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Appropriating Yoga as Their Own: Properties of Mediated Action within Two Nordic Majority Churches

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Abstract

Cultural appropriation has recently become a central topic in discussions regarding majority churches' adoption of 'Eastern' spiritual practices. This article employs a Vygotskian-Bakhtinian perspective on appropriation as developed by James Wertsch (1998) to examine the research question, how have the Danish and Norwegian majority churches made yoga their own, and how is yoga preserved as something that also belongs to someone else? The data consist of two types of sources: ten field visits conducted between January and November 2023; and a qualitative survey distributed in January 2024, with fifteen submissions from Norwegian respondents and sixteen from Danish respondents. The analysis reveals that 1) the churches' primary objectives play a crucial role in how yoga is incorporated in existing practices such as church services; 2) Christian concepts do not entirely replace historically attributed yoga expressions; and 3) the God-centrism of church yoga is well aligned with the prevailing holistic doctrine of self-spirituality. Based on our findings, we conclude that the majority churches in Norway and Denmark have appropriated yoga as part of their own theological tradition, introducing two novel concepts: linguistic domestication; and material domestication.

Keywords*: cultural appropriation, mediated action, Wertsch, Bakhtin, yoga, self-spirituality, majority churches*

Prelude

It is late evening as we enter the church as participant observers. Gregorian music is playing softly from the speakers, candles are lit on the altar, and a pastor welcomes us. A few people have already rolled out their yoga mats on the floor at the front of the church, waiting for the service to begin. Jackets and water bottles are placed in the pews. There are about fifteen of us when the yoga church service begins, mostly women between forty- and sixty-years-old dressed in comfortable clothes, and some have brought blankets from home with them.

The pastor and the yoga instructor enter the chancel together, taking their places on yoga mats at the front of the group, facing the participants. With three strokes on the Tibetan singing bowl and the Trinitarian invocation the pastor signals that the service has begun. She welcomes both newcomers and those already familiar with yoga church services warmly. The pastor explains that these services focus on connecting with oneself and with God bodily and through breathing. She emphasizes that if any of the physical exercises are too challenging or not to our liking, it's perfectly okay – what matters most is practising yoga in a way that feels right and being as you are while you're here.

The service continues with a reading from the Bible, followed by a brief reflection on the text by the pastor. After a prayer the pastor hands over to the yoga instructor, signalling that it's time to start moving. The yoga instructor guides us through various poses like the 'Tree', the 'Downward-facing Dog', and the 'Child's Pose'. As we pose, she incorporates words from the pastor's reflection. We're encouraged to notice our own breath as God's power filling us, and to recall God's all-embracing grace as we lie on the floor. After about thirty minutes of yoga the pastor resumes her role. Standing in front of the group, she invites us to pray the Lord's Prayer, silently or aloud. Finally, she concludes the yoga church service with the Trinitarian blessing and nine strokes on the singing bowl. Some participants linger for a while; others leave the church in silence.[1]

Introduction: is church yoga cultural appropriation?

The question 'Isn't this cultural appropriation?' has often been raised when we have presented our 'When yoga goes to church' research project, which studies yoga services like the one described in the prelude, and other kinds of yoga activities taking place in parishes in the Church of Norway (CoN) and the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Denmark (ELCD).

Yoga in churches started as pop-up events in inner-city locations about a decade ago but has gradually evolved into a regular activity across a broad

1 With some modifications this prelude has been published in a previous article (Graff-Kallevåg, Helboe Johansen, and Johnsen 2024).

array of churches, including in the Nordic majority churches (Plank et al. 2023). In Norway and Denmark church yoga is held in both urban and rural areas, including places known to be theologically conservative. Intrigued by this development, we decided to investigate the phenomenon empirically. Our study contributes to the scholarly discussion of cultural appropriation (Annunen and Utriainen 2023b), addressing the growing research interest in how yoga, as well as meditation, tantra, spiritual retreats, acupuncture, and mindfulness, has become part of religious institutions in the Nordic context (Enstedt and Plank 2023, 1).

Recognizing that the concept 'Eastern' functions more as a discursive marker than a geographical term, Enstedt and Plank highlight that public schools, healthcare systems, and fitness and gym companies in the Nordic countries have integrated 'Eastern' spiritual practices without much debate (ibid., 1). Furthermore, they assert that 'the spiritual revolution' is unfolding not only in society at large but also within the established majority churches, exemplified by the churches' increased interest in offering yoga to their members (ibid., 12). As part of their discussion, Enstedt and Plank ask if a situation where churches are incorporating non-Christian practices necessitates a theological reframing to render these practices legitimate (ibid., 12). In contributing to this discussion, our analysis focuses not on descriptions of web pages but on how church yoga is enacted in specific parishes.

In the Danish context Marianne Qvortrup Fibiger observes, like Enstedt and Plank, that yoga has evolved in different parts of society; the ELCD's growing interest in incorporating yoga in its church activities is a more recent trend. According to Fibiger the various Christian types of yoga delink it from its Indian background and relink it to Christianity (Fibiger 2023, 72). She argues that yoga in churches exemplifies a broader trend of cultural appropriation, suggesting that the church's aim is 'optimizing the relationship with Jesus' through yoga (ibid., 72). Building on Fibiger's research, we delve more deeply into the issue of cultural appropriation, exploring whether church yoga indeed enhances participants' relationship with Jesus.

Like Fibiger, Marcus Moberg and Tommy Ramstedt, writing from a Finnish context, explore the extent to which churches' interest in 'Eastern' spirituality and practices can be understood as cultural appropriation (Moberg and Ramstedt 2023). In examining the justification and legitimization of mindfulness within the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Finland (ELCF), Moberg and Ramstedt argue that cultural appropriation is a pertinent issue. Liz Bucar restricts cultural appropriation to instances where there is

a demonstrable 'explicit harm' (Bucar 2022); Moberg and Ramstedt argue that her definition is too narrow: if an agent like a church actively seeks to change or alter a practice, it should be determined as a case of appropriation proper. This holds true even in situations involving mindfulness and yoga, where it is challenging to link the practice to a specific religious tradition (Moberg and Ramstedt 2023, 121). Moberg and Ramstedt conclude that the ELCF creates 'Christianized' versions of mindfulness (Moberg and Ramstedt 2023), exemplifying what they term 'appropriation of religion *into* religion' (ibid., 134). They encourage future scholarship to use their case as a point of comparison when examining other national and ecclesiastical contexts (ibid., 134), which is what we seek to do in this article.

These research contributions are predominantly based on survey material, as well as the mapping of media debates and web pages (Fibiger 2023; Lundgren et al. 2023), including an analysis of two theses by BA students in a ministerial programme (Moberg and Ramstedt 2023). Such empirical material is suitable for investigating a specific discourse. Our aim, however, is to study how individuals responsible for organizing yoga in church settings practise and describe it. Our data therefore consist of participant observations and a qualitative survey, with detailed descriptions of how yoga is performed within this setting.

Furthermore, our theoretical framework differs from the aforementioned contributions. Instead of utilizing theories developed within religious studies and critical appropriation theory, our project applies analytical tools developed within sociocultural learning theory, specifically James Wertch's *Mind as Action* (Wertsch 1998). Other scholars have emphasized the role of learning in the context of new religious and spiritual practices (Annunen and Utriainen 2023c), yet few have employed sociocultural learning theory as developed by Wertsch in studies that examine appropriation within a religious framework (Afdal 2013; Holmqvist 2015; Johnsen 2014).

Like other sociocultural theorists, Wertsch argues that the task of sociocultural analyses is to 'explicate the relationships between human *action*, on the one hand, and the cultural, institutional, and historical contexts in which this action occurs, on the other' (Wertsch 1998, 24). We have chosen Wertsch rather than other sociocultural theorists because of his unique blend of Vygotsky's focus on mediation as an artefact-mediated process and Bakhtin's understanding of language as social systems of meaning, which together allow a multifaceted analysis of the relationship between yoga and church. Given that appropriation has become a central topic in recent scholarly discussions of yoga in and beyond churches, we find it

particularly compelling that Wertsch views appropriation as a fundamental and unavoidable property of human action (Wertsch 1998, 58).

As part of his discussion concerning appropriation, Wertsch includes a quotation from Bakhtin:

> The world in language is half someone else's. It becomes 'one's own' only when the speaker postulates it with his own intention, his accent, when he appropriates the word, adapting it to his own semantic and expressive intention (Wertsch 1998, 54; cf. Bakhtin 1981, 294).

This article's overall research question is: how have the Danish and Norwegian majority churches made yoga their own, and how is yoga preserved as something that also belongs to someone else?

Method, material, and positionality

The data analysed in this article comprise two types of sources: field visits; and a qualitative survey. We all conducted field research at yoga events within parishes between January and November 2023. Participant observation of religious groups, communities, or activities is sometimes conducted over an extended period or through a sequence of shorter visits, as has been the case in our project (Harvey 2013, 218). Based on our geographical locations, Kristin Graff-Kallevåg and Elisabeth Tveito Johnsen conducted field research at seven yoga activities in parishes of the CoN; Kirstine Helboe Johansen observed three in the ELCD. The parishes we visited were selected using a snowball sampling strategy (Bremborg 2011, 314). We conducted internet searches for yoga activities within the churches and contacted church workers – usually pastors – listed as contacts for yoga activities. All the church workers we approached welcomed us as participant observers. None of us has extensive experience of yoga, but we have all conducted multiple research projects concerning church practices. While easy access to the field is a privilege, it also heightens the risk associated with the project. If our informants find our visits intrusive or feel our analyses are misconceived, it can have a bearing on our future research initiatives (Erdal 2016, 153).

We deemed ten field visits insufficient for achieving theoretical saturation (Bremborg 2011, 314). To supplement our material, we therefore developed a qualitative survey in January 2024. As is typical in qualitative surveys (Anker and von der Lippe 2015, 88), we included narrative questions, inviting respondents to describe various elements of their church yoga

activities in their own words. Targeting individuals responsible for yoga activities in parishes, we distributed the survey through channels such as journals for pastors and Facebook groups for church workers and pastors. Between 11 January and 12 August 2024 we received 31 responses – fifteen from Norwegian and sixteen from Danish respondents. The survey material confirmed that the practices we observed during our field visits were aligned with those conducted in the parishes we did not visit.

Theoretical framework: properties of mediated action

This article explores how yoga is mediated in church yoga activities within parishes in the Church of Norway (CoN) and the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Denmark (ELCD). As we have mentioned, Wertsch's concept of mediated action serves as our primary analytical framework. The following analysis is structured in accordance with three properties he identifies as fundamental elements of all forms of mediated action. As part of the integrated analysis, we consistently compared our findings with the contributions mentioned in the introduction, as well as other relevant scholarly works.

First, a key characteristic is that mediated action serves *multiple purposes*, and that these purposes often conflict (Wertsch 1998, 32). A central analytical task in sociocultural learning analyses is to investigate the complex relations between the different goals of action (ibid., 32–34). Utilizing this property analytically, we identified how church workers and yoga instructors presented church yoga to the participants, and how the importance of different objectives was rated.

Second, Wertsch asserts that mediated action consists of *tensions between agent and artefact*. Material or linguistic artefacts have been attributed a fixed meaning over time, yet agents use artefacts creatively, and an artefact's meaning therefore constantly changes. This emphasizes that tension between actors and artefacts is more a rule than an exception. When analysing mediated action, one should expect 'some form of resistance or friction' between agent and artefact (Wertsch 1998, 55). In this part of the analysis we examine how yoga expressions are used or avoided in church yoga, focusing on how the yoga exercise is framed linguistically.

Third, what Wertsch calls *appropriation* characterizes the relationship between agents and mediational means (ibid., 53). As we mentioned in the introduction, Wertsch adopts this term largely from the writing of Bakhtin (Bakhtin 1981). Following the convention of other scholars, Wertsch trans-

lates Bakhtin's Russian terms to 'appropriate' and 'appropriation', 'with the understanding that the process is one of taking something that belongs to others and making it one's own' (Wertsch 1998, 53). When borrowing or 'renting' the words of others, Bakhtin considered these words 'as "half someone else's"' and consequently also half the speaker's populating of them '"with his own intention, his own accent"' (Wertsch 1998, 56; Bakhtin 1981, 293).

Influenced by Vygotsky (Vygotsky 1967), Wertsch posits that Bakhtin's perspective is applicable to cultural tools in general, not only language. Wertsch maintains that every cultural tool is inherently half someone else's, half one's own. Acting with a mediational means – for example, using a cultural tool or artefact – requires the knowledge that it is partly someone else's property, while populating it with one's own intentions and accent (Wertsch 1998, 56). In addressing appropriation, we explore what the churches do to make yoga their own. The next section focuses on the unique properties that distinguish church yoga from other kinds. We thus identify how the churches imbue yoga with their own intentions and accent.

Analysis and discussion: multiple purposes of mediated action

A low-threshold activity

The first part of this analysis examines the goals of church yoga, seeking to capture any conflicts and the complex relations between different goals. How is church yoga presented to the participants, and how is the importance of different objectives rated?

At the start of nearly every church yoga session, either the church worker or the yoga instructor (or both) includes explicit explanations of its goals and purpose, as described in the prelude. These introductions encourage the participants to adjust and feel comfortable during church yoga rather than performing all the exercises perfectly:

> If any of the exercises are challenging, or if you don't want to do them, just leave them out. It should feel good, and you can be yourself when you're here (Church 4, NO).

> If any of the exercises are difficult or intense, just step out of them or modify them a little. In church yoga we're present without performing (Church 3, DK).

The organizers also emphasize that church yoga differs from other forms of yoga at gyms or yoga studios. For example, 'This is a church service, not a yoga class, so I'm not going around correcting anyone. Just do the best you can' (Church 1, DK). Similarly, in another parish a church worker introduced church yoga by saying, 'Church yoga isn't like a workout. Here, it's all about just being present; you don't have to look a certain way or be able to do anything special' (Church 3, DK). While the distinction between church yoga and other types of yoga may vary in accuracy, what sets church yoga apart is its setting within a church rather than a gym or yoga studio. Viewed as a church activity, the focus on participation without requiring previous skills, achievements, or long-term commitment is aligned with other low-threshold initiatives in majority churches, such as baby hymn singing (Nielsen 2017). Although it is rarely the case, church workers often hope these low-threshold activities will encourage new attendees to participate in church services or volunteer in the local parish (Johnsen 2021).

However, we observed some initiatives where church workers actively used church yoga to recruit participants for more established parish involvement or activities. On a scale of 1 to 10 only 6.7 percent of respondents rated 'Encouraging participants to join other activities in the parish' as most important (10). This suggests the main objective of church yoga is not to transform 'passive' members into more permanently involved participants (Schlamelcher 2018). Instead, the primary focus, as 60 per cent of respondents indicated, is for participants to 'connect with their own breath and body' (60 per cent rated this at 10). The second most important goal was 'ensuring participants feel comfortable in the church space' (46.7 per cent rated this at 10), followed by 'helping participants connect with God' (36.7 per cent rated this at 10).

Connecting with oneself and God

Vincett and Woodhead describe holistic spiritualities emphasizing the integration of body, mind, and spirit as being historically positioned as reactions to traditional forms of Christianity (Vincett and Woodhead 2016, 234). Although the distinction between holistic and Christian spiritual practices has become increasingly blurred and intertwined, Fedele and Knibbe have proposed that spirituality within an institutionalized Christian context differs from holistic practices, as the latter primarily aims to achieve the wholeness and wellbeing of 'body, mind, and soul' (Fedele and Knibbe 2020, 6). However, the introductions given to the participants, as well as

the survey results, suggest that one's wellbeing and connection with one's breath and body are considered primary aims within this institutionalized Christian context, even to the extent of being rated as more important than connecting with God.

In one of the parishes we visited the pastor introduced the church yoga service with the following remark:

> Yoga church services are about breathing and presence. When people ask how you can have a yoga service in a church, I usually reply that there's nothing strange about it. It's about being connected with yourself and God – through breath and body (Church 4, NO).

So the pastor did not see a connection with oneself and God as conflicting. Instead, she viewed the breath and the body as essential for both connections. Yoga instructors leading church yoga sessions without the broader church service framework tended to place greater emphasis on church yoga's distinctly Christian elements. One instructor explained church yoga as follows:

> This is a Christian form of yoga, and I will mention God and use a biblical verse during the session. However, you're all free to place whatever meaning you want on the movements and interpret them from your own perspective. Even though I'll suggest movements, you're free to do whatever works for you (Church 3, NO).

Making participants aware that this was a Christian type of yoga distinguished it from other forms. However, the biblical verse was not presented as an authoritatively binding religious source. On the contrary, as we have seen in the previous excerpts, the yoga instructor stressed that everyone could do yoga as suited them, inviting each participant to interpret the movements from their own perspective. Emphasizing that everyone was free to attribute their own meaning to the movements is well aligned with what Woodhead and Heelas famously describe as 'self-spirituality' (Heelas and Woodhead 2005). Aupers and Houtman argue that self-spirituality has gradually evolved into a foundational doctrine within the holistic spiritual milieu (Aupers and Houtman 2006, 204). Encompassing a well-defined doctrine of 'being and wellbeing', self-spirituality posits that 'in the deeper layers of the self, one finds a true, authentic, and sacred kernel, "unpolluted" by culture, history, or society, which informs evaluation of what is good, true, and meaningful' (ibid., 204). When yoga instructors or church work-

ers incorporate a biblical verse, the primary authority therefore appears to reside not in the Bible but within the participants themselves.

Plank, Lundgren, and Egnell's mapping of new spiritual practices within the Church of Sweden indicates that yoga is often framed as a 'more' Christian and church-based activity in Norway and Denmark than in Sweden (Plank et al. 2023, 224). However, our analysis shows that holistic practices also occupy a significant place in the majority churches of Denmark and Norway. Additionally, we observe that the strong emphasis on allowing participants to interpret church yoga from their own perspectives is closely aligned with a fundamental belief within holistic environments. It therefore seems the doctrine of self-spirituality has become ingrained within parishes organizing church yoga in Norway and Denmark.

In summary, both pastors and yoga instructors aim for church yoga to be a space centred on wellbeing, without the pressure of achieving specific goals. Even within an institutionalized Christian context there seems to be no conflict in prioritizing the connection with one's breath and body over the connection with God. Increased involvement in the parish is not a primary goal. The limited efforts to recruit participants to regular parish activities indicate that long-term involvement is no longer a realistic aim (Fretheim 2014). As a threshold activity, church yoga is therefore valued for its intrinsic benefits rather than being seen as a stepping stone to more extensive engagement.

Tensions between agent and artefact

Linguistic substitution

According to Wertsch tensions and frictions between the agent and artefact make mediated actions a fruitful site where meaning is both maintained and continually redefined. This section examines how yoga expressions are used or avoided in church yoga, focusing especially on the linguistic framing of the yoga exercise. As the prelude describes, the yoga exercise consists of various yoga poses, with a guided meditation at the end. In each parish this part took about 30 minutes and was the most substantial element in terms of time spent. How is meaning negotiated between agent and artefact during the actual yoga exercises? What kind of frictions exist when yoga is used creatively in a church setting?

The initial example comes from a parish where a pastor and a yoga instructor sat together in front of the participants during the yoga church

service. Following a brief devotional segment led by the pastor, the yoga instructor took the lead. Although the exercises consisted of familiar yoga postures, the language the instructor used diverged from traditional yoga terminology. The following excerpt from the fieldwork captures how the 'Sun Salutation' sequence took place:

> The instructor explains what is happening in a calm voice, consistently incorporating religious interpretations in the explanations of the movements, such as 'stretching towards God', 'opening the heart to God', 'letting God's power move you', and 'reaching towards the heavens'. The language is thoroughly religious, employing an inclusive 'we' within this spiritual context (Church 1, NO).

After the yoga church service the pastor explained she had requested the yoga instructor to avoid words and phrases the pastor perceived as theologically inappropriate:

> Our yoga instructor only recently became a Christian and has previously been more familiar with Eastern yoga spirituality. So she initially used terms unassociated with Christianity. […] I've had several conversations with her, and she understands which terms are less appropriate, and which are more fitting for a church yoga setting. She's even 'Christianized' some of the expressions she originally used, so I'm very pleased with our collaboration (Church 1, NO).

One of the frequently cited articles in the previously mentioned work by Moberg and Ramstedt is Candy Gunther Brown's study of how evangelical Christians in the United States 'Christianize' yoga (Moberg and Ramstedt 2023, 123). Brown contends that one method Christian communities use to reclaim yoga from its Hindu origins is *linguistic substitution*, where English and Christian terminology replace Sanskrit (Brown 2018, 660). These Christian yoga programmes in the US aim to bring participants closer to Christ. Brown observes that practices like the Sun Salutation are 'Christianized' by substituting linguistic elements – for example, replacing 'Sun' with 'Son' – thus transforming it into a salutation for the Son, Jesus (Brown 2018, 670).

The above excerpt illustrates that linguistic substitution is a relevant concept when analysing church yoga practices in Norway and Denmark. However, the Christianization we observe differs from what Brown reports in evangelical churches in the US. In our research the yoga instructor per-

forms the 'Sun Salutation' focusing solely on God, without any explicit references to Jesus. This approach differs from what Brown refers to as *crucicentrism* (Brown 2018, 670). Although the church setting guides participants towards the Christian God, we find what we will term *God-centrism* present in our material. It may be that Scandinavian creation theology plays a role here. This tradition 'emphasizes the important idea that each human being is to be recognized and respected as created in the "image and likeness" of God (*imago dei*)'" (Wyller et al. 2025, 23). Following Fedele and Knibbe, this type of Christianization is closely aligned with a holistic approach (Fedele and Knibbe 2020, 332). They point out that the theistic view of God as a personal saviour with authority over individuals like that seen in evangelical Christ-centred yoga in the US has often marked the division between theistic and holistic spirituality (ibid., 332). Furthermore, a theistic spirituality that emphasizes mystical unity with God and employs more impersonal god-language, as the excerpt describes, can facilitate a renegotiation of boundaries between the theistic and holistic approaches (ibid., 332).

Yet both Christ-centred and God-centred substitutions represent creative methods of redefining the linguistic meaning attributed to yoga. Linguistic substitution thus serves as a Christianizing strategy, whereby church agents attempt to control the yoga artefact's meaning, minimizing the productive tension Wertsch asserts is an essential element of every mediated action. This is not a main tendency in our material, however. Only five out of 31 respondents reported that they never used yoga expressions, but only a Christianized vocabulary. The following section analyses instances where yoga expressions are kept and used more in line with their historically acquired meanings, representing a main tendency in our data.

Linguistic domestication

Following Brown, Moberg and Ramstedt argue that 'linguistic substitution' is a dominant approach within churches (Moberg and Ramstedt 2023, 125). Although this may hold true for evangelicals in the US, it does not accurately describe church yoga activities in Norway and Denmark. Some yoga sessions we observed occurred in a church setting with little or no explicit use of Christian terminology. Several yoga expressions were used, but primarily in Norwegian and Danish. Yet Sanskrit terms like '*namaste*' were seldom employed. Our survey asks whether respondents use expressions like 'Child's Pose', 'Downward Dog', 'Warrior Pose', and '*namaste*', or whether

they try to avoid traditional yoga expressions. Several respondents say it is quite important to them *not* to Christianize traditional yoga expressions:

- The instructor names the exercises using yoga expressions out of respect for yoga's distinctive features regarding the positions (DK).
- The yoga instructor decides what to call them; I participate as a pastor, welcoming everyone and hosting the session (DK).
- We use regular yoga terms because the exercises are yoga exercises. There's no need to call them anything other than what they are (DK).

Others mention that they prefer to use Danish or Norwegian names for the different positions, but that they avoid Sanskrit, and specifically '*namaste*'.

- I use Norwegian names for yoga poses like 'Downward Dog' and 'Child's Pose', but I don't use Sanskrit words like 'namaste' (NO).
- I use the classic Danish names for the poses because it connects with what many of them already know. 'Dragonfly', 'Child's Pose', 'Downward-Facing Dog', 'Cat/Cow', and so on. I don't use 'namaste'. I say, 'Peace be with you', and the participants respond with 'And peace be with you' (DK).

This preference for national languages suggests yoga expressions are part of everyday vocabulary in Denmark and Norway, which corresponds to how yoga has become part of everyday life and is regarded as part of mainstream culture (Vincett and Woodhead 2016, 327; Pagis 2019). Moreover, one of the respondents hints at another explanation in her response to the survey question about yoga expressions:

- I use the Danish words for the poses. I avoid Sanskrit to make it as accessible as possible. After all, I'm a Protestant. :)

It is well known that translating the Bible from Latin to national languages was a key concern for Martin Luther. His aim was to make the Bible accessible to people, rather than only to the clergy. This is probably what this respondent was hinting at in the above quotation.

At the same time several respondents mention that they never use '*namaste*', and in some cases '*namaste*' is replaced by the liturgical greeting 'peace be with you'. This active avoidance indicates that Sanskrit is perceived as inappropriate in a church context, probably because it relinks yoga to its

historical and assumed roots within 'Eastern' spiritualities in general and Hinduism in particular (Fibiger 2023, 72). Sanskrit seems to represent a linguistic boundary within church yoga. Neither those who actively Christianize yoga nor those who use yoga expressions in Danish or Norwegian employ words in Sanskrit.

However, it is equally important to note that yoga's roots are diverse. Jacobsen explains that modern yoga as we know it today from gym and wellness centres can be traced to Indian yoga teachers in the late 1800s. These teachers, trained in Western medicine, embarked on 'mission trips' to the US and Europe to promote the idea that yoga was not solely for Hindu monks but was accessible to everyone, including women (Jacobsen 2006, 7). The explicitly religious roots tied to traditional yoga and Hinduism therefore gradually became less prominent (ibid., 4). Arguing along the same lines as Jacobsen, Fibiger claims modern yoga is best perceived as a global fusion consisting of elements from traditional Indian yoga, bodybuilding, and – of particular relevance to our study – Swedish-Danish forms of gymnastics, which became part of the Indian education system during the interwar period (Fibiger 2023, 75).

This historical and contextual backdrop therefore explains why church workers and yoga instructors do not use Sanskrit widely. The historical link to which Norwegian and Danish parishes relate is not the Indian and Hindu traditions of yoga. The use of Danish and Norwegian is simply because yoga is embedded in their countries' everyday life and language. As the concept of 'linguistic substitution' fails to consider this historical development and is inadequate for analysing the linguistic renewal of yoga expressions, we propose *linguistic domestication* as an additional term. This term highlights that, as in other countries, yoga has become domesticated in the Nordic context.

To summarize, when we focus on the exercise part of church yoga, we observe significant tension between agent and artefact. There are deliberate efforts to Christianize yoga and linguistically replace traditional yoga terms with Christian terminology. However, unlike in the US, the language in Norway and Denmark tends to be God-centred rather than Christocentric. This God-centred approach aligns church yoga more with a holistic perspective. Eliminating traditional yoga expressions can be seen as an attempt to control the interpretation of yoga, limiting it to conveying exclusively Christian meanings. Nevertheless, only a few of our respondents choose to avoid yoga expressions entirely. The prevailing approach is to use traditional yoga terms – primarily in Norwegian and Danish – alongside Christian language.

This blend facilitates a dialogue between yoga's historical development and its creative adaptation to fit the church's intentions and accent.

Appropriation

Material domestication of the singing bowl

The previous sections have explored how church yoga is presented to its participants, and how church workers and yoga instructors practise and describe yoga. This final section of the analysis focuses on elements and practices that are typically *not* found in yoga sessions in gyms, yoga studios, public schools, healthcare facilities, and similar venues. What are the distinctive properties of church yoga? How do churches make yoga their own?

As the prelude describes, the object commonly known as the Tibetan singing bowl is integrated into several of the church yoga activities we have observed. According to our survey, 25.8 per cent of the respondents incorporate singing bowls in their yoga practice within a church setting. Although we have not observed this object in other church activities, Annunen and Utriainen note that it is widely used in various holistic practices (Annunen and Utriainen 2023a, 198).

These researchers argue that the bowls are often presented as having historical ties to Tibetan religious and spiritual ceremonies, though the validity of this claim is widely debated (Annunen and Utriainen 2023a, 197). Annunen and Utriainen describe how the bowl is frequently played on top of participants' bodies during sound healing sessions. The sound and vibrations are believed to promote health benefits, particularly in reducing stress and anxiety (ibid., 197). Interestingly, one of the goals is to help participants break free of a traditional Lutheran view of the body as dry, controlled, bounded, and strictly confined, and instead encourage an experience of the body as 'watery, porous, and limitless' (ibid., 204).

The singing bowl is not played on top of the participants' bodies in church yoga. Instead, it is used to signal the start of the session, and sometimes its conclusion. Typically, the pastor strikes the bowl three times and greets participants in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. As discussed in the previous section, adapting the singing bowl in this manner comes close to what we term linguistic domestication, but in this case it is more accurate to call it *material domestication*. The singing bowl is endowed with a role akin to that of church bells, serving as a call to gather and marking the beginning of a sacred activity.

In the sound healing context restricting the bowl's sound to single strokes creates a more controlled, bounded, and confined use, which could be interpreted as an attempt to Christianize or even 'Lutheranize' the bowl. However, Annunen and Utriainen underline that the singing bowl is a versatile object that has been appropriated in many different settings such as yoga, meditation, traditional massage therapy, and parish retreats and activities (Annunen and Utriainen 2023a, 198). As the adaptation of the singing bowl causes no harm to a specific religious or spiritual tradition, Bucar would not necessarily classify it as an instance of cultural appropriation (Bucar 2022). Given Moberg's and Ramstedt's focus on the intention of an agent to change and modify a practice, however, it is more likely that they would classify the transformation of the singing bowl into a church bell as appropriation proper (Moberg and Ramstedt 2023, 121).

Following both Wertsch and Bakhtin, appropriation is a fundamental property of mediated action. When churches use the bowl for their specific purposes, they are populating an artefact that belongs to someone else with their own semantic intentions and accent. However, the artefact does not belong to a single different religious or spiritual tradition but to many different actors. We argue that there is a difference between using yoga as it has been presented in holistic health contexts and using a Sámi drum in a non-Sámi church setting, for example. Given how the Nordic churches and state authorities have suppressed the drum, such an act of appropriation would be more controversial and probably a case of unacceptable appropriation. The singing bowl therefore exemplifies an appropriation in which ownership is shared. The parishes are taking something that belongs to a broad spectrum of others and adapting it to their own context (Wertsch 1998, 56; Bakhtin 1981, 293).

Unique properties of church yoga

Despite the singing bowl's restricted use, its soft sound remains distinct from the sharp tones of traditional church bells. Singing bowls' sound is also blended with other sounds as part of church yoga. Every time we entered a church as participant observers, we were welcomed by music. While music is commonly featured in other yoga activities, Gregorian chants and hymns are probably unique elements within this church-specific yoga soundscape. Our survey indicates that 67.7 per cent of the respondents use instrumental music, and 29 per cent incorporate hymns in their yoga practice.

Most parishes used electronic devices for music, but two churches we visited featured live performances on the organ and on a harp. While the organ is a staple of church music, using a harp is more exceptional. The following excerpt describes how the harpist created a unique atmosphere in the church building:

> As people are lying on the floor in a final stretch, the pastor quietly stands up, puts on her priest's robe and collar, and steps in front of the altar. Before she starts speaking, there's a moment when the harpist is singing and playing. Everyone lies on their mats with their eyes closed while the sound of the harp and the harpist's very beautiful voice fills the room. It doesn't last long – only about five minutes – but it creates a very powerful atmosphere. When the harpist finishes, the priest begins to speak (Church 1, DK).

This sensory interaction between music, room, and participants highlights an aspect that we have seldom seen reflected in previous research on yoga. Berndsen, who has researched pupils visiting churches, cites Böhme, who explains how architecture, materiality, shapes, light, and sound can create sensations and a distinct atmosphere (Berndsen 2024, 2). In a related study Marschner, like Böhme, argues that church buildings can foster powerful atmospheres independent of any religious activities occurring within them (Marschner 2022, 245). Although church yoga is a religious activity, lying on a yoga mat with one's eyes closed while listening to music is not a typical behaviour for most churchgoers, especially in a Lutheran church. The atmosphere of church yoga differs markedly from yoga in gyms, yoga studios, and other settings.

Another unique property of church yoga is, as the prelude mentions, the incorporation of Bible readings, which is not typically associated with other types of yoga. Indeed, 74.2 per cent of the survey respondents reported that Bible readings were part of their yoga practice. When we examined how the Bible was used in the fieldwork material, verses from the Old and New Testaments, with a focus on comfort, rest, and finding peace, were often involved:

> And finally, she [the pastor] said she wanted to share one of her two favourite Bible verses with us, which Jesus spoke just before he died: 'Peace I leave with you. My peace I give to you. Do not let your hearts be troubled or afraid.' She repeated it twice (Church 4, NO).

Fibiger argues that Christian-based yoga is directed at optimizing relationships with Jesus (Fibiger 2023, 72). However, although the biblical verses make some references to Jesus, they are above all seen as words of wisdom, in contrast with Brown's US study, where Jesus is promoted as a personal saviour (Brown 2018, 670). Regardless of the biblical passage, rest and finding peace are emphasized. This is aligned with previous research, which shows a focus on managing daily life (Angel and Johnsen 2019, 66) and depictions of God as a comforter and caregiver (Mjaaland 2020, 31), both common themes in regular church services.

As the prelude outlines, the third distinctive property of church yoga is prayer. A significant 64.5 per cent of the respondents include the Trinitarian blessing, while 38.7 per cent report that the Lord's Prayer is part of their yoga practice. These prayers are part of every church service and are perceived as theologically foundational within the studied churches, as in other churches. This means that when an activity begins and ends with these prayers, it is theologically classified as a Christian practice.

In summary, the singing bowl's adaptation and the incorporation of unique mediating features of the churches' established religious traditions demonstrate that yoga's integration extends beyond it merely being hosted as an activity within a church setting. Yoga has been woven into the fabric of the church and has become an integral part of its core expressions and practices. The singing bowl's use as a church bell alongside music, biblical readings, and prayer creates a distinct type of yoga within the church context. Church yoga's unique properties clearly demonstrate that the majority churches in Denmark and Norway have appropriated yoga. In the words of Bakhtin and Wertsch (Wertsch 1998, 56; Bakhtin 1981, 293) yoga has been adapted to fit the churches' own semantic and expressive intentions, thereby making it their own.

Conclusion

The first part of our research questions asks: how have the Danish and Norwegian majority churches made yoga their own? Enstedt's and Plank's observation that yoga and other 'Eastern' practices have entered public and private spaces with little controversy may stem from these practices not being classified as religion (Fedele and Knibbe 2020, 3). However, a less explored explanation is that these contexts have made yoga fit their own organizational intentions and expressive accents, thus avoiding debate. Overall, the analysis suggests that while an agent's goals may be multiple

and sometimes conflicting, an actor's primary objectives play a crucial role in how a new cultural tool is incorporated in existing patterns of practice. Therefore, in contrast with Moberg's and Ramstedt's view that churches' religious nature makes the appropriation of yoga more ethically problematic (Moberg and Ramstedt 2023, 134), we contend that the ways in which the Danish and Norwegian majority churches have adapted yoga are comparable with how other agents have adapted yoga to their needs.

The second half of our research question is: how is yoga preserved as something that also belongs to someone else? Moberg and Ramstedt argue that churches tend to remove almost every association with Eastern and Buddhist cultures and traditions (Moberg and Ramstedt 2023, 134); Fibiger notes that churches delink yoga from its Indian roots and the Hindu tradition (Fibiger 2023, 84–85). We find that while churches do Christianize yoga, they also maintain it as a practice that belongs to others. Our research reveals more instances of what we term *linguistic domestication* and *material domestication* than linguistic substitution, in which Christian concepts completely replace historically attributed yoga expressions. Furthermore, yoga's complex origins – especially those of modern yoga (Fibiger 2023, 75; Jacobsen 2006) – make assertions about yoga as the sole property of specific religious or spiritual traditions problematic. An intriguing feature of yoga is its ability to belong to a diverse range of actors while maintaining its fundamental properties. The majority churches we studied treated yoga respectfully as something they shared with many others.

In conclusion, Enstedt and Plank pose the question of whether non-Christian practices' incorporation necessitates a theological reframing to render them legitimate (Enstedt and Plank 2023, 12). Our study suggests that the need for a theological reframing is not pressing. The churches' focus is not primarily on optimizing the participants' relationship with Jesus (Fibiger 2023, 72) but on creating a space for stress reduction and wellbeing. The religious teaching and practice were not crucicentrist as in the US (Brown 2018, 670) but entailed an open and nonspecific God-centrism that was well aligned with the holistic doctrine of self-spirituality (Aupers and Houtman 2006). Our study therefore supports Enstedt's and Plank's assertion that 'the spiritual revolution' is occurring not only outside but within the majority churches in the Nordic countries (Enstedt and Plank 2023). However, in contrast with Enstedt's and Plank's suggestion, yoga is no longer understood as a non-Christian practice. The majority churches in Norway and Denmark have appropriated yoga, integrating it into their own theological practice and tradition.

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