

Muslim Encounters with Yogis in South Asia and Beyond

The Sixth
Perso-Indica
Workshop

27 November
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EHESS – Marseille

CERCLES
Centre de recherche
sur les circulations,
les liens et les échanges

Cesah
Centre d'études sud-asiatiques
et himalayennes





Venue:

École des Hautes Études en Sciences Sociales/
School for Advanced Studies in the Social Sciences,
Centre de la Vieille Charité, 2 rue de la Charité,
Marseille, rooms B and C

Organisers:

Raffaello DE LEÓN-JONES DIANI (EHESS-CESAH)
and Fabrizio SPEZIALE (EHESS-CESAH)

With the support of:

Centre de recherche sur les circulations, les liens et
les échanges (CeRCLEs) - Centre d'études sud-
asiatiques et himalayennes (CESAH)



SCHEDULE

SESSION 1

SOUTH ASIAN ENCOUNTERS (Room B)

10.00

Introduction by the organisers

Chair: Carmen Spiers
(Aix-Marseille Université)

10.10–11.00

Jason **BIRCH**
(SOAS, London-EHESS)

“Yogi-Sufi Interactions: The Textual
Evidence for Cross-pollination”

11.00–11.20

Coffee-break

11.20–12.10

Raffaello **DE LEÓN-JONES DIANI**
(EHESS-CESAH)

“Muḥammad ibn Tuḡluq and the yogis:
courtly engagements and cultural
exchanges in 14th century South Asia”

SESSION 2

BEYOND SOUTH ASIA I (Room B)

12.10–13.00

Alberto Fabio **AMBROSIO**
(Luxembourg School of Religion &
Society, Luxembourg)

“Yogic Practices and Spiritualism in
Ottoman Sufism”

13.00–14.30

Lunch break

SESSION 3

BEYOND SOUTH ASIA II

(Room C)

Chair: Damien Carriere
(Aix-Marseille Université)

14.30–15.20

Raphaël **VOIX**
(CNRS-CESAH)

“A Hindu Yogi in Mecca: Tales from
Modern India”

15.20–16.10

Fabrizio **SPEZIALE**
(EHESS-CESAH)

“From criminals to landowners: the
Rāwal yogis in the age of transoceanic
travels (1860s–1890s)”

16.10–16.30

Coffee-break

16.30–17.30

Workshop, Jason **BIRCH**, “Reading a
Yogāsana in Sanskrit.”

Monika **BOEHM-TETTELBACH**
(Heidelberg University) will read the
same passage from a Hindi version,
and Carl W. **ERNST** will read from a
Persian translation.

17.30–18.15

General discussion

ABSTRACTS

“Yogi-Sufi Interactions: The Textual Evidence for Cross-pollination”

Jason **BIRCH**

(SOAS, London-EHESS)

References to yogis and yoga in Persian and Arabic works, stories of encounters between yogis and sufis, and depictions of them in illustrated manuscripts and paintings have helped demarcate the scope of yogi-sufi interaction. Yet, the opportunity to examine written materials that have crossed linguistic boundaries and moved from the texts of one tradition to another has largely alluded modern scholarship. For example, a work on yoga that was translated into Arabic, Persian and Urdu is said to be a translation of the *Amṛtakunda*, a Sanskrit work that has not yet been identified.

This talk will survey textual materials on yoga in Sanskrit, Hindi and Persian that clearly derive from a common source and moved across sectarian divides with clear continuities and discontinuities, revealing both continuities and discontinuities in the ways different traditions interpreted and reinterpreted yogic practices.

10.10–11.00 / ROOM B

“Muḥammad ibn Tuḡluq and the Yogis: Courtly Engagements and Cultural Exchanges in 14th Century South Asia”

Raffaello **DE LEÓN-JONES DIANI** (EHES, CESAHCERCLES)

Throughout what Richard M. Eaton has called “Persianate India” (1000-1750), the historical record attests that not only did different religious communities interact, but that Muslims sought out the company of yogis. This not only true for those individuals that sought to study under the yogis: sovereigns regularly are mentioned interacting with yogis. One such sovereign was Muḥammad b. Tuḡluq (r. 1326-1351), the ruler of the Delhi Sultanate, who was known for his eclectic interests in sciences and philosophical as well as religious discussions. Several sources, emanating both from within and without courtly circles corroborate the Sultan’s interests, and some sources even mention direct interactions with yogis.

The aim of this presentation is to situate, understand and corroborate textual sources that mention Muḥammad b. Tuḡluq’s interactions with yogis, as well as other religious ascetics, such as Jains. It further will aim to show that these interactions at the court were not isolated encounters but formed part of a wider policy of integration of other religious communities, for political, economic, and intellectual purposes. This will be done by relying on textual sources written in Arabic, Persian and Prakrit, as well as epigraphic and diplomatic sources in Sanskrit and Persian.

11.20–12.10 / ROOM B

“Yogic Practices and Spiritualism in Ottoman Sufism”

Alberto Fabio **AMBROSIO** (Luxembourg School of Religion & Society)

This contribution examines two Ottoman Turkish translations, carried out in the eighteenth and twentieth centuries respectively and both entitled *Havz'ül-hayat* (The Ocean of the Water Life) of the hatha yoga text *Amrtakunda*. In particular, it looks closely at their respective introductions firstly to account for the political and cultural contexts in which *Havz'ül-hayat* was presented to Sufi practitioners and non-Sufi readers and secondly to investigate the impact of yogic practices on Sufi mysticism.

Despite acute variances in the framing of *Havz'ül-hayat* in these two introductions from different epochs, both look at this key treatise on hatha yoga as a bridge towards other mystical traditions.

12.10–13.00 / ROOM B

“A Hindu Yogi in Mecca: Tales from Modern India”

Raphaël **VOIX**

(CNRS-CESAH)

This paper explores the case of Baba Lokenath, a Bengali Hindu ascetic who died in 1890 in East Bengal (present-day Bangladesh) and whose cult has expanded dramatically since the mid-twentieth century. Once a local saint, Lokenath has become a major figure in the modern Hindu–Bengali religious landscape, inspiring the construction of temples and roadside shrines across West Bengal. Yet, in a striking paradox, many of his devotees link him to the Muslim tradition through accounts of two alleged pilgrimages to Mecca.

While itinerant ascetics wanderings across Asia are well-attested in both pre-modern and colonial sources, the notion of a Hindu yogi journeying to Islam’s holiest site remains exceptional. This paper examines how and why such a belief emerged, through a comparative reading of Lokenath’s hagiographies and related narratives of “yogis in Mecca,” in order to highlight the singularity of this transreligious imagination in modern Bengali devotion.

14.30–15.20 / ROOM C

“From Criminals to Landowners: the Rāwal Yogis in the Age of Transoceanic Travels (1860–1890)”

Fabrizio **SPEZIALE**

(EHESS, CESAHCERCLES)

The overseas travels of the Rāwal offer unprecedented insights into the circulation of yogis and their practices across Muslim and Western societies—albeit in distinct and uneven ways. The Rāwal, a group of itinerant oculists, astrologers, and occultists, constituted the principal order of Muslim yogis in nineteenth-century India. While the early global diffusion of yoga is typically associated with Hindu masters—most notably Swami Vivekananda (d. 1902), who participated in the 1893 Parliament of Religions in Chicago—this research questions the current narrative relying on the role of eminent Hindu figures.

It shows that, from the 1860s onward, lower-ranking Muslim yogis from Punjab were already travelling to Europe to perform ophthalmic treatments for Western audiences. Some of these practitioners settled in Marseilles, which by the late nineteenth century had become a key point of entry for Indians en route to continental Europe.

15.20–16.10 / ROOM C

Workshop : “Reading a Yogāṣana in Sanskrit, Hindi and Persian”

Jason **BIRCH**

(SOAS, London-EHESS)

This workshop will focus on the textual description of a yoga posture preserved in Sanskrit, Hindi and Persian works. A brief overview of the material will establish that this posture is unique to a particular collection of āsanās that were likely practised by both yogis and sufis.

By reading each description in turn, it will become clear that the complex practice was articulated in similar ways, yet striking differences emerge in the claims made regarding its efficacy.

16.30–17.30 / ROOM C

