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Yoga in Norwegian Nature: The Creation of a New Pilgrimage Practice

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Abstract

As modern yoga continues to be practised and spread all over the world, it is also changing and adapting to local beliefs, practices, and values. Yoga retreats in nature are now a phenomenon in Norway. This article is based on a document study of websites advertising yoga retreats in Norway, exploring how nature is described and presented. The analysis shows that nature is presented as sacred, healing, and valuable. Elements from Sámi spirituality and other religious traditions are drawn on, and nature is marketed as a necessary part of a spiritual package. This can be seen in connection with climate concerns and Bron Taylor's formulation of the concept of dark green religion. Nature's utilization in marketing material suggests a Norwegianization of yoga, where yoga is made more Norwegian by connecting it with Norwegian nature, Sámi spirituality, and local traditions. The article argues that we are seeing the emergence of a new pilgrimage practice in Norway as part of the Norwegianization of yoga. Yoga and wellness are paired here with nature experiences and nature spirituality in a local retreat setting.

Keywords: *dark green religion, nature, New Age, pilgrimage, yoga*

Modern postural yoga has been integrated into Norwegian culture since the 1960s, finding its way into diverse settings such as gyms, schools, hospitals, and even churches. Research on contemporary yoga practice in Norway is limited. Most has been health-oriented, focusing on the health benefits of yoga and/or mindfulness. An important intention of this article is therefore to contribute to a broader understanding of the current landscape of yoga in Norway from the perspective of religious studies.

An increasing number of companies now market yoga retreats in Norway's natural landscapes, and there seems to be a growing trend to offer yoga tied to the experience of being in nature. This phenomenon was especially

intriguing for me: I could find no research examining the connection between nature and yoga in the Nordic countries, but this is necessary if we are to understand more about contemporary yoga practice. The article therefore explores the portrayal of nature on a selection of websites promoting yoga retreats in Norwegian nature. The study draws on a document analysis of publicly available websites marketing such retreats in Norwegian natural landscapes. The research question is: How is nature described and presented in advertising and information about yoga retreats in Norwegian nature?

My analysis of the material identified several new elements that had not previously been described. Claims made about nature and descriptions of the connection between nature, spirituality, and health highlight nature's place in the contemporary Norwegian yoga scene. By exploring how nature is described and portrayed in marketing yoga retreats, we can gain a better knowledge of how modern yoga is adapted within a Norwegian context. This will contribute to a deeper understanding of the Nordic branch of what is often referred to as modern yoga.

Modern yoga

Although yoga developed in India within the framework of Hinduism, and its spiritual and physical practices were created to achieve its religious goal (Jacobsen 2003), yoga is often distanced from its Hindu origins (Singleton 2010) when practised in the West today – frequently by people not associated with religion at all (Iversen and Krogstad 2020). This raises interesting questions concerning religious appropriation, and whether yoga can be understood as secular (Bowers and Cheer 2017). De Michelis (2005) describes modern yoga as 'a technical term to refer to certain types of yoga that evolved mainly through the interaction of Western individuals interested in Indian religion and a number of more or less Westernized Indians over the last 150 years. It may therefore be defined as the graft of a Western branch onto the Indian tree of yoga' (De Michelis 2005, 2). This article uses the term modern yoga similarly as a technical term to describe a westernized version of yoga that is widely practised all over the world. Yoga is pluralistic and needs to be understood as a diverse phenomenon (Newcombe 2020). Yoga's increasing popularity worldwide has led to a commercialization of the practice (Bowers and Cheer 2017), and the marketing of yoga retreats all over the world, including in Norway, can be seen as part of this development.

Modern yoga has been prevalent in Norway since the emergence of the New Age movement, and New Age ideas have been part of the Norwegian

spiritual scene since its beginnings in the 1960s (Gilhus and Kraft 2017). The meaning of the term 'New Age' has changed since the movement's emergence in the 1970s. Hammer (2016, 348) describes how the movement today is characterized by diversity and a lack of a single central doctrine. He further explains how the idea of healing, fulfilling potential, and optimizing the practitioner's life seems to be the core theme in most New Age circles and literature. Whether a particular spiritual movement can be classified as New Age is disputed. It is possible to question how 'new' all the practices referred to as New Age really are (Repstad 2020, 27). The label 'new' can also be misleading or destructive. This is especially true when describing Indigenous spirituality like shamanism within a Sámi context (Kraft 2023, 95) and other older spiritual practices like yoga. The New Age is always influenced by location, and Scandinavian and Sámi spirituality have been especially influential in Norway (Gilhus and Kraft 2017). This is probably also true of the Norwegian yoga scene.

Many yoga practitioners do not understand yoga as religious, and yoga studios are not necessarily seen as religious places. Religion in Norway is increasingly seen as private and personalized (Repstad 2020). This is part of a broader phenomenon in which individuals are reluctant to identify with religious labels and the label 'religion' (Woodhead 2016). This also seems true of the Norwegian yoga milieu. Iversen and Krogstad (2020) describe a tendency to see yoga as non-religious. The concept of 'Lived Religion' (Ammerman 2021; McGuire 2008) is therefore relevant. It refers to how individuals practise and experience their religious and spiritual belief in everyday life. The concept originated in the 1990s from an interest in ordinary people's religious practice in every domain of life. It recognizes that religious beliefs and practices are not confined to sacred spaces or prescribed rituals but are integrated into various aspects of individuals' lives. By focusing on religion as it manifests itself in different spheres, we can expand our view of what religion is beyond official texts and doctrines, and in private and unofficial places. Ammerman writes that this 'is to focus on what people are doing, as well as what they are saying' (Ammerman 2021, 5). This is relevant here because this project examines how nature is described regardless of the facilitators' and practitioners' definitions of their practice as religious, spiritual, secular, or none of the above.

There has been a growth in spiritual tourism in general and yoga tourism specifically in recent decades (Bowers and Cheer 2017). This is also connected with a growth in global wellness tourism (Clissold et al. 2022), and yoga is often understood as a wellness practice in the Western context.

Kato and Progano (2017) describe spiritually motivated tourism today as transcending religion to include health, wellness, and self-improvement, and yoga-related tourism like retreats and festivals seems a good example. While most organizers present such tourism as both authentic and inclusive, Lucia's book *White Utopias: The Religious Exoticism of Transformative Festivals* (2020) points to the opposite. She explores some yoga festivals and notes the cultural appropriation and white privilege occurring in such settings. In both the mainstream media and in retreat and festival settings yoga is increasingly seen as a practice for promoting health and wellness while being connected with spirituality (Bowers and Cheer 2017). There has been a shift to using the concept of spiritual rather than religious travel, even though these two concepts often overlap. However, Kujawa (2017) describes spiritual travel as often situated outside established religion, and the label may therefore be more suitable to describe modern yoga retreats in nature. Spiritual tourism can also be seen in connection with the commercialization yoga has undergone, and Selberg (2017) writes about how local trip organizers often utilize national heritage in marketing spiritual tourism. An important part of what is considered national heritage in Norway is nature and experiences in it.

Nature as a Norwegian value

Nature has played an important role in establishing what is defined as Norwegian since the Romantic movement's idolization of the wilderness in the late eighteenth century. This eventually also gave rise to the idea of *friluftsliv*, or free-air life (Gurholt 2014, 234). *Friluftsliv* can be described as the practice of spending time in nature and engaging in an active outdoor lifestyle all year round. It can also be understood as a core value in Norwegian society, as it is generally only used positively as something from which everyone benefits. *Friluftsliv* has remained an important part of everyday life in Norway and is closely connected with the idea of national identity, and what is seen as typically Norwegian (Hågvar 2008, 206). This is also evident in official documents: a 2023 parliamentary announcement states that the government's goal is high participation in *friluftsliv* for the entire population (Government document 2023, 39). The Norwegian philosopher Arne Næss (Næss 1976) formulated the concept of deep ecology, an ethical theory that holds that nature has an inherent value. He has been important in the Nordic countries for making the connection between experiencing nature, environmental philosophy, and environmental activism (Naess and

Jickling 2000). Nature-based tourism in Norway today has some elements of sustainability practices. Rosenberg et al.'s study shows that sustainability occurs in nature-based tourism in Norway but is not a central topic (Rosenberg et al. 2021, 14). It is unclear if this also applies to spiritual nature-based tourism like yoga retreats.

The practice of *friluftsliv* offers experiences that can be understood as spiritual or religious (Hågvar 2008), and seeing nature as spiritual seems to be a worldwide phenomenon. Nature can also act as a spiritual inspiration in modern Western societies (Fredrickson and Anderson 1999). Ferguson and Tamburello postulate that the local environment competes with established religions and eventually reduces participation in traditional religious organizations (Ferguson and Tamburello 2015, 295). Thurfjell and Remmel (2024) propose that contemporary northern Europeans' love of nature is entangled with existential questions and individual wellbeing through the processes of modernization and secularization.

Nature spirituality

Nature's role in Norwegian spirituality is not limited entirely to local influence. In the nineteenth century there was a spread of intellectual pantheism, which contributed strongly to the re-enchantment of nature within modern Western shamanism, or neo-shamanism. This is also true of northern Europe in general and Norway in particular. Von Stuckrad argues that the understanding of nature in neo-shamanic discourse is derived from Western mysticism and philosophy going back to antiquity, peaking in the Renaissance and in nineteenth-century German idealism (Von Stuckrad 2002, 778). The twentieth century saw the emergence of the concept of nature religion, and American pagans increasingly referred to themselves by 1970 as a nature religion. Nature as something sacred became a way to legitimize this spiritual tradition without scriptures (Clifton 2016, 340–41). Neo-shamanism is often seen as part of the New Age, though practitioners often reject this label (Hammer 2016). The New Age can be seen as a problematic term because it is often used for all new religious or spiritual movements. I use it here, however, as it is a common label for the phenomenon.

Within the same period a strong connection has been made between the environmentalist movements that developed in the 1960s, New Age spirituality, and the popularization of neo- shamanism (Kaikkonen 2023, 26). The spread of the New Age and neo-paganism saw the passing on of environmental values from the hippie movement (Kvalvaag 2022). New Age

circles also began to show great interest in nature religions' original religiosity. 'Nature religions' is perhaps not suitable as a description of modern spiritualities, in which eco-crisis anxiety is central. Graham Harvey suggests that we should instead speak of 'religion as ecology' (Bøe and Kalvig 2020, 240). In Norway interest in nature religions became evident as old Sámi and old Norse spirituality became part of the New Age scene. As location always influences the New Age, it is unsurprising that Sámi spirituality has been especially influential in the Scandinavian New Age (Gilhus and Kraft 2017). As pre-Christian Sámi spirituality was shamanistic, this has contributed to the Scandinavian New Age's focus on nature.

Bron Taylor describes nature's prominent position as spiritual in a variety of milieus. His concept of 'dark green religion' can be understood as '…religion that considers nature to be sacred, imbued with intrinsic value, and worthy of reverent care' (Taylor 2010, ix). In *Dark Green Religion: Nature, Spirituality and the Planetary Future* Taylor examines the emergence of green religions and explores how environmentally motivated movements and individuals manifest religious tendencies, even when their participants reject the religious label. Taylor avoids defining religion and thus a discussion of whether dark green religion is indeed religion, but he exploits an operative definition of religion that does not necessarily entail a belief in nonmaterial spiritual beings (Taylor 2010, xiii). This is relevant here, for the contemporary yoga milieu lacks a stated shared religious belief, instead consisting of individuals whose only thing in common is that they practise yoga in some form. As the results presented in this article make clear, however, there are some strong tendencies in nature's perception and description in the contemporary Nordic yoga scene.

By examining the intersections of modern yoga, New Age influences, and Norwegian values and spiritual traditions, this study reveals the unique Norwegian adaptations that frame contemporary yoga retreats as more than just a place for its physical practice.

Material

This article is based on a document analysis of publicly available websites marketing yoga retreats in Norwegian nature. Document analysis was chosen because it allows an examination of how nature is framed and presented to potential consumers through digital platforms. Following Asdal and Reinertsen (2020), I understand documents to be not only text but also sources of new practices and tools that can lead to change. The material

was sourced by online searches for 'yoga' + 'nature', terms chosen to ensure that the selected yoga websites directly addressed nature. One of the first results was visitnorway.com. Visit Norway states that it is produced and maintained by Innovation Norway, which is given the responsibility by the Ministry of Trade, Industry and Fisheries. The website explicitly states that it is the official travel guide to Norway, which makes its yoga and nature content and descriptions especially interesting.

Visit Norway's material is used with 11 other websites run by people or companies organizing and holding yoga retreats in nature. The websites to be used as material were chosen by the original search process of 'yoga' + 'nature' or by links from the search process's results. I selected websites that marketed and sold yoga retreats, either in their own permanent location or as events in different locations. As the material was sourced from open online sources, the process was easily repeatable with other similar websites or other online material such as social media platforms or fora. None of the websites matching the criteria of selling yoga in nature was excluded; all the first 11 matching websites were used as material. This ensured the results' integrity. Although the sample size was small, this method made the findings more reliable in answering the research question and may therefore say something about the tendencies.

The information from the selected websites was chosen as material and collected before being coded and categorized. As the analysis was inductive, the categories emerged from the dataset (Tjora 2017, 197). The material was then analysed by examining the categories. The findings are presented in the following sections corresponding to the categories from the material: healing space; sacred place; and something valuable. I have translated the Norwegian quotations literally to English to prioritize preserving the original terminology and structure without adding interpretive alterations. The aim is to maintain the original meaning as closely as possible.

For many of the websites it is difficult to be certain of who has written the text or is responsible for the content. Several websites are linked in various ways; some have many people associated with them; some have only one. The website's name is therefore used as the name both in the bibliography and the text to make the website easily identifiable for the reader. As websites are constantly changing living documents, there are bound to be some changes in the websites used as material here. I have kept screenshots of the websites as they appeared when I collected the material, and anyone interested is welcome to ask to see them.

Ethical considerations

The use of online sources as material raises questions of privacy. While the material is publicly available, Davie and Wyatt (2022) write that in digital material like blogs 'even when access is open, the line between what is public and what is private is very easily blurred, raising questions regarding anonymity and protection from harm' (Davie and Wyatt 2022, 250). As I consider all the material used to be marketing material – it describes and sells yoga retreats – there is no doubt that the material should be defined as public. This is also in line with the general guidelines of the Norwegian National Committee for Research Ethics in the Social Sciences and the Humanities (NESH 2019), which state that 'it will be expedient to apply the concept of reasonable expectation of publicity' (NESH 2019, 10) when considering if the material should be defined as public. As already mentioned, the material here is marketing material, meaning those who have published the websites also consider it public material.

The following section presents the findings with the website names. The themes emerging from the material – healing space, sacred place, and something valuable – are all connected with nature as something Norwegian. These themes are explored in relation to how nature is presented in marketing yoga retreats in Norwegian nature.

Nature as a healing space

All the websites describe some form of self-development or healing practice, and nature is the common healing component in them all. Venabu.no writes that the retreats 'use nature around actively in the programme' and that 'getting closer to nature helps us find balance and peace within ourselves'. Finnskogenretreat.no writes that '[w]e are nature. While you are here and get to know your inner nature, the outer nature forms the foundation for the retreat and is healing in itself.' Another example is 'mindful walks in nature' which several of the retreats include. Juicyful.no offers 'light therapy', where the light is the natural light in a specific place. Norwegiansage.com offers 'yoga therapy', 'Ayurveda', and 'forest therapy, describing how '[b]y listening and paying attention to this conversation, we also increase our awareness of the conditions needed for preventing stagnation and disease, and nurturing healthy, thriving systems'. Naturretreat.no claims that 'When we live close to nature and do energy work like yoga and meditation, we come in automatic deeper contact with our inner, true nature and reality. From here everything can be experienced, healed and changed.' It also states

that '[t]he mountain with its powerful nature and clean air is a vitamin bomb for both body and soul and contributes in this way in supporting the effects of the internal processes we are diving into'. Mountainyoga.no has an instructor who has 'studied and practised energy medicine for years, from various ancient cultures and teachers'.

Visitnorway.com describes similar things to the individual websites. There is a quotation from one of the offerers of outdoor yoga on visitnorway.com: 'I practise and teach outdoor yoga, and I feel that nature adds an extra dimension to the physical practice. The combination of yoga and nature, in the wind and by the waves, is very powerful. I genuinely believe that experiences out in nature are important to people's health and life mastery.' Some descriptions go beyond healing, as on trevarefabrikken.no: 'Place yourself in the centre of the universe, be the little spoon with nature, and return well charged with a new experience or skill.' Sjobrisadventure.no writes '[e]xperience the transformative journey of yoga', '[a]cknowledge past wounds, seek healing, and embrace transformation', and '[i]t's not just about doing; it's about becoming'. On venabu.no we read that '[s]pending time out in nature has many proven effects both for our lives and our relations with other people. Practising mindfulness outside enriches the experience.'

Nature as a sacred place

All the websites used as material here feature photographs of nature, and the majority also have photos of people doing yoga outside. Most of the websites highlight nature's sacredness in one way or another. The word 'sacred' can refer to different understandings but is used here to describe how the webpages emphasize nature as inhabiting qualities associated with spirituality, religion, supernatural powers, and something holy or deeper than other aspects of ordinary life. Sjobrisadventure.no exemplifies this: 'Yoga in Nature opens up for complete presence, allowing you to take in all that nature has to offer.' The same website also states that its yoga practice offers '[t]ransformative experiences that go beyond mere tourism'. The connection between humans and nature is also emphasized, as on finnskogenretreat.no: 'We are nature.' Many also describe nature in their specific location as spiritual, as in this example from juicyful.no: 'The light in Finse is really special. This weekend you will experience being filled with light from within'; or on mountainyoga.no: 'the nature around is powerful and endless.' Nature here is given qualities like 'powerful' and inhabits certain qualities that can be understood as supernatural, like filling

humans with light. Some websites also describe specific locations as sacred. Meretesgarden.no describes a source of holy water in the mountains nearby. This water is connected with St Olaf the Holy by presenting a thousand-year-old legend. A website that stands out is vana.no, as it is more inspired by Hinduism, offering kirtan, breathwork, meditation, and mantras. This site also constantly mentions nature: '[a]bsorbing the quiet in the autumn-dressed forest', '[b]athe in the energy of the beautiful nature', '[r]efuel with the power of nature', and '[w]ith yoga as a tool we awaken the gratitude for life, nature around us and nature inside us.'

Several sites mention that they offer a variety of treatments or spiritual practices connected with different religious or spiritual traditions. Venabu.no offers yoga, mindfulness, and tai chi, for example, and this is presented within a nature setting. It offers meditation classes outside, stressing that it thus aims to bring participants closer to nature. The descriptions highlight nature as a component that makes these practices more potent and sacred. Naturretreat.no has a teacher who offers Reiki and Mayan dreamspell in addition to different types of yoga like kundalini and yin. Norwegiansage.com stands out in its explicit emphasis on Sámi and old Norse spirituality. Yoga, Ayurveda, I Ching, psychology, and shamanism are presented with deep ecology and nature as teacher. One of the site's photos shows a woman lying in the forest covered by a blanket while a man in traditional Sámi clothes touches her forehead. Beside them there is what appears to be a Sámi drum. Other places on this website describe old Norse goddesses and their connection with nature.

Visitnorway.com writes that '[d]oing yoga outdoors enables you to be at one with nature' and encourages you to '[f]ind your yoga paradise'. Among other recommendations linked from the yoga page on Visitnorway.com there is a page about how to '[f]ind inner peace on a spiritual journey'. This is a short piece on pilgrimage routes that states that '[y]ou don't have to be religious to gain a treasured experience from your journey'. It is described as an opportunity to '[c]ontemplate the big questions, consider your future, … or just observe the little things in life along the way', all while taking in the 'stunning scenery' and seeing 'quaint villages with a strong cultural heritage'. Other links on Visitnorway.com led me to a page about the Sámi that encourages people to travel north to '[g]o find your joik', which it describes as something the Sámi got from the 'fairies and elves of the Arctic lands'. There are photos of Sámi in traditional clothing, and one is quoted as saying, 'The joik is like swirls in the northern lights and wind on the mountain plateaus. I feel otherworldly when I joik', and 'I feel that my ancestors are with me when I'm joiking'.

Nature as valuable

Visitnorway.com mentions eco-travel several times, and the same is true of some of the individual websites. The person behind meretesgarden.no writes about 'wanting to contribute to sustainable tourism'; the person behind norwegiansage.com refers to herself as an 'eco-therapist'. Sjobrisadventure.no states it is 'combining the thrill of outdoor activities with a commitment to safety and sustainability', and 'we aim to inspire sustainable care where people actively contribute to the preservation and growth of what they have a profound connection with'. All the websites that mention food write about vegetarian or vegan food. Some, like meretesgarden.no, also describe the food as organic or local: they use vegetables from their own garden grown without pesticides and natural materials to contribute to caring for the earth. Vanayoga.no writes that '[w]e will share lovely vegetarian meals, mostly made with organic produce'. Nosenyoga.no offers 'three healthy vegetarian meals per day'. Some websites omit the concepts of sustainability, eco-tourism, and climate challenges. Many are in Norwegian, probably marketed at Norwegians travelling within their own country, perhaps also relatively close to home. One of the retreats offers the option of sleeping at home and only attending during the day.

Most of the websites explicitly refer to local nature. For example, naturretreat.no states that '[w]e cannot imagine a more beautiful place than Ringerike in the spring with hepatica, wood anemone, and birdsong'. Nosenyoga.no also describes its local nature: 'Nøsen is in beautiful, scenic mountain surroundings', and 'Nøsen is in magnificent, untouched natural surroundings.' Above all nature in general is highlighted as valuable, as a quotation from one of the entrepreneurs on visitnorway.com demonstrates: 'Nature brings an extra dimension to the physical practice.'

Making yoga Norwegian

The material presents nature as sacred, healing, valuable, and Norwegian. The emphasis on the Norwegian-ness of nature is interesting: it communicates that it is not just yoga in nature, but yoga in Norwegian nature. The previous section highlights how this is done.

Although all three of the core themes are connected, this seems particularly true of the first two. Nature's sacred aspect is presented as making healing possible. Nature as a healing space to change, grow, heal, and realize one's full potential can partly be interpreted through the previous New Age self-help literature (Hanegraaff 2013, 39). Nature as something sacred

is also linked in the material to various religious and spiritual traditions and practices such as Sámi religiosity, old Norse goddesses, Christianity, and Zen Buddhism within a broader self-help framework, as the practices described are all intended to optimize one's life. This is typical of the synchronization occurring in what can be described as the New Age. As Hammer (2016) explains, New Age innovations are characterized by a sufficient distance from beliefs and practices supported by major social institutions, individualism, nostalgia and exoticism, needs in the here and now, and recognizability. These traits are evident in the material I have examined, suggesting that Norwegian yoga retreats can be situated within a broader New Age framework in which nature and the experiences in it become essential components of a spiritual package consisting of yoga, nature, and self-help.

As New Age movements have historically been linked to environmentalist ideas, often through pantheistic views of nature (Kaikkonen 2023; Kvalvaag 2022), the connection between environmental concerns and modern yoga in the material is unsurprising. Pantheism is the philosophical idea that everything is in God, or that God is in everything, and the closely related term panpsychism refers to the understanding that there is a life force, mental activity, and animating spirit in the natural world (Irwin 2016, 417). Magical societies also frequently embrace such pantheistic views in incorporating neo-pagan beliefs about nature into their own belief systems (Irwin 2016, 428), and this may be the case at these retreats, where pre-Christian and Sámi views of nature seem to function as an inspiration. This re-enchantment of nature accords with the tradition of nature religions, and what has been referred to as shamanism. 'Shamanism' is derived from the Siberian word *saman*, meaning 'one who knows', which refers to a person who can travel between worlds and communicate with spirits, animals, and other beings. Shamanism is used to describe religions where this is a central practice. It was first used by Western researchers (Bøe and Kalvig 2020, 12) but is today also used as an emic term in Norwegian Sámi milieus. In describing and defining these different religious and spiritual traditions, it is important to be aware of the Protestant bias there has been in the classical approach to the study of religion since its inception (Hanegraaff 2013, 103). As most of the research on religions focusing on nature is still undertaken by scholars outside the religions, one must assume bias remains. Research on old Sámi religion is limited and largely based on material from Christian missionaries.

The natural world and the wilderness are understood in this context as valuable in and of themselves, and therefore something for which one

should care. This accords with Clifton's (2016, 334) description of a prevailing belief in pagan and shamanistic religion. The presence of environmental concerns in the marketing of these retreats further reinforces this connection. Some websites emphasize sustainability and environmental care; others do not explicitly mention them. This omission may be due to these websites marketing nature. Retreats themselves may discuss these topics more thoroughly, however. The promotion of vegan or vegetarian food, and the emphasis on organic or locally sourced ingredients, suggests an effort to reduce environmental impacts. Viewing nature as healing, sacred, and valuable may encourage participants to care for it. This perspective aligns with Kato's and Progano's (2017) description of pilgrims taking a special interest in sustainable travel, which they define as 'slow'.

As I mentioned earlier, many of the retreats seem to be marketed at Norwegians, as the texts about them are in Norwegian. Situating yoga in Norwegian nature for a Norwegian audience is one way to create a more sustainable and environmentally conscious travel alternative. Local yoga retreats can thus be understood as a reaction to the growing climate concerns in the last decade. As spirituality functions as a travel motivation (Kato and Progano 2017), nature-centred spiritual tourism can contribute to more sustainable tourism by offering local alternatives. If local nature is seen as healing and sacred, this may reduce the need for long-distance travel to specific destinations. It is also possible that these local yoga retreats function as an addition to international yoga travel, meaning they may not significantly reduce the overall environmental impact.

The examined websites' descriptions of nature suggest that environmental concerns and a spiritual view of nature similar to Bron Taylor's concept of 'dark green religion' heavily influence contemporary yoga practice. Taylor (2010) writes about the global prevalence and diverse manifestations of dark green religion as a phenomenon existing beyond environmentalist and conservationist circles, and influencing spiritual paradigms in various subcultures (Taylor 2010, 102–3), including the Norwegian yoga scene. Historically, nature has played a significant role in Norwegian spirituality, so this is not new. However, the current practice of combining nature with yoga and other spiritual activities in a communal setting seems to represent a new approach. This blending of yoga with the idolization of northern nature reflects a 'Norwegianization' of the practice. For example, yoga is presented as a partly outdoor activity, integrated with other outdoor experiences, implying that engaging with nature is essential for realizing its spiritual and healing benefits.

The wilderness functions in this framework as an aesthetically pleasing backdrop for spiritual experiences, socializing, and self-development (Ammerman 2021, 141). Nature becomes more than just a component of the spiritual package: it provides a sacred framework for the entire experience – one that is perhaps more aesthetically pleasing to the demographics attending these retreats than the aesthetic framework associated with the New Age of the 1990s. Historically, untamed nature with its wild animals has been seen as unpredictable, mysterious, and dangerous for humans. This has gradually shifted. Norwegian nature no longer poses a threat to the people inhabiting the land, so the wilderness can now be seen and described in purely positive terms, and the websites here exemplify this. None has any warnings about or negative descriptions of nature. Nature is instead presented as the positive opposite of urban places, and yoga in nature as more powerful and healing than yoga in urban settings. Connection with other people and the setting seems to enhance the experience of nature as spiritual inspiration (Fredrickson and Anderson 1999), which may explain people's willingness to pay for these retreats instead of simply practising yoga in nature on their own. Meanwhile, the sacred and healing qualities attributed to nature also probably reflect how individuals utilize and relate to nature outside yoga retreats as a form of 'lived religion' in everyday life.

One could argue that placing yoga in nature serves a commercial function that is less about ecological concerns and more about adapting yoga to local cultural trends. Is it possible that these retreats' nature aspect is less about ecology and more about making yoga Norwegian? Taylor (2016, 297) asks if advanced environmental concerns in groups are connected with the tradition within which they are operating or a strategic response to a market demand. If the current market demand is local yoga that builds on national heritage and tradition while not damaging the environment, these nature yoga retreats can be understood as a response to this demand. By pairing yoga with *friluftsliv* (free-air life), yoga retreats move closer to what is commonly understood as typically Norwegian (Gurholt 2014; Hågvar 2008, 206). Situating yoga practice in local nature is also a way of detaching yoga and spirituality from spiritual tourism. Participants are no longer on a journey into someone else's spiritual landscape; they are having spiritual experiences at home. This can create a sense of authenticity for participants, positioning yoga in nature as an inherently Norwegian practice. At the same time this process has the potential to become exclusive of certain groups, as in Lucia's (2020) description of American yoga as a familiar domestic practice

for certain Americans: yoga is seemingly becoming more Norwegian, but may not be for all Norwegians.

A new pilgrimage practice

This process of making yoga more Norwegian also distances it from its Indian and Hindu origins, a trend linked to the commercialization of yoga worldwide (Bowers and Cheer 2017). By removing obvious Hindu elements of yoga practice and incorporating Norse, Sámi, and pagan elements, retreats may be easier to market to a broader demographic. Norwegian yoga may thus be easier to sell then yoga that feels too Hindu or Indian. This raises questions about religious appropriation and the ethics of detaching yoga from its Indian spiritual roots. Nevertheless, the 'Norwegianization' of yoga may be inevitable, as location influences New Age practices (Gilhus and Kraft 2017). It is therefore only natural that the modern yoga scene in Norway draws increasingly on Norwegian nature and continues to incorporate elements from Sámi, Norse, and Christian spiritual traditions. By localizing yoga retreats in the Norwegian wilderness and building on Norwegian traditions, modern yoga can also function as part of a chain of memory (Hervieu-Léger 2000). It feels familiar to the participants, even though yoga is not part of the participants' culture. This localization also shifts yoga from international spiritual tourism, offering spiritual experiences grounded in environments familiar to participants. Sámi, Norse, and nature spirituality thus offer a component of tradition.

Nature in general is familiar to most Norwegians, and it is nature in general that the material portrays as a spiritual place. Interestingly, there is no mention of sacred sites from pre-Christian, Christian, or Sámi traditions, except for one reference to a water source connected to St Olaf. Instead, the wilderness appears to be valued more broadly, serving as a contrast with the stress of everyday life. This reinforces the idea that nature itself is seen as sacred and as a destination for spiritual pilgrimage, rather than specific sites imbued with historical or religious significance. However, the material's emphasis on local nature points to location as relevant in a historical context as lines are drawn to a Sámi and Nordic spiritual past. This not only happens in Norway: Lucia (2020) writes about the romanticization of premodern and Indigenous spirituality taking place at yoga retreats and festivals. What is special about the Norwegian retreats is that they seem to be marketed by appealing to Norwegians' connection with the land. As most Norwegians lack a personal connection with Sámi culture and spirituality,

this also raises questions about cultural and religious appropriation. As the analysis is based on website content, it is unclear what is said and done at these retreats. Perhaps particular sites are highlighted and visited. Some organizers may take participants to sacred sites even if it is not mentioned in the marketing material. Such sites may also be used more if this new pilgrimage practice continues to grow or is influenced by other spiritual traditions.

Selberg (2017) notes that local trip organizers often incorporate national heritage into the marketing of spiritual tourism, and this is clearly happening here: yoga entrepreneurs refer to Sámi and Norwegian traditions, culture, and nature. How this is done is relevant for the development of spiritual practices in Nordic societies. Eade (2020) points out that institutions and entrepreneurs play crucial roles in creating new rituals and sacred places. We may thus see commercial yoga entrepreneurs as contributing to the shaping of new spiritual practices and influencing how participants understand nature and their relationship with it. Social media probably plays an important role in spreading ideas about yoga and nature, both to possible participants and everyone else seeing posts and videos. Social media platforms have enabled the spread of religious and spiritual ideas in a hitherto unwitnessed scale and timeframe. An astonishing number of people can see ideas and practices within days. This may explain why the ideas presented here about nature, spirituality, and yoga, and the concept of the 'nature yoga retreat', have spread across the country.

Yoga retreats that emphasize the healing qualities of Norwegian nature can be understood as the creation of new rituals and a new pilgrimage practice. They also exemplify lived religion in participants' daily life if the participants take the ideas and practices with them, and in the communication of nature values through websites and social media. The phenomenon of the 'nature yoga retreat' draws heavily on the idea of nature as a Norwegian value and sacred place. We can see this new pilgrimage practice as the merging of two strong traditions in contemporary Norwegian society: modern yoga; and spiritual views of Norwegian nature. This new pilgrimage practice of yoga retreats in nature is a relatively open commercial New Age spirituality, heavily influenced by Eastern religious practices and a wellness focus, with nature a key component. Even the official Norwegian travel guide markets it, suggesting it has all the components to become – or perhaps already is – an established spiritual practice.

Conclusion

The material presents nature as sacred, healing, valuable, and Norwegian. The descriptions of nature the websites promote as material focus on nature as something other and more valuable than 'not nature' – whatever that might be. Elements from multiple religions such as Buddhism, ancient Sámi religion, nature religion, and New Age beliefs are used to underscore the natural environment's spiritual significance. Nature's therapeutic benefit is emphasized both in general and at specific sites near the retreats. Nature seems to be presented as healing in itself, but also more potently when paired with the other spiritual components yoga retreats offer. Nature is also portrayed as something valuable that humans should take care of and appreciate, especially given growing climate concerns and activism. The views of nature are in line with Bron Taylor's (2010) concept of dark green religion. Nature seems to be understood and presented as a significant part of the 'spiritual package' offered within a New Age framework.

The material shows that yoga in nature is a Norwegian phenomenon that is experiencing a process of 'Norwegianization'. Yoga is assimilated into Norwegian culture through its association with Norwegian landscapes, Sámi spirituality, Old Norse beliefs, and Norwegian traditions, while distancing it from its Hindu origins. Furthermore, yoga retreats in local nature seem to be an emerging new Norwegian form of pilgrimage practice, in which yoga and wellness experiences are intertwined with nature-based spirituality and promoted and sold online. The view of nature as sacred, healing, and valuable is an essential component in understanding why situating yoga in nature can be so relevant and attractive for participants. This article's findings thus contribute to a deeper understanding of modern yoga's complex landscape. These understandings are important because yoga is one of the most widespread modern spiritual practices. As new ideas and entrepreneurs emerge on the local yoga scene, it can be expected that understandings, descriptions, and utilizations of nature in the Nordic yoga milieu will continue to evolve and change, probably under the continuous influence of other spiritual and secular currents.

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