in a war-torn society where many, if not most people are traumatised in different ways and still face innumerable problems in their daily lives. The idea of obtaining, or regaining control of one’s body and mind, which yoga and meditation are promoted as ways of obtaining, obviously have a strong appeal in these circumstances. As Meredith McGuire writes, leaning on Elaine Scarry (1985), “war is an exercise of power over bodies, in part because it takes place between political bodies and between bodies of armies, and in part also because it accomplishes its ends specifically by the destruction of human bodies” (McGuire 1990, 294). To some extent, the use of new body rituals can therefore be seen as a way of healing the devastating effects of war by transforming oneself and regaining control.

The growing interest for yoga in the Balkans over the last few years seems to some extent to have coincided with the United Nations 2014 approval of India’s Resolution for an international Yoga Day to be celebrated on the 21st of June. The date has become a public event in many countries, sometimes with political
support, such as in Belgrade and Tirana.\textsuperscript{73} However, there are no indications that the yoga initiatives in Kosovo which I have encountered have any connection support from the Indian embassy in Belgrade and thus indirect connections to Hindutva politics.

The preoccupation with the self, internal life and lifestyle can also be seen in relation to individualism and the waning of traditional religious authorities: The highest authority is found within one’s inner, authentic self, not in traditional religious authorities or transcendent sources. We do not know anything about how the individuals active in Kosovo’s “mind-body-spirit” activities feel about Islam, or if they embrace or reject Islamic dogmas, institutions, or traditions. We do not even know if they define themselves as Muslims. Generally speaking, however, we know that when people are exposed to new values and lifestyles like those here under scrutiny, it often leads to a certain hybridization of practices in which new secular and religious elements become enmeshed with those from the old culture. Traditional ideas and identities can acquire new meaning, and what is new and foreign can be appropriated and re-interpreted, for example turn into an invented local tradition (cf. Hobsbawm 1983). While meditation and yoga are both new and international phenomena, it is not unusual that they undergo a certain indigenization processes in which practitioners tailor them to their own needs, embed them in local traditions or integrate them in their own traditions and narratives. In some cases, we see how mind-body ideas become intertwined with nationalist narratives of the past and aspirations of transcending ethnic and religious boundaries.

Yoga, meditation, Ayurveda and gurus represent a global trend and can be seen as examples of “glocalization” (Robertson 1995). New impulses from the global religious marked are being adapted to local conditions, while the local is being lifted into new, global discourses and webs of meaning, as symbolic resources in new and individualised identity constructions. Further studies are needed to determine the indigenising processes that might be taking place in neo-religious therapeutic ideas and practices, noting that adherents of alternative practices or belief in “energies” etc. do not necessarily have a conspicuously individualistic orientation (cf. Hall 2013: 160). The relationship between alternative forms of religion and traditional collective identities and affiliations should not be overlooked in the study of the way new ideas and practices – with the body at the centre – are transformed and play out in the local context.

\textsuperscript{73} Cf. Endresen’s chapters on Albania and Serbia in Jacobsen and Sardella (2019).
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