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## LIFE OF YOGA AND NEO-HINDUISM: IDENTITIES AND BELONGINGS

### INTRODUCTION

The manifestations of neo-Hinduism at a global level are prominent among sectors of the urban middle classes, either due to the growing therapeutic interest in meditative practices or the renewed appeal of spiritualities of Eastern origin over the last few decades. Hindu knowledge and beliefs circulate among seekers with few ties to Hindu traditions and theology in spaces such as yoga and meditation studios and retreats, workshops and lectures with Indian gurus, fairs and esoteric festivals. On the other hand, groups of devotees or disciples linked to some Hindu lineage are made up of members with high levels of dedication, commitment and discipline aligned with Hindu practices, routines, rituals, and beliefs. Some notable examples are international centres such as Siddha Yoga, Brahma Kumaris, Ananda Marga, Hare Krishna (ISKCON), Sathya Sai, Sivananda, among others.

With the case study of a group of Vedanta students and yoga and meditation practitioners<sup>1</sup> from Copacabana, a neighbourhood in Rio de Janeiro's south zone, this article presents the potential of neo-Hindu spirituality as a mechanism for perpetuating the power of tradition by the diffusion of behaviours and norms. We will show how neo-Hindu discourse influences interlocutors through an internationally dominant, attractive rhetoric adapted to the realities of the local audience. It is significant to understand how social actors, by expressing the tradition, influence their peers to recognise the importance of certain values and rules of conduct.

Our research highlights the meanings the religion category acquires among interlocutors. We will analyse the resistance revealed by the group in

identifying itself as religious and, simultaneously, the recurrence of self-declaration as Hindus and their high levels of involvement with devotional practices. The evidence allows us to discuss and understand how the position of social actors is characterised by overcoming ethnically oriented discourses about Hinduism, traditionally recognised as a birth religion linked to the Indian caste system, with no possibility of conversion. We will show how certain neo-Hindu traditions and philosophies adapt to local realities, emphasising that the meanings of being Hindu are associated not exclusively with beliefs, but above all with lifestyle and adherence to rules, norms, values, routines, and bodily and mental disciplines related to *dharma*<sup>2</sup> and a life of *karmāyoga*<sup>3</sup>.

Our analyses indicate that the experiences and identities of the interlocutors are influenced by Vedic knowledge, contact with Indian gurus, and pilgrimage travels to India. Furthermore, the analysis of their conceptions regarding religion, spirituality, and their experiences and lifestyles reveal recurring attitudes towards religion in contemporary times. The tensions inherent to the following points will be fully expressed: the refusal to identify with the hierarchical, normative, and dogmatic notion of religion; the search for religious autonomy; and the prominence of subjective experiences. Despite the group's affinity with this type of discourse, the data collected in the field shows that certain religious and ethical precepts and rules are on display and manifest themselves on different occasions.

The topic is relevant to contemporary discussions in social sciences since it bears significant analogies with the increase in the number of people self-identified as “spiritual but not religious,” itself a segment of the census-measured “non-religious” category. Our interlocutors are part of a small Vedantic community that frequently claims not to identify with the religion category. However, the majority of people observed and interviewed identify themselves as Hindus since, in addition to having ties to a traditional Hindu lineage through the study of Vedanta, they adopt a lifestyle guided by Vedic values.

The analysis we carry out in this text, therefore, considers that the category of religion does not have a transhistorical and transcultural essence that allows it to be applied to any society or group. Talal Asad (1993) inaugurated this discussion by evaluating that the notion of religion as a set of practices and doctrines organised in a well-defined cosmology acquired its authority within the historical context of the formation of the modern world in the West, being the product of historically distinctive forces. This means that the category is not universal, because it was defined in the terms in which Western religious institutions organise themselves through the use of dogmas, authorities, faithful members and because it holds an inadequate vision for analysing other cultural factors — such as neo-Hinduism, for example. In this sense, our effort is not to seek some timeless or universal element of

the religious, but to identify how individuals in a given context evaluate, re-evaluate, define, experience, and express their connection with the sacred.

### **CONTEXTUALISING NEO-HINDUISM**

The renewal or reform of Hinduism, known as neo-Hinduism, developed from the end of the 19th century, associating the reinterpretation of religious traditions, the affirmation of Indian national identity, and the assimilation of Western values and ideas (Smith, 2016). Many of its aspects can be understood as a new form of religion that would not exist if not for the prolonged contact between the cultures of India and those of the “West” (King, 1989). The global transit of Hinduism revealed itself as a two-way movement between India in the process of westernisation and the “West” in the process of easternisation<sup>4</sup>: a cultural encounter in which neo-Hinduism emerged as an Indian response to imperialism and Western New Age religiosities (Silveira, 2005).

It is worth mentioning that this transnational intercultural exchange, noticeable in the spread of Hinduism (Newcombe, 2009), was only possible since ethnic boundaries were overcome by eliminating the centrality of the discourse on the caste system — in which the individual must be identified by birth to be considered a Hindu — and the willingness of religious leaders to take Hindu practices beyond national borders (Penumala, 2010).

The neo-Hindu movements established outside India stem from this Hindu renaissance, which began at the end of the 19th century. Authors such as Altglas (2004, 2005), Hatcher (2004), Squarcini (2002), and Viotti (2015) use the concept of neo-Hinduism both to designate the historical diffusion of religion and the contemporary configuration of reinterpretations or adaptations of Hindu traditions in the global scale. In general terms, this new Hinduism constituted over the last century would be the neo-Vedanta influenced by the “West” (Hatcher, 2004).

Global neo-Hinduism is defined by its leaders and followers not only as the true and eternal religion — *sanātana dharma* — but also as a new universal religion. According to Ursula King (1980), neo-Vedantin thought considers Vedanta to be a “meta-religion” capable of including any religious denomination. Among contemporary neo-Hindu groups, this universalist rhetoric often takes precedence over the affirmation of Hindu identity and the antagonistic representation of the world — Western materialism versus Indian spiritualism — developed by precursor leaders (Altglas, 2004). Véronique Altglas (2004, 2005) reveals that gurus of movements that claim the title of “global” or are free from geographical and cultural borders adopt dissemination strategies that distance themselves from representations of India imbued with orientalism. The groups they lead tend to relativise the importance of Hindu doctrines, rituals, and symbolic sources, on which their religious messages are based. Generally, they

present their knowledge as universal and esoteric, lived and experiential, practical, scientific, or therapeutic with the aim of attracting more disciples.

Torkel Brekke (1999) identifies in this historical process the link between the development of universalist Hinduism — qualified as peaceful, tolerant, and flexible — with the individualisation of religion. The *dharma* of classical Hinduism, which was guided by the duties of the caste system, became in the last century a universal principle: it stopped being related to social duties and began referring to individual psychophysical potentials and the personal duties related to them.

The consideration of the historical evolution of Hinduism also explains the possibility of non-Indians seeing themselves as Hindus. Traditional Hinduism was an exclusive religion for those born into Hindu families, there was no other way to enter this community (Weber, 1958). Neo-Hinduism, on the other hand, is not ethnically oriented and managed to reformulate the conceptions that maintained the social structure of castes as the central point of religious life. In this context, “Western” members of neo-Hindu groups saw the possibility of considering themselves Hindus by following the devotional disciplines of the Vedic tradition and by leading a lifestyle guided by these values.

### ***Neo-Hinduism and the scope of spiritualities***

The integration of neo-Hindu practices into the Brazilian context is related to the New Age Movement, which began to take shape with the emergence of the counterculture in the 1960s. That gave rise to a plural phenomenon of leisure, culture, consumption, health, and mystical-esoteric practices, supported by discourses of individual freedom, autonomy, and personal growth. The practices of yoga and meditation, discourses on energy centres or chakras, vegetarianism, Ayurveda, among other Hindu knowledge and customs were elements that spread and have since become more and more popular.

In general terms, within the scope of the New Age paradigm, having a personal experience — with the divine, with the unknown, or with the higher self — is more important than having institutional religious ties or maintaining a family religious tradition. Those who adhere to these practices experience their spirituality as an option, choice, or preference, autonomously and voluntarily; when circulating in groups, they eventually build, on their own, their religiosity in a kind of bricolage (Sanchis, 2006). The affinity of neo-Hindu groups with this type of discourse and experience is notable given that they tend to deny identifying their repertoires as religious, preferring to characterise them as philosophy or lifestyle. Practitioners therefore consider the traditional religious repertoire as authoritarian and inflexible, seeing new forms of spirituality as less restrictive and more adjustable to individual needs and aspirations (Dawson, 2007).

The empirical data we collected highlights the discourses, conceptions, practices, beliefs, and lifestyles of people involved with neo-Hinduism. Two

elements stand out: the refusal to consider the study of Vedanta as religion; and the tendency of practitioners to consider themselves Hindus and live according to traditional precepts. We will see how they resolve this apparent contradiction or incoherence in different and creative ways. Our analysis goes beyond the essentialist opposition between the religious and the secular and the polarisation between religion and spirituality. According to Bender and McRoberts (2012), the notion that spirituality is the domain of interiority, individuality, and autonomy is questionable since, despite highlighting aspects of the phenomenon, it tends to consolidate analytical dichotomies — such as internal and external, private and public, affiliated and non-affiliated. The authors' research points to a spirituality that is not diffused in all social spaces, nor do they analyse it as something natural, evident, or universal. In fact, its manifestations and connotations have contextual specificities, historical traits, and particular characteristics of the social groups that embody it.

Véronique Altglas (2018) shows that the discourses about personal growth and development seen among seekers of neo-Hindu spiritualities and their teachers refer to prescriptions and rules that encourage certain types of conduct and discourage others. The author argues that a self-discipline that requires awareness and control over emotions, thoughts, and behaviours is in place. Although individuals defend freedom of choice, the “correct” attitude for each situation is well defined and mobilises notions of responsibility, self-knowledge, and self-control. For the following discussions, it is essential to keep in mind the normative aspect of these disciplines.

### **RELIGION, SPIRITUALITY, OR A WAY TO SELF-KNOWLEDGE?**

Vedanta is a teaching tradition that transmits knowledge of the self in a traditional Vedic way, that is, from the master directly to the disciple — *guru-paramparā*. The group researched studies Vedanta at Vidya Mandir within the Advaita lineage<sup>5</sup>. Our interlocutors understand that Vedanta is not a religion, but a way to self-knowledge through study and self-observation<sup>6</sup>. The term designates the mode of transmission or method of knowledge as well as the content of that knowledge. Its subject of study is the limitation-free nature of the self and, therefore, refers to self-knowledge. According to this worldview, ignorance about the nature of being is the cause of human suffering. Therefore, Vedic practices aim to recognise the identity between the person and the divine — between *ātma* and *brāhmaṇ* —, which would be the path to happiness and would ultimately lead to *mokṣa*, liberation from the suffering linked to *samsāra*<sup>7</sup>.

In the words of Gloria Arieira, founder and teacher at Vidya Mandir:

Generally, knowledge is acquired through the senses with the help of the intellect and logic. But, in the case of Vedanta, the senses and logic are not useful

because there is no object to be perceived; there is only the subject, its nature free from limitation. Vedanta is just that. *Karmāyoga*, *īśvara*, attitudes and values are addendums, they help to understand this self that is free from limitation. It is no surprise that Vedanta is not a religion, it is just knowledge. Moreover, it also does not belong to a culture because it talks about a subject who is free from culture, free from time. People generally associate it with a religion because Vedanta is embedded in a religious context. However, there are two distinct things: Hinduism, understood as a lifestyle and a formalised religion with specific practices; and self-knowledge. One does not need to be a Hindu or become a Hindu to study Vedanta. Nevertheless, in the process, people end up identifying with many Hindu things. If we were to ask a more rigorous Hindu, perhaps he would say that Hindus are those who are born Hindus. But certain people can relate. Likewise, one can be a Hindu and never seek Vedanta. One thing is not necessarily linked to the other. Here [at Vidya Mandir], people bond because they end up embracing life practices, clothing, language and, in the search to identify with something, they end up identifying themselves as Hindus (Gloria's statement, October 4, 2016).

In fact, the Hindu lifestyle is not just restricted to devotional activities, but requires one to fulfil one's *dharma*, live a life of *karmāyoga*, and appreciate the natural order that governs the universe. For the Vedantin, this way of leading life guided by Vedic values is not understood as central, but complementary. The fundamental point of diverse interpretations of Vedanta is the conception that it is a path to self-knowledge which is distinct from the religious practices of Hinduism and from the notion of religion in general.

The testimony of Arthur, a 37-year-old yoga teacher, illustrates the idea that people linked to any religious tradition can study Vedanta:

Vedanta for me has nothing religious, zero religion, totally black and white. It was something that touched me because I have this aversion to this thing about religion, this thing about faith, about believing blindly [...] In Vedanta you believe in what is factual, what is real, what you are. The aim of this study is to show that you exist, that you are complete, free from limitations, that you are the happiness you seek. This is extremely palpable, you have these experiences every day of your life — experiences that give you a glimpse that it is here, and you need to recognise it. Vedanta for me has nothing religious, it is a logical process of thought that shows you what you are — regardless of being Catholic, Jewish, atheist; it is for everyone (Statement from Arthur, April 7, 2016).

Arthur tells us that his parents were never religious or provided him with any religious education during his childhood or adolescence. He got in touch with Vedanta and met Professor Gloria Arieira in 2003, when she spoke at a yoga studio. His statement reveals that he did not approach these practices because he was looking for something religious or spiritual, on the contrary, from the start he had an aversion to the more devotional aspects. Years later, after completing his studies at an ashram in India and undergoing the initiation process as a Hindu — *upanāyana*<sup>8</sup> —, he began to maintain daily practices of rituals and mantras, living as a *yogī*.

### **The devotees**

For the students and teachers at Vidya Mandir, Vedanta is close to an intellectual pursuit and is interpreted as something separate from the religious aspects of Hinduism. However, the lifestyle guided by Vedic values, understood as a way of relating to the world, people, and the Absolute, is identified as religious. The point of connection between these two aspects is the idea that said lifestyle would contribute to the student having a mind that is more prepared to absorb the teachings of Vedanta.

Within the Vedic tradition, there is no clear separation between Hinduism, the religious aspect, and Vedanta, the ways to knowledge of the fundamental self. Everything has a single orientation: the deliberate search for self-knowledge. But if we were to divide it, it would be this relationship between the individual and the “whole” as a religious aspect, and the study would give us guidance in understanding what the whole is, what the individual is and what the relationship between them is (Statement from Beatriz, April 26, 2016).

This explanation shared by Beatriz (36 years old, physiotherapist and yoga teacher) distinguishes Vedanta and religion while revealing a certain complementarity. Her conceptions of religious characteristics are based on the Vedanta teachings she acquired from Swami Dayananda (Professor Arieira’s master) in India, where she still studies. Before moving to India, Beatriz had already finished college and had a job in the public sector, but little by little she began to dedicate more time searching for the “truth.” With this purpose, she began to make changes in her life: she got divorced, quit her job, sold all her possessions, and went to India to study Vedanta. At the time of the interview, she was in Brazil to renew her visa to stay in that country, where she had been living for two years. She reported that her life “gained a new format in practice, but also a single point of view, and then Vedanta began to integrate all areas” (statement from Beatriz, April 26, 2016).

She considers that Vedanta is not a religion, but still declares herself a Hindu due to the lifestyle that allows her more free time to dedicate herself to teachings and small daily rituals of relationship with the whole. Her testimony coincides with that of other interviewees who declared themselves Hindus. We highlight Fernanda’s explanation about how lifestyle is fundamental in the understanding of Vedanta:

Vedanta is the understanding of the individual’s identity with the whole. Since this understanding does not occur immediately, a process of qualification of the mind is necessary. It is from this process of qualifying the mind that values are a part of. So, the values are related to what we call a life of yoga. Both Vedanta and yoga, in this sense, are not something separate from life, they are in everything all the time. (Statement by Fernanda, March 15, 2016)

The life of yoga mentioned by Fernanda (45 years old, physiotherapist) is guided by Vedic values and is sustained by actions carried out in a detached manner from the possible fruits arising from them — since these are understood as manifestations of a cosmic order that governs everything. Within this worldview, a life of yoga and the devotional practices associated with it are understood as disciplines for preparing the mind, appreciating the whole, and recognising a more fundamental reality than that captured by the senses (Bastos, 2019a).

Most interlocutors seek to lead a *karmāyoga* lifestyle, fulfil the *dharma*, carry out devotional disciplines, maintain an altar at home, chant mantras, have a *japamālā*<sup>9</sup>, and participate in rituals, for example. Still, many tend to refuse the religious label or accept it only with reservations:

Vedanta goes far beyond religion, it goes far beyond philosophy. Absolutely beyond religion in the sense of... I am talking about the concept of religion as being a social, cultural, and a historical construction, therefore it is not an absolute truth. Vedanta goes far beyond everything because it deals precisely with the Absolute, doesn't it? With the reality of who I am and not with the relative self. [...] But, on the other hand, in my understanding, and not only in my understanding, but in my practice, *bhakti*, devotion, this *religare* (in the quintessential sense of the word religion), Vedanta is what gave me the complete reconnection. So, I am part of the whole and I am the whole. It is impossible for me to dissociate Vedanta from a devotional or religious aspect because I surrender, I bow to *īśvara*, which is *ātma*, which is me, which is *brāhmaṇ* (Gisele's statement, May 9, 2016).

Gisele, an anthropologist and lawyer who has refrained from revealing her age, points out that Vedanta deals with an absolute reality, free of time, space, and culture. As an anthropologist, she associated a theological discourse with a rhetoric of relativisation of the notions of religion, culture, identity, and belonging to try to explain Vedanta. For her, scientific concepts are partial and historically limited to designate what Vedanta teaches. Regardless, after the problematisations she made in her statement, she ended up revealing she has a religious stance.

To a certain extent, the problem for members is not the use of the term religion itself, but the idea that being a member of a religious group requires an exclusive and lasting bond:

I have no problem, no question with this word religion because for me religion is connecting me, from *religare*. Now if you see it as an institution that you must be converted to, that has dogmas... then the group really is not. The person who attends here can follow any other religion (Vanessa's statement, July 18, 2016).

Vanessa is a Vedantin who is a filmmaker and made a documentary on this topic: she asked the members of the group who made a pilgrimage to India in 2010 and 2013 whether or not they considered themselves Hindus

and what their justifications were for being so. People's answers to this question are similar to those we obtained during fieldwork: all interviewees argue that Vedanta is a study independent of devotional exercises, but most associate the aspects of study and devotion in their lives.

In the documentary, a man who has attended Professor Arieira's classes since the 1970s claims not to be a Hindu on the grounds that only those born that way can be considered as such. Other people who declare themselves Hindus said they perform daily religious practices and live a life of *karmāyoga*, guided by Vedic values. Some Vedantins have declared a tradition-driven religious lifestyle for a long time but are not comfortable saying they are Hindus — mainly because they are not born into Hindu parents. This is the case of Rafael (systems analyst, 50 years old), who has been a Vedanta student for 17 years, attends at least two classes a week, participates in most Vidya Mandir events, does not follow any religion, but does not consider himself a Hindu, since he did not do the initiation ritual that some people did, and since he was not born into a Hindu family.

There are still those who claim to be “non-religious” since they do not identify with the ritual and devotional aspects of Hinduism or have no contact with Vedic symbolism. Two interviewees who shared this justification mentioned phrases that Professor Arieira usually says in class: “God is a question of knowledge” and “the greatest form of devotion is knowledge:”

I embrace knowledge with all my might, but I have difficulty with rituals. Rituals are part of Hinduism, which is a religion, but Vedanta itself is not a religion. You can be anything and study Vedanta, it has nothing to do with religion. The Vedas are the basis of Hinduism, but Vedanta is self-knowledge (Statement from Marta, July 26, 2016).

Marta (65 years old, retired systems analyst) has been attending Vidya Mandir for 17 years and was once a Sanskrit teacher. Her statement exemplifies the idea dear to the group that religious adherence or some type of conversion are not necessary to study Vedanta. According to her, Vidya Mandir's members know that she does not identify with India, nor with the rituals of Hinduism. The same happens with Marcela, a Sanskrit teacher, who declared that she accepts the existence of an order in the universe and who, as a scientist, is also led to recognise it. In her words, “*Īśvara* was what I studied in physics at college;” however, she reveals that she has difficulty with the ritualistic part of Hinduism. This circumstance does not prevent them from respecting the group's practices or the tradition to which Vedanta is linked. For example, they chant the mantras that precede classes and eventually stay for the meditation that takes place afterwards. Furthermore, they are vegetarians<sup>10</sup>, have already practised “postural” yoga, have been attending Vidya Mandir at least once a week for a few years, have taught the group, read books published by the Vidya Mandir publisher etc.

It is worth considering that the levels of involvement of students as devotees or not are diverse and, therefore, it would not be possible to generalise them into two opposing ideal types. The case of Clara (65 years old, retired flight attendant) is a good example of this variety since she has been attending Vidya Mandir regularly for 18 years, is a vegetarian, and declares herself a Hindu, but says she has difficulty with the devotional part due to being raised in a Catholic family. According to her, integrating Vidya Mandir into her life is not difficult, since she is retired and has time available to fulfil the commitment she made to manage and be the vice-president of the study centre. The challenge for her is to live a life of yoga:

Attending classes leaves me with my soul cleansed and all, but another thing is the day-to-day life. Living *karmāyoga* is the most difficult thing, sometimes we slip. But I try to live Vedanta in my daily life, I try to practise *karmāyoga*, trust in *īśvara* and the devotional aspect of it too [...] You know, I am not very devotional, no. I would like to be, but I am not very good at it. I don't come to *pujas*. [Thaís: Don't you even come to the *pujas* every month?] From time to time, I don't have a regularity, no. But I have a little altar in my house, I do *namaskaram*<sup>11</sup> and so on, I say the prayers, right? But I'm not very devotional at all, I have to improve (Statement by Clara, April 25, 2016).

It is possible to observe from these testimonies that people associate their religious self-declaration with devotional aspects, including lifestyle and ritual practices. Observations in the field indicate that this statement is independent of the length of time each person has been linked to the Vidya Mandir: there are people like Rafael and Marta who have been attending for more than ten years and do not consider themselves Hindus, whereas there are others who have been attending for a few years and already declare themselves as Hindus. This is the case of Sandra, a 19-year-old student, who has attended Vidya Mandir for only two years and considers herself a Hindu. Before meeting the group, she had been practising yoga for two years and participated in meditation and collective activities at Ananda Marga. However, according to her, the search for self-knowledge only effectively began with Vedanta.

Therefore, Vedanta students and teachers understand that the search for self-knowledge leaves them free to follow any religion. The main aspect that connects the group is the intellectual one. Still, the *dharma*-oriented *karmāyoga* lifestyle is the parameter of the degree of involvement in the search for self-knowledge. There is a mental discipline and certain values that guide people's choices and actions, and their attitudes in life are guided by values, norms, rules, and precepts of "correct" action. One of the interviewees described such involvement as *maturity* and another interlocutor described the misconceptions in the search for a life of *karmāyoga* as mistakes.

This data is consistent with what Altglas (2018) identified among participants in Siddha Yoga and Sivananda centres in Europe. Through seminars,

courses, and workshops, those attending neo-Hindu groups are socialised to fulfil the requirements of self-discipline. Classes and interactions in these environments instruct individuals to reinterpret their life experiences, follow collective norms, have virtuous attitudes and adopt certain practices to achieve the goal of self-realisation. Self-improvement is an imperative in these groups: making the “right” choice, practising yoga (mental and “postural”) regularly, and maintaining control over reactive behaviours are some of the guidelines. The ideally autonomous and independent self, in effect, becomes the locus of discipline and conformity to collective Hindu values.

### ***Becoming a Hindu: lifestyle and embodiment***

With the aim of delving into controversial issues about religion and conversion, we illustrate the following statement that addresses internal conflicts in the field. Vanessa (biologist and filmmaker, 40 years old) reports having had a significant experience in a temple in Rishikesh (India). She describes that the day after her arrival was *śiva*'s day and that, on that date as ritual practices are carried out in the temple, she sat for hours witnessing the *śivaliṅgan* ritual (phallic symbol that represents the Hindu deity *śiva*), which she describes as follows: “the altar is filled with fruits, then those are taken out, little stripes are made, and every time the curtain was closed, when it opened again it was a different decoration, you enter a different state, it's impressive.”

She highlights that she had already felt an inclination to practise rituals: “I have always really liked rituals, and Vedanta already made perfect sense, but when I saw [in India] that there was still all this ritual baggage, I thought, is this a religion then? So, this is my religion!” This statement indicates that she needed to travel to India to realise that there was this “baggage” of the ritual in addition to the study. While in Brazil, she attended Vedanta classes, a very “rational” experience, in India she was able to get in touch with the ritual itself, a less rational and more religious or spiritual side. The first time she went to India, she explains, “that was when I realised about the ritual itself, the Hindu ‘voodoo’ there, the temples, the culture, how it is inserted.” And perhaps most importantly, she realised how much she identified with that — and it was from that moment on that she became aware there was a Hindu religion and that, therefore, she considered herself one.

An important aspect is the fact that Vanessa did not ask herself before the pilgrimage whether what she was studying was a religion; and the experience of being in India was what made her realise how much her studies in Brazil had a meaning beyond what was previously recognised by her (cf. Bastos, 2021). It was also from this experience in India that she began to consider herself a devout. What is noteworthy is the fact that she has stated several times that she considered herself a Hindu and what “discovering” that she was a Hindu meant to her. During her trip to India, she realised an important factor, that in Hinduism there is no religious conversion, which means that,

for most Hindus at least, she could not be considered as such. Max Weber (1958: 6) assures that, in this case, whoever is thought of as Hindu is whoever belongs to a “strict religion by birth,” merely because they were born to Hindu parents. In any case, Hinduism is “exclusive” in the sense that, in no way, can an individual be part of its community, at least the circle of those considered religiously qualified. According to Weber, Hinduism does not wish to encompass humanity, regardless of their beliefs or way of living — anyone not born a Hindu remains an outsider, for whom the sacred values of Hinduism are, in theory, denied.

On the other hand, although Weber did not see the growing spread of practices of Hindu origin such as meditation and yoga in the “West,” he indicates an alternative when he describes the spread of Hinduism by its strategy of “assimilation;” that is, once established, the power of integration of Hinduism is so great that it tends to absorb social forms considered beyond its religious borders. In light of this, Julius Lipner (1994) defends Hinduism as a “fundamentally cultural” phenomenon, in which a person does not need to be religious to be accepted as such by Hindus, or to describe themselves as Hindus; according to the Cambridge professor, he or she “can be polytheistic or monotheistic, monistic or pantheistic, even agnostic, humanist, or atheist and still be considered a ‘Hindu’” (Lipner, 1994: 8).

For the Hindus that Vanessa met in India, however, it makes no sense for her to have the same religious reference as them. According to her, their perplexed stares asked, “What are you doing here? Isn’t there a god in your country for you to worship?” As she reports, the Hindus she encountered did not seem to understand why she considered herself one of them; they also did not seem to understand why someone from another country and culture would go to India to worship their deities.

Perhaps few themes are as rich in anthropology as the encounters between cultures, which possibly constitutes the heart of the discipline. The literature has thought-provoking debates on this topic, articulating concepts such as identity, cultural borders, acculturation, creolisation, hybridity, authenticity, among others. In this case, we can make an approximation of what some authors describe as inverted culture shock, which is the fact that Vanessa felt free to express her devotion in an environment perceived by her as familiar, while, on the other hand, the “natives” themselves seem to have felt “strangeness.” For the Hindus she describes, the feeling seems to be one of displacement, while she herself says that she was not really bothered by it; she simply “became” a Hindu; which means she came back from India transformed.

Roy Wagner (2016) considers that anthropologists call the situation they are studying “culture” first of all to be able to understand it in familiar terms, in order to know how to deal with and control their experience. But they also do so to see how calling this situation “culture” affects their understanding of culture in general. “Whether they know it or not, and whether

they intend to or not, their 'safe' act of making the strange familiar always makes the familiar a little bit strange. And the more familiar the strange becomes, the stranger the familiar will appear" (Wagner, 2016: 73).

Although Wagner refers to the notion of culture for anthropologists as a discovery to be understood by heuristic means and an encounter with otherness, this does not come from the same concerns as those of pilgrims who see this experience as a moment of internal and existential reflection. This comparison shows that the abstract meaning of culture can be grasped through the contrast experienced. In other words, it is in the sense described by Wagner that returning from a pilgrimage can be considered a challenge, perhaps for the simple fact that its transformation was relevant, having the meaning of a cultural "displacement." It is a time to confront issues that have transformed internally, and which may eventually change in the course of their lives, at least in terms of perspective, that is, coming back means gaining another perspective on objects, situations, and even worldviews that start to take on new meanings.

The case of Vanessa refers to this confrontation, both in relation to the transformations that occurred during her stay in India and those that occurred after the pilgrimage. She reports having discussed this with an Indian friend and asking him, "I think I am a Hindu. Is there any problem? How does that work?" And her friend simply replied, "I think you are more of a Hindu than my sister, who was born here, because you are living this, my sister is not interested in any of this." According to what the Indian friend said, it is possible to understand in what sense Vanessa believes she is a Hindu, since she seems to have more understanding of the meanings of Hinduism than many Hindus.

Just like the transformation of identity that some go through, as shown in the case of Vanessa when acquiring a Hindu identity, in other cases there is a bodily change related to the physical and mental practice of yoga, which functions as a type of body construction. Maintaining control over desires and reactions causes, according to Srinivas (2012: 20), the development of self-awareness and, at the same time, allows practitioners greater power of choice and agency in the modern world. However, we attest that this empowerment accompanies adherence to norms, values, hierarchies, rules, and traditions that inscribe their identity mark on the bodies of practitioners. This adherence, however, appears as a contradiction in the modern world, where it is important to find oneself and live according to one's own parameters, instead of surrendering to conformity to an imposed model (cf. Taylor, 2009).

From this perspective, we have observed that if, on the one hand, there are rules regarding eating habits, contact with the teacher or guru, and appropriate behaviour regarding ritualised activities, on the other hand, there is also a creative experience of transformation by adopting these rules and behaviours. This adoption, according to Leledaki and Brown (2008: 326), inhabits the body of practitioners by an embodied creativity that consists of a "becoming,"

in the sense described by Deleuze and Guattari (1987), resulting from a feeling of cultivated belonging that reconstructs collective identity.

One of the objectives of Vedanta is to change thought processes and, thus, interlocutors end up changing habits and behaviours to build a “new” self. In the discourse of self-transformation, there is a reinvention of the self, a change that is valued, in the direction of perfection, not only in appearance but in behaviour — a subjective change, in the sense of self-cultivation and self-improvement, accompanied by bodily transformation. The construction of this “improved” self includes weaving new relationships, the deconstruction of the “old” self and, through complex processes of subjectivation, integrating the practitioner into the identity group. The more physical and mental practice the interlocutors accumulate, the more they understand how to cultivate a “balanced” and “integrated” identity — which seems to contrast with an identity affected by “discontinuities, imbalance and disintegration” (Whicher, 2002: 201). What draws attention in their speeches is the fact that, with effort and constant practice, the “old” or “small” self is “dissolved” into the “universal” self or, as they prefer, “consciousness.”

When Le Breton speaks of the body as a cultural construction, in which everything passes through the body, is translated by it, and circumscribed in it, which is being educated and formed by society as a whole, we see how the body and mind of the practitioner are transformed by the embodiment of Hindu culture: they learn and master the teachings by assimilating and executing them. In a way, we can say that the Vedic or yogic tradition models the body or imposes order on it, as Flood (2004) suggests, since the body is subject to an institutional power by which it is inscribed, but the author notes that practitioners transcend this power, which we also observe in the case of our interlocutors, when they subvert standards and appropriate the teachings and their cultural meanings in their own narratives.

On the one hand, we have seen how the norms and habits followed by the interlocutors consist of a lifestyle based on Hindu identity, given the social environment of Vidya Mandir, where the actors, both teachers and students, follow certain normative prescriptions and thus behave following considerations of what is “appropriate” or “right” according to a particular shared identity. On the other hand, we have observed that, in the case of interlocutors, there is also significant space for innovation in this process, in which there are elements that more or less adapt to the Brazilian reality — and in which more “easily” adaptable norms of behaviour replace others with less appeal. The norms of tradition are disseminated there through a process of teaching and learning, as well as the “successful” demonstration of this operation; and this demonstration seems to affect the prestige, credibility, and acceptance of teachers (and older students). The interlocutors, in turn, appear as agents not only in this “transposition” of Hindu culture or tradition, but when choosing whether to accept or reject certain prescriptions and identifications.

### ***Hindus without religion: the challenges of declaring oneself a Hindu***

Declaring oneself a Hindu while being Brazilian, white (at least for local standards), and a member of the urban middle classes brings some confrontations. Despite some ethnic diversity at Vidya Mandir — including the occasional black person or the one with a “peripheral” family origin —, this is the predominant profile of the interlocutors at the Centre for Vedanta Studies in Rio de Janeiro (Assis, 2017; Bastos, 2016). In this space, the religious category is under negotiation and individual self-declaration as Hindu is controversial. The most immediate difficulty in declaring oneself a Hindu is the fact that traditional Hinduism is ethnically oriented. How is it possible to be a Hindu without being Indian and without being born into a Hindu family?

Amanda Lucia (2015) observes that precisely because they assume that there is a fundamental ethnic requirement to belong to Hinduism, many non-Indians who demonstrate affinity with Hindu practices prefer to experience their beliefs as personal convictions and not in the name of religion. In a text entitled “Hinduism without religion” (Lucia, 2011), the author highlights that, among followers of transnational gurus and contemporary yoga practitioners, there is great difficulty in dealing with the Hindu category: some even reject it completely and adopt terms as spiritual or spirituality to mark the distance from Hindu orthodoxies and to support the idea of ecumenism. Actually, few global movements deem themselves religious among those that derive their practices and theologies from Hinduism. As the author notes, when proponents of such practices argue that they are not religious, they are relegating the Hindu definition to something stagnant. The effort to distance themselves, then, seems linked to a conception of religion as something ritualistic, hierarchical, and anti-modern.

Lucia (2014) also highlights that neo-Hindu cases are varied: there are both those who advocate the value of tradition, that is, the importance of returning to the original or authentic, and those who catalyse a complete break with the traditional. Whether conventional or innovative, traditions need to reconfigure themselves to maintain their relevance to contemporary audiences. Even the conservative recovery of tradition is conditioned by language, social forms and practices, and current worldviews. For the author, this is what happened with *advaita vedānta* or neo-Vedanta, a branch of Hindu theology that became best known in the “West,” adapted and labelled as universal, ecumenical, or spiritual so that it could be received by different audiences — as well as in the cases of yoga and meditation.

It is essential to emphasise that, although the teachings of current neo-Hindu groups are linked to specific religious traditions, the participants either adhere relatively without constraint to neo-Hinduism — they do not adopt some notions but select only what adapts to their personal search — or seem to maintain a pragmatic relationship with the teachings, from which they generally retain body, breathing, and meditative techniques, aiming to

improve themselves (Altglas, 2004). Our analyses provide a caveat to this argument since we identify that freedom of choice is relative, given the normative requirements and the morality of the experiences of people engaged with Vedanta and yoga. The experiences of devotees start from a voluntary choice, however, this results in a series of concessions and adjustments to the yogī lifestyle.

### FINAL REMARKS

In our research with a group of yoga practitioners and Vedanta students in Rio de Janeiro, we observed that some interlocutors declared themselves Hindus. However, they are not recognised as such within more traditional Hinduism, as we saw that according to Weber (1958) a Hindu is someone who was born into Indian caste society. We showed that the interlocutors understand Hinduism not from the point of view of the traditional caste society system, but in an embodied way into their lifestyle so, as a result, some take this religious classification as a reference. At the same time, some other members of the group also have this depth of assimilation and connection, but do not feel the need to call themselves Hindus. Furthermore, some interviewees have performed a rite of passage called *upanāyana* and have become recognised as Brahmins, for example. We understand, therefore, that most of the interlocutors should be considered Hindus from the perspective of the renouncer who, according to Dumont (1980), is someone who transformed renunciation into an internal act: renunciation happens “inside” the person and not in the action of practising austerities. In other words, the meaning is more mental than physical, which implies living a life of yoga without reacting to what the cosmic order brings, but acting “consciously” (Bastos, 2018).

We suggest that many choose neo-Hinduism as a lifestyle based on a notion of spirituality that is within the field of possibilities of new religiosities. “Being a Hindu,” from such a perspective, does not mean being an adherent of that religion in its strictest sense, but being able to think of oneself as someone who borrows cultural values that would suit them best.

This article presented the meanings attributed to the experiences of people who, in their spiritual searches, end up producing new personal identities. By basing themselves on references that are in line with Vedanta, they begin to adopt practices and values that guide their conduct and which insert them into this new social environment — one that involves identification with social imperatives, such as being accepted, controlling emotions, and cultivating certain moral dispositions (Altglas, 2018). However, living a life of yoga, for the interlocutors, does not only imply the performance of certain behaviours and adherence to norms and rules, but has a broader meaning, whose objective is not the form of bodily discipline, but of self-realisation. Thus, the bodily and mental practices of interlocutors can be observed as

allowing a sense of agency and empowerment through which practitioners are able to create social bonds that intensify feelings of belonging. The construction of a Vedantic ethos takes shape in relationships with the community of practitioners, who develop their identities by adopting new knowledge, value systems, diets, clothing, and worldviews. An involvement that is based on a process of sacralisation of tradition, teachers, and the community of practitioners. Their new patterns of speech and behaviour involve the creation of a new lifestyle, which points to what can be compared to a religious “conversion.”

Vedantin practices stimulate the emergence of a series of emotional and cognitive experiences, bringing with it a subjective change. At the same time, we see a tension in the dynamics of the lifestyles we have analysed, in which autonomy, choice, and belonging are ambiguous categories, due to the selected embodiment of teachings and behaviours, as well as the different levels of engagement with ritual and devotional practices of the tradition. Going beyond the notion of conversion, we assess that the construction of this neo-Hindu identity implies restrictions and adjustments to traditional precepts, but also a creative experience of transformation through the choice of certain prescriptions, identifications, and behaviours.

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## NOTES

- 1 The research of Cecilia Bastos with yoga and meditation interlocutors began during her doctorate in Social Sciences at the State University of Rio de Janeiro, during which she researched the group of students from Vidya Mandir — who meet weekly to study sacred Hindu texts in Copacabana (Rio de Janeiro) —, seeking to understand the meanings of their spiritual quests in Brazil as well as the meanings of their pilgrimages to India (see: Bastos, 2016). The author continued researching the same group of interlocutors, through participant observation and fieldwork of over ten years, during her post-doctoral research in Social Anthropology at the National Museum — Federal University of Rio de Janeiro (PPGAS-UFRJ), this time focusing on the meanings of yoga and meditation practices related to devotion, rationality, body, identity, emotion, and subjectivity in the neo-Hindu context of Brazilian urban middle classes (see: Bastos, 2019a, 2019b, 2020, 2021, 2022a, 2022b, 2023a, 2023b, 2024). The research of Thaís Assis Ladeira was developed during her master’s degree in Sociology and Anthropology at the Federal University of Rio de Janeiro (UFRJ). Field observations at Vidya Mandir were carried out between March 2015 and July 2016, during which 21 informant interviews were conducted. The criterion for choosing the interviewees was people’s attendance at events and Vedanta classes. In addition to fieldwork and interviews, the researcher also monitored publications by some students and teachers on their social media profiles and posts made on Vidya Mandir’s page (see: Assis, 2017).
- 2 *Dharma* is every person’s duty, the function he or she must fulfil in each social situation; it is their role in a given context.
- 3 Practising *karmāyoga* is acting “correctly” and dedicating oneself to one’s duties without attachment to the fruits, results, or rewards of actions.
- 4 There is a criticism here by Marcos da Silveira (2005) of Colin Campbell’s (1997) thesis on the easternisation of the West. Silveira analyses the issue with an emphasis on the processes that occurred in the two cultural hubs.
- 5 Advaita is the branch of Vedanta that values non-dualism, that is, the conception that *ātma* and *brāhmaṇ* are identical.

- 6 In this case, the term does not refer to someone's personality or subjectivity, but to their unlimited, full, eternal, immutable, divine, and absolute nature.
- 7 *Samsāra* is the cycle of successive reincarnations in which people go through periods of ups and downs, happiness and sadness.
- 8 Originally *upanāyana* was a Hindu rite of passage from childhood to adolescence in which the master introduced the child to Vedic studies. The ritual was adapted to represent the students' acceptance by a guru and conferring on them the title of Brahmins.
- 9 *Japamālā* is a necklace with 108 beads used to chant mantras — with each bead the mantra is repeated.
- 10 Vegetarianism is recommended as a dietary regime in the *Upaniṣads* and is aligned with the Vedic principle of non-violence — *ahiṃsā* — and respect for all forms of life.
- 11 *Namaskaram* is the gesture of salutation and prostration made before the altar.

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## LIFE OF YOGA AND NEO-HINDUISM: IDENTITIES AND BELONGINGS

### Abstract

This article addresses the themes of embodiment of tradition and the building of new religious identities by the case study of a Vedanta group in Rio de Janeiro. From the historical context of the transnational movements that have propagated practices and beliefs of Hindu origin, we present the interlocutors' religious identifications and lifestyles. We then discuss the tensions and contradictions involved in the discourses, to some extent ambiguous, about autonomy and belonging. The data collected in the field reveals the meanings of a *life of yoga* and the different levels of engagement with the Hindu tradition and its practices and rituals. Beyond the notion of conversion, we argue that the construction of this neo-Hindu identity not only involves restrictions and adaptations to traditional precepts, but also a creative experience of transformation through the choice of certain prescriptions, identifications, and behaviours.

### Keywords

Neo-Hinduism;  
Vedanta;  
Identity;  
Religious belonging;  
Tradition.

## VIDA DE YOGA E NEO-HIDUÍSMO: IDENTIDADES E PERTENCIMENTOS

### Resumo

Esse artigo aborda temas de materialização da tradição e de construção de novas identidades religiosas pelo estudo de caso de um grupo de Vedanta no Rio de Janeiro. A partir do contexto histórico do movimento transnacional que propagou práticas e crenças de origem hindu, apresentamos as identificações religiosas e modos de vida dos interlocutores. Discutimos então as tensões e contradições envolvidas nos discursos, até certo ponto ambíguos, sobre autonomia e pertencimento. Os dados coletados no campo revelam os significados de uma *vida de yoga* e os diferentes níveis de envolvimento com a tradição hindu e suas práticas e rituais. Para além da noção de conversão, argumentamos que a construção dessa identidade neo-hindu não apenas envolve restrições e adaptações a preceitos tradicionais como a experiência criativa da transformação pela escolha de certas prescrições, identificações e comportamentos.

### Palavras-chave

Neo-hinduismo;  
Vedanta;  
Identidade;  
Pertencimento religioso;  
Tradição.