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Revolution and Spiritualism

An Unlikely Chapter in the History of Yoga in Mexico

This article seeks to broaden the current scholarship on modern yoga by expanding the customary regional areas of enquiry. It offers an introspective overview of an early episode of the history of implementation of yogic ideas in Mexico. By focusing on the case of Francisco I. Madero, a prominent statesman and one of the chief actors in the Mexican Revolution, I will explore the influence that yogic philosophy had on Mexican politics at the beginning of the twentieth century. With a wide range of meanings, yoga here designates an ethical attitude and discipline, more than a bodily postures methodology. Even before the yoga boom from the 1960s onward, yogic ideas were already present in intellectual international circles—usually mediated by esotericism—and often had an impact on social and cultural environments. This enquiry will explore the intricacies of transregional negotiations of cultural items. Also, this article intends to situate expansive intellectual exchange in the light of global networks of knowledge and wider reimaginings of cultural worlds.

Keywords: global yoga—yoga in Mexico—Francisco I. Madero—esotericism and modernity—receptions of the *Bhagavadgītā*

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This article aims to unravel some of the not so obvious channels of "yogic" mobility from South Asia to Latin America, within a larger global history of yoga.[1] Some scholars state that the "reinvention" of yoga in this region, in the period of 1900–1950, "is a unique contribution . . . not established in the literature" (Simões 2018, 291). It will not be possible to offer here a detailed and wide-ranging overview, but only a synthetized insight into the early manifestations of yoga in Mexico, by focusing on a singular case.[2] This specific case is closely intertwined with the Mexican reception and circulation of the *Bhagavadgītā* (BhG), traditionally considered a *yogaśāstra*, or "scripture on yoga." First of all, it is worth pointing out that here yoga is understood in its broad sense, namely a technique, a method, and a philosophy, among other meanings. Regardless of how convoluted the semantics, the term "yoga" is not gratuitously equal to South Asian religiosity or postural global techniques but cuts across rich symbolical, soteriological, and experiential forms of practice. This is how the growing field of modern yoga studies handles the question, not privileging only *āsana*-oriented or postural yoga—a modern, but even more pointedly contemporary development—over all other historical trends in the Indian subcontinent. In fact, Swami Vivekananda (1863–1902) is one key subject in the field of modern yoga studies, even if he championed his so-called Raja Yoga (a Neo-Vedantic interpretation of the *Yogasūtra*, partly mediated by Theosophy) as opposed to Hatha Yoga, the more bodily oriented practice that the swami despised.

The topic of this article concerns a period just before the bloom of modern postural yoga. The inquiry raises a number of questions: if not all of the forms of yoga in Mexico are indebted to Anglophone yoga avatars, what other manifestations were important? What were the specific sociohistorical contexts that encouraged the assimilation of yoga in this region? This article critically assesses two major strands of adaptation of Indian ideas and practices in Mexico: (a) an occultist milieu, and (b) a proto–New Age sensibility.[3] These are in turn related to the growth of a loose but strong Latin American orientalism.[4]

Seeking to elaborate on this specific time and space from a regional perspective, I focus on the case of Francisco I. Madero (1873–1913), a prominent statesman and leading actor in the Mexican Revolution, an enthusiastic Spiritualist, and president between 1911 and 1913. A notorious and educated bourgeois, Madero soon took interest in Mexican politics, a vocation partially fueled by Theosophist and Spiritualist ideals that circulated worldwide. This and his understanding of Indian philosophy

were instrumental in his political career: Madero himself was an ardent reader of the *Bhagavadgītā*, and his political vocation seems to have been fortified by his readings of the Hindu text. As I will show, the Mexican case bears idiosyncratic features that can shed light on adaptive forms not merely derived from Anglophone contexts, even though they respond to a wide network of shared cultural ideas.[5] It has to be stressed that Madero's yoga predates the boom of modern postural forms of yoga fashioned by Tirumalai Krishnamacharya, Shri Yogendra, and others. In this way we see how the global histories of yoga and Spiritualism connect with the regional particularities of the Mexican case to offer a new kind of, one might say, "revolutionary yoga."

The field of modern yoga studies has gained significant momentum in the early twenty-first century. Indeed, the nature, history, and forms of yoga in the modern world have become an established and thriving area of enquiry. It is not only about ancient and classical writings in Sanskrit anymore; instead, scholars are paying increasing attention to texts in different languages, practices in different regions, and schools at different points in time. As Andrea Jain (2015, ix–x) and others have noted, "The stories of yoga in South Asia, Europe, North America, the Middle East, and other regions of the world . . . are each a part of a larger global narrative." Nevertheless, the main focus has been on South Asian, European, and North American avatars of the yoga phenomenon. The aura of Anglophone yoga has become mainstream and, rather unconsciously, has extended a colonialist view of the world.

The trajectories of yoga—and other cultural items—in non-Anglophone regions show a wide range of developments that sometimes follow from Anglophone forms, but sometimes convey features of their own. This complex history can best be surveyed by thinking not just locally and not just disciplinarily, but globally and across disciplines. The case study of this article shows interesting aspects that concern Mexican political history but also unravel wider connections geographically and culturally: there is a complex web of networks that link Mexico to Spain, France, the Unites States, even Germany, and some countries in Latin America. Theosophy and Spiritualism prove to be cohesive factors in the present case. Before going into the study, I will first ponder on how to explore a local topic, but trying to think it globally.

The global and the regional (spaces and languages)

The dawn of the twenty-first century heralded a rising interest in globalization and the birth of a new interest in global history. This interest in the twentieth century was driven to a great extent by the collapse of European empires and the rise of the postcolonial, as well as by the influence of "history from below," although global history cannot be equated to these (Drayton and Motadel 2018, 5). It has only accelerated in recent decades. Part of the motivation of the global history approach was to challenge dominant West-centered versions of history, to account for various topics concerning transatlantic affairs. Global history can help us understand different historical processes by paying attention to the relationships, networks, and interactions that exceed the conventional frontiers between states, nations, cultures, and civilizations (Hausberger 2018, 16). One appropriate motivation of global history

has been to counterpoise national histories and area studies. One of its alleged promises is to escape from histories of empires and from teleology (de Vries 2013, 45).

This has led to a growing number of "comparative studies of the East and the West," especially focused on "environmental, migration, slavery, trade, and travel" themes (Berg 2013, 3). The global, the regional, and the particular need to be reflected on, especially in the light of notions such as interaction and transference. For one thing, the category "global" is usually not "universal"; however, it points to specific dynamics of global interconnections that condition various interactions, mobility, and fluidity of multiple items, ideas, and agents (Strube 2021, 58). This invites us to think of the "global ecumene," or what Ulf Hannerz (1996, 7) explained as "the interconnectedness of the world, by way of interactions, exchanges and related developments, affecting not least the organization of culture." Indeed, many momentous issues and events took place in a markedly "entangled global context, in which transfers of knowledge were not monodirectional but polyphonic and often ambiguous" (Krämer and Strube 2020, 1). As will become clear, the shared knowledge and symbolic projections of esoteric groups shaped transnational linkages that connect people in different places and also facilitated local interpretations of distant texts and cultural practices.

The discipline of global history is still struggling to clearly define its orientation, scope, and methodologies of its own. In other words, it has taken pains to distinguish itself from world history or area-specific, yet comparative, case studies. I do not intend to add to this discussion, but it is worth bearing it in mind. A key article has addressed the challenges and detractions to the discipline, for example the allegation that global history somehow rejects "smaller scales of historical experience" (Drayton and Motadel 2018, 2). But even thus, "there is no way back from the 'global turn' in our century, any more than we could go back to a history which paid no attention to women or the poor" (Drayton and Motadel 2018, 5). Indeed, we are living in a world culture, which does not entail an extension of uniformity but rather a growing sense of interconnectedness of different local cultures that somehow organizes diversity; for this reason, it cannot be anchored to any specific terrain, but is diffused (Hannerz 1996, 102).

Mostly dealing with relations between either Europe and China or Europe and India, global history has not avoided the failure of forwarding an Anglophone view of the world. More often than not, historical and cultural phenomena are understood through Anglophone lenses. Here we need to point out the fact that English has been the principal linguistic medium for scholarship in general. Whereas this "global language" acts as a lingua franca that "unites the 'global' community of scholars and reaches the 'global' audience" (de Vries 2013, 39), at the same time, in fact, this somehow neutralizes the globality of voices, as it were. Spanish, another transcontinental language, may have the potential of competing with English, the most cosmopolitan of all tongues (Aravamudan 2009, 2). However, this seems to be limited to specific themes and lines of research. When dealing with South Asian religions and philosophy, English has definitely become the principal linguistic tool, a sort of "theolinguistics" that somehow speaks out the pattern of the global popular (ibid., 29)—and few things are nowadays as popular, globally, as yoga.

Indeed, it has been recognized by advocates of global history that the field has been driven by Western priorities and Anglophone historians (Drayton and Motadel 2018, 8; Douki and Minard 2007, 13–14). This is a flaw. Sometimes, the knowledge of one or more Asian languages are combined, at an international level, but not in substitution of writing in English about world (even Asian!) experiences and issues. This means that the "global" has not yet become fully global, but semi-global. Further work that can deal with similar issues in transpacific regions or other regions and time frameworks also within the Atlantic is called for. But perhaps it is even more important to actually and effectively be able to engage in discussions across languages, not just across regions:

> The edited volume and the work of translation are the natural media of global history. But these volumes, like many conferences, will be dialogues of the deaf if we do not work actively against the idea that the business of history can or should be done in English, or that only that which is translated or translatable deserves our attention. (Drayton and Motadel 2018, 15)

The present article partly seeks to bring these issues to the fore, even though at the same time it does so through the medium of the English language.

By paying attention to other parts of the globe we may gain not only a deeper insight of the diverse ways of enculturation of yoga in the world, but also a better understanding of the very redefinition, adaptation, and transmission of religious traditions and cultural items in the modern and contemporary ages. Thus, among the main approaches of global history, I seek to invoke the connective approach, "which elucidates how history is made through the interactions of geographically (or temporally) separate historical communities" (Drayton and Motadel 2018, 3). Such an approach calls for comparative techniques and a vision for *l'histoire croisée*, and it also involves cutting across Eurocentric chronological and institutional divides (Douki and Minard 2007, 15–16). It is important to stress that such an approach responds to the global, which suggests a degree of interdependency and integration, in contrast to the world, which may be international but does not necessarily imply connectedness and integration (ibid., 10).

A key category in the present project is Latin America. Nevertheless, the category is not exempt of discussion and critique. "Latin America," "Hispanic America," and "Ibero-America" are related terms that overlap easily. Sometimes the distinctions between one and the other are not very clear. In broad terms, Hispanic America refers exclusively to Spanish-speaking countries in the Americas, whereas Ibero-America comprises countries where both Spanish and Portuguese are the predominant languages (all of them having been colonies of the once Iberian maritime powers of Spain and Portugal), namely Hispanic America plus Brazil. In principle, Latin America includes also French-speaking territories, such as Haiti, Martinique, or French Guiana. Thus, broadly speaking, Latin America is composed of all countries from Mexico through most of the Caribbean to Argentina, excluding Suriname and the few English-speaking countries in Central America and the Caribbean. Thus, even though the same region is more or less covered by the three regional labels, the general outlook may change drastically in dependence of which one is being used. All of these

countries share a connected history of European expansionism of colonial powers that speak Latin-derived languages.

To complicate matters, the term "Ibero-America" sometimes encompasses Spanish-speaking countries and Brazil, plus those in the Iberic peninsula (Andorra, Spain, and Portugal), especially in the context of summits. Also, notice that French Canada is usually not included in "Latin America," which is problematic and attests to the porosity and fuzziness of categories. In like manner, one could argue that some parts within North America could also be included in the label "Hispanic America," considering the large and growing number of Spanish-speaking individuals. So, while the labels "Ibero-America" and "Latin America" are useful to indicate certain regions when discussing specific issues, they also fail to account for wider nets of interaction. In such a project, one must necessarily go back and forth from the local or regional to the global. I will come back to this in the next section.

Unlike most global history efforts, I will not focus on either economic or social theory around the early modernity but will seek to coordinate history of religions–related themes with global history's drives well after that period. Also, I would like to probe into the Mexican case so as to find idiosyncratic features that can shed light on adaptive forms not found in Anglophone contexts. The way in which yoga was imported in Mexico responds to a wider network of practices and understandings, but (as is the specific topic of this article) it bore an impact on domestic affairs. This early instance of yoga in Mexico depends on two different transregional interactions: an intellectual one (ties with France and Spain, and reliant on the French and Spanish languages) and an "esoteric" one (the impact of Spiritualism and Theosophy, which *also*—and arguably more pronouncedly—depended on Anglophone channels of transference).

In a sense, my motivation for this topic echoes Maxine Berg's (2013, 9) urge to unravel "narratives of interaction" that would stem from the pursuit of "more open-ended questions concerning global connections: how did the transmission of material culture and useful knowledge across regions of the world affect the economic and cultural developments in any one of these regions?" These "narratives of interaction" are means of transcending traditional area studies and of fostering more intense interdisciplinary efforts, that is, striving for "alternative academic models" (ibid., 13). Thus, I would deal with dynamics of acculturation, transference, and "*métissages culturels*" in a way that carefully pays attention to contexts (Douki and Minard 2007, 19). This also echoes processes of cultural exchange, where "the transfer or non-transfer of [cultural items] depends on how the receiving culture conceptualizes both the reference culture and itself." Thus, "In its new cultural surroundings, the exchanged item often assumes another shape and meaning" (Baier 2016, 315–18). This process is clearly attested in Madero's reception of the *Bhagavadgītā*, as we will see later in this article.

It is important to emphasize that the topic of this article links Mexico, Spain, and France mainly through Theosophical and Spiritualist webs of transregional connections. One wonders if this puts at stake the usual reliance on the much-employed categories of the Global South and the Global North. In instances such as this, the dynamics of exchange do not respond to politico-geographical parameters,

but to intellectual and cultural concerns shared through extensive lines of transmission across diverse regions. Also, it is worth noticing that these lines are usually not motivated by imperialistic drives but by proselytism. The Theosophical Society—or yoga or Spiritualism—sees the world not as a territory to be conquered, but a stage onto which to extend a web of influence and, thus, generate a sense of global comradeship.

Latin America: New routes for research on yoga and esotericism

The shaping of links over long distances may have been motivated by the growth of commerce and the spread of religions, among other factors (Hausberger 2018, 17). Thus, scholars such as Richard Drayton and David Motadel (2018, 11) speak on behalf of "a cis-global history, lived in territories far from the apparent hotspots of transglobal processes or circulation." My contribution pertains to a wider project: the history of reception and practice of yoga in Latin America, a region usually left out of the field of modern yoga studies. This puts into question different sorts of issues, both local and global. To begin with, the label "Latin America" can of course be construed as a regional framework. It is also one that includes a very vast expanse of territory, covering as a matter of fact around two-thirds of the American continent. It is not always easy to define which countries are included in this category, as already discussed in the last section. Indeed, "the concept of region lacks the spatial precision we associate with cities, countries, or the world as a whole"; however, identifying "various regional worlds in the early modern era that can be vantage points from which to look out at larger global patterns is one way to go beyond a European-centered world history" (Wong 2013, 85). This statement is also valid for the modern and contemporary periods.

The Latin American region is an extensive and complex one, as pointed out previously. It can be studied for a wide array of topics and cases "to take the measure," using Bin Wong's phrasing (2013, 88), "of some spatial dimensions of history more effectively." Of course, this region presents a number of similarities and differences that affect in different ways all sorts of social, political, and cultural issues. Although predominantly Spanish speaking, Latin America hosts the country with the highest number of speakers of Portuguese around the globe: Brazil. Most of the countries in the region are an outcome of Iberic colonial projects. As a consequence, the majority of the population here religiously identify themselves as Roman Catholics; yet, there is a growing number of other Christian denominations (notably Pentecostalists). The presence of indigenous communities in most of the Americas further enriches the sociocultural landscape and often permeates political discourse, as can be seen in the cases of Bolivia and Paraguay, for example, but also of Canada. Also, most of the Latin American countries attained political independence long before the majority of colonial territories in Asia and Africa.

Thus, even though it is a handy tool, it needs to be pointed out that resorting to the "Latin America" tag as a conceptual tool or episteme can be misleading, because there are significant differences within, as there are also subgroups. Things that happened in Mexico may not necessarily be true for the rest of the region, even the closest one,

Central America. Many historical, political, and cultural issues in Mexico were tightly tied to either Spain, France, or the United States at different moments between the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Many events that took place in South America (especially Argentina, Uruguay, and Paraguay) do not correspond with those that shaped sociocultural developments in Nicaragua or Costa Rica, for example. Indeed, they also do not necessarily mimic events that happened in Colombia or Chile, much closer countries to the southernmost part of the region. Yet some political events and phenomena did share traits, and some cultural items were, in fact, common, thanks partly to the linguistic medium of the Spanish language (which is shared by most countries in the region), along with many other complex matters.[6]

By paying attention to the story of yoga in Mexico (and Latin America at large), it is also possible to observe more clearly some features of the global narrative of yoga, which is obviously not of one piece. Certainly, the trajectory of yoga can best be understood in the light of a global historical understanding of the circulation of ideas, more than seeing yoga just as an Indian religious discipline going abroad. Moreover, Latin America–based scholars have an advantage: apart from dealing with English and French sources, methods, and critiques, they can also deal with various materials in Spanish and Portuguese, thus being able to cover a vast territory and significant archival material.

As early twenty-first-century scholarship has been showing, esotericism and occultism have played a great role in the making of the modern world. They usually extend their zones of influence across regions and linguistic barriers, the best example of which is the Theosophical Society.[7] The presence of occultist and esoteric groups is indeed noticeable in Latin America, and the reception of yoga and other Asian practices has been filtered by them. Long before the global momentum of postural yoga, some "Eastern" concepts had already been introduced into the West, often through esoteric circles. Texts like the *Bhagavadgītā* became illustrious and often-cited sources of wisdom. Therefore, a global history approach can prove very beneficial in examining the processes of religious transformation, especially by recognizing that such phenomena as esotericism are not gratuitously "Western" but really global (Bergunder 2020, 88). In this context, it is worthwhile to keep in mind that "yoga" covers a wide range of meanings and refers to very different traditions and methodologies. Here I understand "yoga" in a very broad sense, implying discipline, meditation, concentration, and bodywork; in this article, I use the term to refer to notions of discipline and ethics. In Madero's own phrasing (2000b, 187), yoga could be understood as a "*filosofía de la acción*" (philosophy of action); he fervently adhered to the tenet that: "For the *muni* who wishes to attain Yoga, the method to be practiced is action" (BhG 6.3, in Madero 2000b, 220). So, it is important to note that the first uses of the word "yoga" on Mexican soil had nothing to do with corporeal flexibility and *āsana* (physical postures) but rather connoted a philosophical and ethical approach.

Such an understanding of yoga was not uncommon at the time. In this sense, Madero shared a cultural worldview that was open to engaging creatively with the *Bhagavadgītā*. Thus, it is worth pointing out that for such dissimilar Indian personalities as Lajpat Rai, Bal Gangadhar Tilak, and Gandhi, renunciation that

entailed detachment from worldly duties was objectionable; the true yogi was the *sthitaprajña*,[8] whose yogic self-control enabled him to carry out social obligations (Davis 2015, 140). This is an underlying motif in Madero's exegesis, as I will discuss later at more length. Indeed, a more comparative analysis of similar enterprises of both nationalistic and revolutionary readings of the *Gītā* across the globe would be highly engaging, but that would fall outside the scope of this article. A related concept, cosmopolitanism, could also expand discussions in this kind of analysis (cf. Hannerz 1996, 103). Madero was somewhat of a cosmopolitan, even though his relationship to India was indirect and mediated by an esoteric global ecumene.

Francisco I. Madero: Prosopography of a Spiritualist politician

Madero's is probably the earliest of the key episodes of the history of the reception of yoga in Mexico (Muñoz 2021b, 339). It would be misleading to suppose that all things Indian or Asian entered Mexico through Anglophone routes. There were also French and Spanish ones. In part, this had to do with the strong influence that esotericism and kindred movements exercised between the second half of the nineteenth century and the early twentieth century in many regions. Spiritism or Spiritualism played a major role in widening the minds of aristocratic liberals in both Europe and the Americas, and so occupied an interesting place in Mexican history.[9] Indeed, it can be argued that Spiritism greatly contributed to the shaping of some modern societies in Latin America (Bubello, Diniz-Silva, and Villalba 2021, 233).

Spiritualism is a religious movement centered in the belief that the afterlife is peopled with spirits, or "invisibles," who can communicate with the living. Its practices focused on gatherings known as *séances* (a French word), sessions where a group of people took hands around a table and a "medium" contacted a spirit, who in turn manifested or spoke through the medium. Its proponents presented it as a "scientific religion" capable of enhancing human moral virtues. Interest, suspicion, and curiosity provoked scholars, psychologists, and other professionals to engage in studies on Spiritualist practices. Some concepts were derived from Swedenborgian and Mesmeric ideas (Hanegraaff 1996, 421–41; Clarke 2006, 86, 133), like the notion that a natural invisible force could allegedly control objects and cure different sorts of ailments in human beings, or the notion of the channeling of energies and the pre-eminence of mind over matter, further developed by Allan Kardec (1804–1869) and others. Spiritualism is also heavily guided by ethical values, despite the fact that it is usually associated with the inexplicable movement of tables and other objects during *séances*.

Modern Spiritualism was developed in Hydesville, New York in 1848. It promoted interest in "psychical research" and grew astonishingly rapidly: by 1854, some three million North Americans had become adherents (Hanegraaff 1996, 435–36; Aureliano 2015, 1). After being fashioned in North America with a more or less Protestant outlook, Spiritualism became more universalistic in its European—and specifically French—developments. French Spiritualism, or Spiritism,[10] incorporated the belief in reincarnation, very probably an invention by Allan Kardec (Ceccomori 2001, 40), the major figure and author of French Spiritism. Formerly an educator, Kardec (born

Hippolyte Léon Denizard Rivail) witnessed events of jumping and moving turntables and developed an interest in communicating with the spirits and gradually more elaborate Spiritist sessions. Among his influential writings, mention should be made to *Le livre des esprits* (Kardec 2020), *L'evangile selon l'Spiritisme* (Kardec 1868), and the periodical *Revue Spirite*. Kardec became widely read within some Mexican intellectual circles in the latter half of the nineteenth century and the first half of the twentieth century.

In Latin America, Spiritualism became very popular and also merged with some local traditions, notably in Brazil, where "possessions" are well known (Aureliano 2015, 2–3).[11] It arrived in Mexico during the 1870s, where proponents publicly defended it, but this open defense declined in the next decade due to objections from both Catholics and positivists (Tortolero Cervantes 2004, 14). Because Spiritualism opposed the established church, it sometimes identified with freemasonry, which also held anticlerical attitudes (ibid., 15).

One of the most prominent proponents of Spiritualism was Francisco I. Madero. He has been deemed the "patron saint" or "*apóstol*" of Mexican democracy (Tortolero Cervantes 2004, 17; Chaves 2012, 77). As Mariano Villalba points out, Spiritism and Theosophy "helped Madero resolve the deep contradiction he found around the idea of starting the armed conflict" (Bubello, Diniz-Silva, and Villalba 2021, 251). Yet while Madero is not an obvious link in the chain of reception of yogic philosophy in Mexico, he is a noteworthy one, both for the political and the intellectual implications of his participation, especially since his espousal of *karmayoga* turned into concrete action in Mexican politics. Also, it is very significant that a politician of this stature embraced *both* Spiritualism and Indian ideas. It was part of the zeitgeist.

A complex figure, Madero was both a political leader and a Spiritualist medium, and these two aspects were inextricably linked from the 1890s until his untimely death in 1913. His activism was crucial in generating the Mexican Revolution, a major armed struggle ignited by a sociopolitical movement that lasted roughly from 1910 to 1920. Yet, its impact was felt during most of the twentieth century (Garciadiego and Kuntz 2010). This revolution was multifaceted; it sought to excise authoritarian regimes (especially Porfirio Díaz's three-decade rule) and foster more egalitarian and democratic forms of government. Madero has inspired a number of laudatory novels and songs, as well as defamatory libels and satires, and has also become a sanctified figure in Mexico's historical pantheon. Since he sparked the Mexican Revolution, his political career has been a matter of constant study and debate among historians. Yet, there has been something rather elusive about his personality: "While these historical and political questions have inspired numerous studies into the biography of Madero and his political beliefs, there remains an aura of mystery that surrounds the leader's lifelong quest to explore all questions spiritual, paranormal, and metaphysical" (Chandler 2010, 6).

Madero's political vision was largely determined by his Spiritualist vocation, as well as by his readings of Asian philosophy, especially from India. Madero's motivations were consistent, whether he was formulating a political manifesto on behalf of democracy or an exposition of his communication with ethereal beings. Such a complex figure demands an interdisciplinary approach of sorts. As a critic puts it: "In

order to better understand the true Francisco I. Madero, it is necessary to consider the importance of these texts, spiritual and secular alike, in his life" (Chandler 2010, 10); therefore, we should attempt "to explore this web of texts, the discursive codes through which Madero formed his understanding of reality" (ibid., 12).

Even though Brian Chandler focuses on literary elaborations about Madero, he is very insistent that Madero combined his own literary inclinations with his incorporation of all sorts of readings. Chandler claims that Hindu and Tibetan texts, such as the *Vijñānabhairava* and the *Bardo Thodol*, were influential (ibid., 7, 10, 13). The influence of these specific texts is yet to be proved (it seems rather unlikely that it was so), but there is ample evidence that the Mexican politician was influenced by South Asian philosophical ideas. This issue has made its way even into a literary narrative inspired by Madero's occultist leanings.

Madero's political career, as well as his former education, made him spend some time abroad. After a brief stay in the United States in 1886, he moved to France and stayed there from 1887 to 1892. In Paris, he felt more comfortable, partly because of his higher proficiency in the French language. As he himself recorded in his memoirs: "I stayed there [Saint Mary's College, Maryland] for less than a year, so I learned very little English and not much else by my not knowing the language" (Madero 1956, 15).[12] He was about twelve years old and also happened to have a French teacher and soon after was taken to study in Versailles and Paris, where he "learned most, for I was in possession of the language" (ibid., 19). Quoting Victor Hugo, he referred to this city as the "brain of the world" (ibid., 18).

As has been noted, Madero in this way expressed the spirit of the age. The editors of *La cruz astral* (The Astral Cross), an esoteric, Spiritualist Mexican periodical, celebrated their first year of publication around 1905, evaluating the efforts of spreading the doctrine. They wrote: "In France, Spain, the United States, and so on, there are confederations or associations perfectly organized and doing very significant work [of divulgation]. In Costa Rica, several societies have been founded both methodically and efficiently and they are disseminating our doctrines among the masses" (in Madero 2000b, 22). Notice that France and Spain come before the United States, which suggests the closer proximity that the editors felt toward the two European countries. It is also noteworthy that the one Latin American country that they mention is Costa Rica, an important foothold for other esoteric circles later on, suggesting possible circuits for the circulation of material culture: ideas, books, pamphlets, and so on.

It may be for these reasons that Madero felt a closer link with the French people and language than with North Americans and the English language. He even goes as far as to write:

> The Frenchman is very hospitable and treats the foreigner with a courtesy brimming with politeness. We of the Latin race, when in France, feel more at home than in the United States, for our character gets along better with the French than with the Anglo-Saxon. (Madero 1956, 20)

Geographical proximity did not match intellectual and cultural affinity in Madero's case, as was also true of most of the Mexican intelligentsia at the time. Madero and his family attended the 1889 *Exposition Universelle*, which the analogous world exhibition

in Chicago four years later attempted to outmatch. Significantly, the Chicago Exposition was also to host the first Parliament of the World's Religions, where yoga and Advaita philosophy were to enter for good the stage of world religious discourse due to the momentous participation of Swami Vivekananda. It was also in 1893 that Madero returned to North Mexico, so as to promote agricultural progress (irrigation and cotton growth, in particular, but also homeopathy) and to follow his political inclinations.[13]

But most important is the fact that during this period Madero came into contact with Allan Kardec's oeuvre and became a fervent sympathizer. From 1891 onward, he became an enthusiastic reader of *Revue Spirite*, Kardec's magazine, and especially adhered to the interpretation of Spiritism by Léon Denis, a follower of Kardec (Bubello, Diniz-Silva, and Villalba 2021, 255). His link with Spiritualism was thus received through a French channel and not directly adopted from North American conduits, despite the fact that modern Spiritualism was initially a North American elaboration. Consequently, in returning to Mexico, Madero held numerous Spiritualist *séances* and became a medium himself. The Mexican Revolution was still some years off, but the *séances* were not altogether separated from Madero's political career. In fact, his Spiritualist activity partly stimulated his political determinations, driven by a desire for democracy and liberalism.

Madero was a prolific author. He wrote several books, letters, and pamphlets advocating for better social justice and less-authoritarian government. He was especially opposed to the administration of Porfirio Diaz, who had been in office for over thirty years. In point of fact, it was because of Madero's effort that there is no re-election in Mexico nowadays, a means of preventing leaders from yielding to the temptation of holding power indeterminately.

It is indeed very interesting to find such apparently disparate traits in a single person: an advocate of liberalism, on the one hand; a promoter of communication with immortal spirits, on the other. Now, this is probably not *that* strange if one considers that, in Mexico at the time, liberals were rejecting social strictures, including institutionalized religion. Regardless of how "Christian" the liberals considered themselves, they usually distanced from institutionalized religion, especially the Roman Church. Liberal thinking implied criticism, both political and religious. Neither the government nor the church would like such stances, here or elsewhere. In consequence, different forms of life and organization were to be devised by freethinkers. Thus, Spiritualism depicted itself as a "scientific religion" of sorts; in a sense, "it is a by-product of modern positivism and owes its accession to methodical observation of the phenomena that were considered supernatural in previous epochs" (Madero, quoted in Chaves 2017, 224).

A Spiritualist revolutionary

By analyzing a novel by Ignacio Solares[14] that was inspired by Francisco I. Madero's persona, Brian Chandler remarks that "recalling the works that have so influenced Madero draws attention to the intellectual and spiritual environment in which he functioned both as a revolutionary leader as well as a spiritualist adept" (Chandler

2010, 11). Yet, it is not only the things he read but also the things he wrote that shaped Madero's career and figure. In his various letters, or communications with spirits, Madero's writing exudes a yogic sentiment of sorts. Even though these letters were technically not authored by Madero (they were allegedly dictated *to* him by the spirits), they can shed light on Madero's envisioning of political duty and human betterment.

What happens in Solares's novel can also be applied to Madero himself: "The leitmotif of the influence of the texts on the leader's life is present throughout the narration, highlighting the connections between reading and identity" (Chandler 2010, 8). It is in this light that we can also ponder the fact that Madero usually wrote under the pseudonym of "Arjuna" when contributing to Spiritualist magazines, such as *La Grey Astral*. Chandler notes (2010, 11): "at any given moment there exists a web of texts which provide a discursive space where all meaning is created." In other words, by resorting to pen names, Madero was not just merely veiling his political identity but was actually constructing a symbolic persona, one that was simultaneously eagerly reading Indian philosophy, holding dialogue with ethereal beings, and planning to take resolute political action. All three activities were, in fact, directed at creating a more democratic environment in Mexican politics. They cannot be separated.

It is important to contextualize Madero's Spiritualist inclinations. In Mexico, Spiritualism had faced severe critiques and attacks from 1890 onward, especially because President Porfirio Díaz had forged an alliance with the Catholic Church. Also, national education was decidedly driven by positivism, which was strongly opposed to such things as conversation with the spirits. Spiritualists, then, had to remain in partial obscurity, but managed to survive, although with some losses. The Sociedad Espírita Central, an association that gathered different Mexican Spiritualist groups, ceased to exist by 1906 (Tortolero Cervantes 2004, 73–79). Nevertheless, a first Latin American Spiritualist Convention was held in 1906 in Mexico City and, later, a second one in 1908. Madero participated in both, and even delivered the closing speech for the 1908 Convention (Madero 1956, 146). He became a defender (authoring books on the subject), a promoter (generously funding meetings and publications), and a practitioner (acting actively as a medium).

In Madero's communication with the spirits, two interlocutors stand apart: "José" and "Raúl," the latter supposedly the spirit of a younger brother who died as an infant while Francisco was studying in Baltimore, in the United States. In one of the myriad letters from Raúl, we read such things as: "I was eager to talk to you in order to revive you, that you do not slacken in your path" (Madero 2000a, 84). The letter is dated March 26, 1902, still a long way before the ignition of the revolution. As we will see, this will be a leitmotif in Francisco Madero's personal communications, and it is also a key theme in the *Bhagavadgītā*, a text he was to grow very fond of.

In said communication with the "invisibles," Madero as a medium channeled and penned messages from different spirits. All these spirits spoke in the same tone and with a shared mood and motif. In one of them, "Raúl" speaks to an audience (of which Madero was the scribe):

> The main thing you need to do is forge your character, that is, educate yourselves, for the character is the individual, the personality; and the chief basis of character, that which gives it its true value, is the will, supreme force of the soul, spiritual force par excellence, a force so powerful that sometimes the solid will of a man has saved nations and even humanity. (Letter of "Raúl Madero," dated October 10, 1903, in Madero 2000a, 133)

The invisible spirit is trying to encourage his liberal audience, a gathering of Spiritualists inclined toward social and political change. In other letters, the spirits are very clear in stating that the foremost tool they have to bring about this change is the spread of the Spiritualist doctrine and its implementation in both private and public spheres:

> Spiritualism brings to you a conception much more precise about the goal of life and palpably proves the need for doing good and getting rid of personal faults. [Hence] you should study this philosophy, so as to be prepared to repel any attack and so that you can talk more steadily and with more data in order to convince the skeptics. (Letter of "Raúl Madero," April 6, 1904, in Madero 2000a, 156)

Around 1906, a couple of years after the previously quoted letters, Madero was appointed chief editor of *La cruz astral*, the *espírita* magazine previously mentioned. In his editorial to the readers, he explains how he had been asked to provide substantial contributions to *La cruz astral*, and he writes these interesting words:

> In order to fulfil this offering, I wrote some articles that I of course did not want to pen under my own name, because I had previous appointments and of a different sort, which prevented me from devoting my whole attention to this task, so I adopted the pseudonym of "Arjuna." (Madero 2000b, 23)

It is no coincidence that Madero chose the *Mahābhārata* hero's name as one of his pen names. It was definitely not a decision out of literary inclinations. Even though Madero would write more overtly about the philosophical tenets of the *Bhagavadgītā* (an important passage of the *Mahābhārata*) in the years to come, he had obviously been reading the text and was already amply acquainted with the text's principles. This acquaintance is concomitant with his understanding of duty, moral virtue, and ultimately of yoga philosophy.

Madero won the presidency in the middle of 1911, after much turmoil and an exhausting campaign, although he effectively assumed the charge from November 1911 until his untimely death. Occultist and Spiritualist magazine *Helios*[15] published a laudatory note on this occasion in October 1911. According to the editors, it was because of his morality that "even the clergy recommended his [Madero's] candidacy, the candidacy of a liberal, a Spiritualist, a Freemason," despite the press having mocked Madero time and again due to his communication with the spirits (Madero 1956, 142). Yet, as a matter of fact, mock and libel against him were intense; there were a good number of publications from detractors that accused him on grounds of him being a Spiritualist, a Jesuit, a Freemason, a neo-occultist, a weakling, superstitious, and demented (Tortolero Cervantes 2004, 22–23). Note that this evinces that mainstream Christianity in Mexico was not openly favorable to alternative systems

such as Spiritualism. *Helios* recalls an editorial from the North American newspaper *The Globe* that had severely criticized and mocked Madero. *The Globe* editors claimed: "We who had made fun of Madero and his Spiritualism promise not to mock again any Spiritualist who decides to depose a tyrant in Latin America" (Madero 1956, 144–45). The Spiritualist publication tries to stress the recognition even from formerly opposed parties; it also, incidentally, evinces a sociopolitical antagonism between Mexico and the US government, who was favorable to dictator Díaz. It should also be noted that on his winning the elections, the government of the United States was at first sympathetic toward Madero, for they hoped that Mexico would loosen its strong ties with Europe; yet, Madero's taxes on oil extraction, the politicization of workers, and other issues eventually triggered Washington's uneasiness about the Madero administration (Garciadiego and Kuntz 2010, 546). In Mexico, there was no lack of detractors either. Eventually, a group of dissidents teamed up with the US embassy, apprehended Madero and his retinue, and took their lives on February 22, 1913 (ibid., 546–47).

For *Helios*, the appointment of Madero as the ruler of the nation was palpably seen as providential and hopeful. It also was destined and deserved. According to the editors, Madero's parents "were inspired by the pure teachings of our doctrine, the same doctrine that both Christna [*sic*, i.e., Krishna] and Jesus preached" (Madero 1956, 143). To some extent, such associations are triggered by the idea of the open landscape or the pool of culture that the global ecumene conveys (Hannerz 1996, 48–50). The praise in *Helios* then soars higher: "Under what tree, what holm oak, just like the ancient Druids and Bodhisatwas [*sic*], did he attain enlightenment?" (Madero 1956, 145). Madero is depicted as an enlightened being, whose ascension was to ensure "extraordinary moral and material progress," because the "sublime doctrine that he preaches is the best warrant of his self-sacrifice as a man, and his virtue as a ruler" (ibid., 149). Indeed, at one public demonstration, a passionate crowd wholeheartedly praised him thus: "Long live the Immaculate! Long live the Incorruptible! Long live the Redeemer!" (Tortolero Cervantes 2004, 23).

Yet, his character stumbled at times, and he was subjected to doubt and anxiety. Then the spirits would communicate and try to remedy Madero's angst:

> Procure for yourself all the moments you can, so as to be absorbed without thinking in anything at all, and with the purpose of letting the fluid currents of the higher spirits that you attract run through you. . . . Remain faithful to your plan; retreat to that isolated haven[16] of yours as much as possible, where you can best re-concentrate, pray more fervidly, and receive with more accuracy our inspirations. (Letter of "José," October 20, 1907, in Madero 2000a, 172)

It is not very difficult to find similarities between the instructions from this spirit and the recommendations commonly found in Hindu scriptural sources, such as the *Pātañjala-yogaśāstra*. Retreat, elimination of disturbing thoughts, concentration, meditation, and the channeling of higher forces are shared items between Madero's ethereal interlocutors and South Asian philosophical traditions. However, as far as I know, Madero was not particularly cognizant of Patañjali's philosophy or Vedantic schools. But these ideas feature prominently in the *Gītā*, for example in BhG 2.47–50:

"Go, then, and find a refuge in meditation and knowledge," and BhG 6.10: "The Yogi should assiduously apply himself to Yoga, residing in a solitary abode, with thoughts and body completely subdued, and free from concerns, affections, and hopes"[17] (Madero 2000b, 182, 221). Madero did read and comment on this, as we will see.

Madero's foremost yogic textual source

Francisco Madero was a keen reader not only of publications on Spiritualism but other topics as well (including growing cotton, herbology, homeopathy, and so forth). He effusively pleaded with others to get copies of spiritual books, many of which were published by the Theosophists, such as *Karma*, *The Voice of the Silence*, or the *Bhagavadgītā* (Tortolero Cervantes 2004, 91). Among his spiritual readings Madero counted the *Bhagavadgītā*, an important Indian text on forms of yoga, pre-eminently the disciplines of devotion (*bhaktiyoga*), knowledge (*jñānayoga*), meditation (*dhyānayoga*), and action (*karmayoga*). The *Gītā* antedates the other famous philosophical text the *Yogasūtra* and is considered a classical yoga treatise, or *yogaśāstra*. Krishna, the divine interlocutor, is commonly referred to as a *yogin*. The *Gītā* was to leave a deep impression on Madero's mind. It is interesting to note that Madero devoted time to write on the *Gītā* while in a forced exile in Texas in early 1911 due to the political turmoil. His reading and understanding of the text encouraged his political career. Even though he never called what he was doing "*karmayoga*," he continually paraphrased the purport of this type of discipline, as we shall briefly see. Also, it could be objected that in his memoirs, letters, and communications he rarely spelled out the word "yoga." Yet, as can be surmised by an attentive reading, his writings are brimming with references to Indian philosophy and most notably to Krishna's teachings in the *Gītā*.

The *Gītā* is one paradigmatic case of cultural transference not just because it has circulated widely, but also because it can link groups of people across boundaries and thus give space for various readings. In this sense, Hannerz (1996, 20) agrees with Benedict Anderson in that the commoditization brought about by the print culture somehow accelerated the capacity for different people to come into contact and partake of a shared intelligibility. Thus, both Spiritualists and Theosophists felt entitled to access the Hindu text. Indeed, particularly from the 1880s onward the *Bhagavadgītā* enjoyed a widespread and privileged status, in no small part due to the Theosophists' interest in the text in the light of the relationship between "Eastern" and "Western" traditions (Bergunder 2020).

The relationship of the BhG with politics is, of course, nothing surprising. There are plenty of well-recorded cases, especially in modern India. Notably, in this sense Madero was among the modern pioneers of a new, political reading of the *Gītā*, even foreshadowing Gandhi's use of the immortal Hindu text. Especially around the end of the nineteenth century and first two decades of the twentieth, different readings were utilized for diverse nationalistic purposes, from reformation projects such as the Arya Samaj, to rightwing ideologies close to the Hindutva ideology. In such variegated readings and interpretations, the *Gītā* was often seen through the lenses of activism, as was the case of agrarian leader Lajpat Rai, Sri Aurobindo, and Bal

Gangadhar Tilak, who claimed that the compulsion to fight (i.e., *karmayoga*) was more important than devotion or knowledge; a "masculine" Indian personality was of special relevance as an anticolonial project (Davis 2015, 125, 128, 131; Bergunder 2020, 84–87). In the various avatars of these hermeneutical readings (sometimes especially within revolutionaries), the *kṣatriya* dharma (or warrior-code) was highly praised (Davis 2015, 127). Aurobindo took to breath control and meditation and expected revolutionaries to become worldly activists "who needed the strength and wisdom that these [yogic] practices might provide" (ibid., 130). I have not found evidence that Madero practiced breath control, but he seemed to have undertaken meditation and certainly thought of himself as a committed *karmayogī*, guided by virtue, moral obligation (*dharma*), and, as in the case of his counterparts in India, a firm devotion toward the nation.

Madero had access to a translation of the *Gītā* into Spanish by Josep Roviralta Borell, a Theosophist from Spain. The Spaniard prepared two editions: one in 1896–1897, based on English and French editions, and a second one in 1910–1912, when he had already studied Sanskrit. The 1896–1897 version circulated widely in Mexico from early on, because most Spanish publications had ample diffusion in many Latin American countries, but also due to the great influence of the Theosophical Society. The translation was also published in serialized form in an occultist periodical when Madero was already president. This translation appeared in the *Helios* periodical between 1912 and 1913 and was accompanied by "commentaries from an adept." We now know that the adept was Madero himself, who did not feel free and confident to pen the commentary under his real name for political reasons (being a public figure, he was liable to constant attack from his detractors). This was not an isolated case; as I have already mentioned, he published other texts on Spiritualism and kindred subjects, always under pseudonyms such as "Bhima" or "Arjuna," two key characters in the Indian epic the *Mahābhārata*. Thus, in his *Manual espírita* (Spiritist Handbook) from around 1909, he chose "Bhima" as his pseudonym; he offers there an explanation of the soul and the path it treads before coming into the human body. (The way in which both the individual identity and the senses manifest in the world is strikingly similar to what Sāṃkhya philosophy expounds.)

There was still another translation of the *Bhagavadgītā* into Spanish, by Federico Climent Terrer, who, in turn, resorted to the Theosophist Annie Besant's version. Originally published in 1908, Climent Terrer's was the third Spanish version of the *Gītā*, as he duly explains in his introduction (Besant 1914, 9).[18] Yet Madero discarded Climent Terrer's edition because he considered Roviralta's a more exact and prestigious translation (Chaves 2017, 221). Even though Madero, a Spiritualist, was naturally opposed to Theosophy, he had to resort to publications and materials by the Theosophists, since they were one of the chief agents in promoting and distributing readings and publications on Indological subjects. In the Spanish language, most of the available material came from the Theosophical Society or was associated with it. In fact, the North American Katherine Tingley had already established a Raja Yoga Academy (dependent on the North American branch of the Theosophical Society) in Havana, Cuba; this was an outpost for dissemination of Theosophical ideas in Mexico,

Central America, and the Caribbean (Simões 2018, 292, 300). To put it in other words, Madero's "orientalism" was nurtured by Theosophical Orientalism.[19]

Here we should also consider that Roviralta's translation (and, occasionally, also Madero's gloss) is amply supplemented by quotes and references to previous translators and commentators. The most important names are: Śaṅkara, H. Blavatsky, Annie Besant, Charles Wilkins, Burnouf, M. Chatterji (who is quoted a lot), Subba Row (most likely Subba Rau, also cited quite frequently), Davies (very likely Rhys-Davies), Thomson (presumably J. Cockburn Thomson, who published one *Bhagadavgītā* in 1855), Sridhara, Pramadadasa-Mitra, William Quan Judge, K. T. Telang, and César Cantú. Of these, H. Blavatsky, Annie Besant, William Quan Judge, Row, and Telang are directly associated with Theosophy, which attests the enormous influence of the Society. Many readers would have accepted the appreciation of the *Gītā* by one of the Theosophical translators into Spanish, who wrote that reading it produces the same profound effect as listening to Wagner's music (Besant 1914, 22).

Indeed, the Theosophical Society was by that time one of the most influential channels for the circulation of ideas, people, and texts, and it had a lasting impact on different linguistic worlds. It was a major agent in the making of a global modernity. All of this implies the types of relationships, interactions, and interdependence, both supra-regional and transfrontier, that have taken place throughout time and which form part and parcel of global history inquiries (Hausberger 2018, 15). Thus, the Theosophical Society became an important and truly global cultural network.

Besant published two books on yoga, in 1908 and 1912. In the second one, in French, *Introduction à la yoga*, Besant gave a telling definition of the Indian discipline: "*une science, un ensemble de lois coordonnées mises en jeu pour obtenir un résultat précis.*" For her, yoga was to aid the evolution of consciousness (Ceccomori 2001, 43, 44). It is uncertain whether the volume was read by Madero, for he was struggling with his mandate, but he probably would have agreed with Besant's definition.

Madero's understanding of yoga

Now it will be convenient to look more carefully at the instances in which Madero addresses yoga either by name or by implication. I will mostly refer to Madero's commentaries to the *Bhagavadgītā* (BhG) but will also allude to other documents when deemed relevant. It is important to consider Madero's expositions and reflections on the topic, but also to note Roviralta Borrell's phrasings, since they determined what and how Madero read and received the BhG's teachings. It is important to bear in mind that whatever the spread of yoga at the time in the region, it mostly was understood as "Raja Yoga," after the fashion of Vivekananda and the Theosophists. It was not a postural understanding.

A telling feature of Madero's attitude throughout his gloss is that he strongly and repeatedly opposes the idea of pantheism and the loss of individuality by merging into the absolute; that is, he was clearly against Theosophical tenets (see Madero 2000b, 259). For example, despite the apparent implications of pantheism in BhG 7.15–19, Madero underlines Krishna's statements in BhG 9.4 ("I do not reside in creatures . . .").[20] Then he roundly asserts:

> This affirmation, done in very precise and categorical terms, without resorting to parable at all, can leave no doubt; it is the firmest negation of the Theosophical doctrines that claim that God resides within every human's spirit and that we all are gods. According to our view, this false idea stems from an error of translation and the lack of equivalent words for it, for through some Buddhist works the word "*deva*s" has been translated as "gods," whereas the word "devas" has a very different meaning from the word "Brahma," that is the indestructible, supreme Being, whereas the "*deva*s" are lesser divinities equal to Catholic saints. (Madero 2000b, 259)

With no real knowledge of the Sanskrit language, the Mexican exegete tried to question the Theosophical understanding of the word "*deva*." Needless to say, the semantic content of the word can vary greatly depending on the context. "Brahma" here is to be construed as "*brahman*," the more appropriate term for the universal, abstract spirit.

In traversing Theosophical and Spiritualist readings, Madero was on par with other similar enterprises; for example, in 1881, an ex-member of the Theosophical Society authored a book that exposed a syncretic Spiritualist-Theosophical theory that relied heavily on the *Gītā* in Charles Wilkins's translation (Bergunder 2020, 75–76). For Madero it was crucial to underpin his Spiritualist agenda, while at the same time finding a foothold for his political mission. Of course, sometimes he takes pains to project his ideological inclinations, because his translated BhG was often phrased in Theosophical terms. Time and again, the Mexican politician reinforces his Kardecian reading of the *Gītā*.[21] Reflecting on BhG 6.41 and 6.42, the Mexican commentator points out (Madero 2000b, 232): "This is extremely important because it is in complete accord with the teachings of Spiritualist doctrine." Indeed, the *Helios* editors were also keen on stressing the Spiritualist understanding of the Hindu text. In the preface to the presentation of Roviralta Borrell's translation, commented by "an adept," they state:

> Our readers will also have the opportunity to note the striking concordance between Krishna's philosophy and the modern teachings of Spiritualism, a concordance that is not restricted to just a few passages but embedded in the very core of the doctrine. (ibid., 163)

A text that constantly and openly elaborates on yoga (or forms of yoga), the BhG was to imprint on Madero an idea of what yoga was supposed to be, not only in the light of his Spiritualist leanings but also regarding his political concerns. The key theme by far in this understanding is action. The commentary to chapter 3 of the BhG phrases Krishna's definition of yoga as "that which rests on the upright fulfilment of deeds" (ibid., 195), a recurrent motif in Madero's annotations. Indeed, instigation toward action is Krishna's main objective toward a dejected and disheartened Arjuna, who has decided not to take part in battle. This seems to have fascinated Madero; the text spoke directly to him.

As I pointed out, it is important to take into account the translator's phrasing as well as Madero's own elucidations. However, it should also be noted again that this article addresses both texts (the *Bhagavadgītā* and Madero's exegesis) indirectly through translation.[22] In chapter 2, verse 39 of BhG, yoga is explicitly defined as a

"philosophy of action" (ibid., 180), and in BhG 3.3 as "Yoga, or practice, which is the devotion that consists of the upright fulfilment of deeds" (ibid., 189).[23] Madero devotes considerable space to this in his commentary. Then in BhG 4.11, the translator provides the following footnote in order to further explain what a yogi is: "Devotees who are intent on the practice of Yoga [are] 'those who possess the upright knowledge of action,' according to Chatterji"[24] (ibid., 211). If the notion of action or deed is already present in the text, it will acquire an even more ample dimension in Madero's understanding.

Madero is especially receptive to Krishna's critique of ascetic inactivity and was inclined to promote "a man of upright action," or yogi, as the footnote to BhG 6.1 remarks (ibid., 219). Paraphrasing Krishna, Madero comments: "It is possible that the life of a man of action may not be as pure as that of the ascetic, but since the onslaughts he suffers on account of his passions are harsher and he is more exposed to temptation, his triumphs are greater" (ibid., 215). Needless to say, he saw himself exactly like the man of action who had to resist and overcome various temptations. Moreover, his political mission somehow purged him from possible moral faults and justified casualties: "the man who, defending his land or society, goes to war, can kill numerous enemies without this bringing a stain on him; just like the lotus's leaf comes immaculate out of [muddy] waters, in like manner the warrior will be immaculate and glorious after battle, where he fulfilled his duty" (ibid., 216).

It comes as no surprise that the Mexican leader had to deal with anxiety and hesitation. In his memoirs, time and again he vents his apprehensions and struggles to regain his resolve. The *Gītā* was no doubt instrumental in helping him deal with such turmoil, as well as in reinforcing the legitimacy of his fight. It would not have been impossible that he considered himself a yogi of sorts, especially when carefully reading passages like BhG 6.19–20: "The yogi who has his mind under control and is absorbed in contemplation of the Supreme I [or "thus employed in the exercise of his devotion," in Wilkins 1871, 58] is comparable to a lamp, whose flame, guarded from the wind, does not experience any oscillation. When he has his mind in repose, chained by the practice of Yoga, when he contemplates the Universal Spirit in his Supreme I" (Madero 2000b, 222).

Insistence on a firm resolution was crucial for the Mexican politician, who stressed also such passages as BhG 6.23: "Know then that that breaching of all association with pain is called Yoga. To attain this Yoga, a firm perseverance and unwavering faith are required" (ibid., 222).[25]

The discipline of action

Nevertheless, there were also those verses that seemed to define yoga as something a bit different. In BhG 4.25, for example, yoga and yogis are explained in relation to devotion (Madero 2000b, 202, 204). Indeed, one of the main motifs in the *Gītā* is to avow for the discipline of devotion toward God, who is Krishna himself. This was not a reading that Madero laid stress on, although he was certainly aware of it. Overtly revolutionary, his yoga paid more attention to the contrast between contemplative meditation and active engagement in the world, as noted earlier in the article.

The contrast was essential for Madero, since it seemed to support his political drives. Through his Spanish *Gītā*, he conceived of "fakirs" as extreme ascetics who mastered bodily functions, as opposed to the figure of the yogi, who was explained as a "*santo*" (Spanish for "saint" or "holy man"), as he very clearly underlined in his comments to BhG 6.15 (ibid., 228). There is a critique of extreme austerities. In the commentator's view, the practices of "most of the Catholic monks and current Indian fakirs" have no other effect "but the weakening of the body, a tool for the spirit, and preventing it from manifesting itself in all lucidity" (ibid., 230). While espousing Krishna's avowal of disimpassioned action, Madero was also finding justification for his sponsoring the political armed struggle, one that in *Gītā* parlance was "dharmic," namely lawful and mandatory, if also bloody.

At times, Madero himself played the role of Arjuna. A year after the previous episode, Madero sent a series of letters to his father. The champion of democracy had just finished his popular *La sucesión presidencial en 1910* (The Presidential Succession of 1910), a polemical book against absolute power that was not going to be welcomed by the status quo and Porfirio Díaz, Mexican president since 1876. As mentioned, "Arjuna" was his favorite pen name, presumably because he saw himself with a similar role in life and office.

Because the book could easily instigate retaliation from the government, Madero's father was reluctant about its publication. Therefore, Madero (1956, 78) compelled his father to "muster courage and energy so that you too can fulfil your mission, which implies not preventing me from taking action." As one critic puts it, for Francisco Madero politics was "Spiritualism in practice," as long as it was undertaken in a just, detached, and salvific action, without craving the fruits thereof, as stated in the *Bhagavadgītā* (Chaves 2012, 75). This is reminiscent of Mahatma Gandhi's similar use of the *Gītā* in his pursuit of Indian independence some years afterward—and it is worth stressing that Gandhi actually came to the *Gītā* in a Theosophical context (Bergunder 2020, 82–83). This is telling of the strategies of reception in modern and reformist contexts worldwide, and the similar tendencies for a "revolutionary yoga." At the same time, the different contexts of reception and strategies of adaption of a given text help increase its longevity and relevance for particular times and places.

Madero's battle had to be fought because the national socioeconomic situation demanded it. It was unconscionable that one person wanted to hold on to power indefinitely, while so many poor were left to hunger, illiteracy, and backwardness. In his commentary to the *Gītā*, he writes: "For example, inhabiting space, we see that a people we care about—whether because we had been a part of [that people] or for whatever other circumstances—is being oppressed and suffers and deems its oppressors a dam that prevents progress, without a doubt this people's lot will concern us" (Madero 2000b, 232). He was evidently justifying himself. A virtuous man had to act. That man would be a yogi of sorts. On reading BhG 6.45, Madero states: "The yogi is superior to ascetics; he is considered more preeminent than wise men and even better than men of action. Thus, Arjuna, attempt to become a yogi" (ibid., 226). Commenting on this passage, Madero draws an interesting analogy:

> Another example: a person considers that the evolution of a people has been restrained by oppression or tyranny; his duty is to fight against those obstacles,

> even to the point of sacrifice if necessary. Acting in such manner, he knows, on the one hand, that he fulfils his duty, and he also has the conviction that his sacrifice will not be sterile. . . . (ibid., 226–27)

This mood finds equivalence in some of his correspondence with the spirits. Two or three years before the *Gītā* exegesis, this letter was dictated to him: "As in evil, so in good, and especially in this one, the light of cause and effect works constantly. Just like in verifying some evil action you have to suffer all its consequences, until 'karma is used up,' as the Buddhists and Theosophists say, in like manner a good deed renders immeasurable benefits to you" (Letter of "José," May 24, 1908, in Madero 2000a, 218). A month later, Madero was victim to doubt and anxiety, so another spirit addressed him:

> Without a doubt, you worry too much about some details and let yourself fall into the ground, and in that position and that circumstance, what are but grains of sand appear to you as mountains . . . . [The tests you are to face] are the last shackles of your karma. (Letter of "Raúl," June 22, 1908, in Madero 2000a, 224)

In these letters, "karma" is explicitly spelled out, but in the sense of the law of cause and effect. In Madero's understanding, karma can be worn out through good deeds underpinned by resolve and rightful action. If one were to put this in other words, it would amount to something like: karma (the energetic consequence generated by past actions) can be used up by *karmayoga* (the discipline of rightful, selfless action).

This was a belief shared by Madero's Spiritualist kindred spirits. The *Helios* editors wrote in the preface to the BhG: "These teachings, as well as the other rules it gives for enhancement, are of the most beautiful morality; it rejects religious practices that are carried on without any criterion and recommends as a most efficient means for betterment, an intensely active life, that is, the philosophy of action" (Madero 2000b, 165). It should also be mentioned that in most Western countries, the *Gītā* was not yet received as a religious scripture but more as a source of inspiration: "knowledge of the *Bhagavad Gita* since the end of the eighteenth century had been at par with ecumenism and never really had a missionary zeal, of religious conversion, but rather a 'spiritual' as well as a 'cultural' sense" (Chaves 2012, 71–72). In any case, Madero only managed to comment on twelve of the eighteen chapters of the *Gītā* due to his treacherous assassination in early 1913. As a homage, *Helios* decided to continue the publication of the rest of the *Bhagavadgītā*, revealing the true identity of the "adept" and giving a farewell to "our brother of unforgettable memory, apostle, martyr, honor, and glory of his motherland and of all humanity" (Madero 2000b, 298).

Concluding remarks

Indian nationalist Tilak called for a historically situated reading of the *Bhagavadgītā*, fit for this "Age of Karma" (Davis 2015, 130–32). In a sense, Madero undertook this approach, although he was far from endorsing such chauvinistic and communalist ideologies as Tilak's. Madero's reading was both historically situated and regionally adapted. Perhaps, however, his fondness for the *Gītā* was a bit closer to Gandhi's

embracing of Krishna's teachings, an "infallible guide to conduct" (ibid., 137). Gandhi wrote the "Anasaktiyoga" or "Discipline of Non-Attached Action" (his interpretive introduction to the *Gītā*) some eighteen years after Madero published his commentaries. Like Madero, Gandhi also interiorized Kurukshetra as a battleground for an inner struggle, by which self-realization could be achieved. Habits of meaning are shared, but they can also become idiosyncratic (Hannerz 1996, 23).

Madero's commentaries on the *Bhagavadgītā* had considerable success and were read by modernist literati in Mexico such as Amado Nervo or thinkers like José Vasconcelos. The general public, in fact, was aware of Madero's unorthodox leanings, despite his resorting to Indian pen names. Thus, for example, on his being elected president of Mexico in 1911, the Spiritualist publication *Helios* issued a substantial note on the occasion, praising Madero wholeheartedly. *Helios* also quoted a note from a North American newspaper that somewhat derisively said that on that day, "the lunatic, Spiritualist, deranged reformer was unanimously elected president by the Mexican people, who consider him a *libertador*, an apostle, and a seer" (Madero 1956, 144).

All in all, *Helios* sought to enhance Madero's ethical virtues. In the same text, the editors wrote:

> Within his spirit, there were no doubt opposing feelings that prompted both inertia and action, which to him perhaps exemplified that fearful scene from the sacred book of the East where Arjuna, in the midst of a battle . . . lays down his weapons, whereupon the god reprimands him and, in superb language, compels him to fight. . . . Thus, the apostle became a warrior. (ibid., 148)

The editors of *Helios* were very clear in presenting Madero as a modern, Mexican avatar of the great Hindu hero. As a matter of fact, they even stressed the fact that, while preparing for the revolution, Madero was also spending some time in writing his commentaries to the *Gītā* (ibid., 148).

The analogy was not just a literary device displayed in *Helios*; Madero himself saw his mission under that light, as was shown previously. There is ample evidence of this, especially in the years prior to the Revolution. In 1908, for example, he records an event in which a friend of his, in charge of installing an electoral stall, was feeling shaken and intimidated. Madero writes: "I was able to revive him, uplift his spirits, and make him understand his duty" (ibid., 56–57). Here Madero plays the role of Krishna, reassuring his downcast friend. A similar event happened with "cultural *caudillo*" José Vasconcelos, once on the verge of relinquishing the party.[26] But Madero more clearly sought to emulate Arjuna, an archetypal *karmayogi*. Through cultural transfer, Madero enacted a "revolutionary yoga" that was enthused by the *Bhagavadgītā*, filtered through Spiritualism and Theosophy, and adapted to Mexico's political changes in the first decades of the twentieth century.

Indeed, "in the maze of action, Madero makes use of the *Gītā* as an ethical and philosophical compass, as a great mirror where to project his personal situation and where to find a Spiritual meaning for his political practice" (Chaves 2017, 226). Without calling it so, Madero puts in practice *karmayoga*, the discipline of action, in his struggle for democracy. His understanding of yoga was indebted to a wide

network of cultural exchange. Moreover, in Madero's case it was a dual network: on the one hand, his Spiritualist agenda was a filter through which to interact with the world; on the other hand, the Theosophical production of knowledge about India was a major point of access to South Asian lore in different parts of the globe. And all of this was then merged in a specific Mexican context and, at least partially, stirred significant political events. For some historians, whereas Madero's opposition to Díaz was indeed successful, his own presidential management failed; he did bring about significant structural changes but was heavily inexperienced (Garciadiego and Kuntz 2010, 541–42). And then he was assassinated. So, despite his confidence in the ethical import of *karmayoga*, his electoral victory did not last long.

It is important to note the influential role of the Theosophical Society as a "truly global movement" that very clearly provides "an outstanding example of the complex entanglements of the global religious history of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries (Krämer and Strube 2020, 3–4; Strube 2021). Indeed, it has been noted by early twenty-first-century studies that Theosophy, Spiritualism, and occultism ("esotericism," in short) have deeply affected and shaped a wide array of ideas and practices that are still visible today (Strube 2021, 61). In Madero's case, Theosophy and Spiritualism form part of a narrative of interaction through which the *Bhagavadgītā* was received and then utilized as a political handbook of sorts, by underpinning a correct and just action to be performed for the sake of a nation. The cultural transference of the influential Hindu text was refurbished in a distinct political context, but at the same time connected to the larger history of Theosophy and Spiritualism. The present case shows the possibilities of thinking about yoga not just internationally, but transregionally as well. This helps best assess the complex dynamics of intercultural exchange and transfer across regions, languages, and communities.

There is a vast array of significant cases that also call for transregional perspectives, cases that cross boundaries, regions, languages, and actors, for example: the already cited participation of the German occultist Arnold Krumm-Heller during the Mexican Revolution (Villalba 2018), the influential and widely read work of a Chilean diplomat that re-articulated the esoteric Hitlerism of a French fascist (Versluis 2014), or the interesting Colombian conflation of sexual magic and neo-Gnosticism that culminated in the Universal Christian Church (Zoccatelli 2014). These multiple developments (dealing with Latin America, yoga, esotericism, and Asian religions) are still understudied. Also, the involved scholars still need to establish cross-region and cross-disciplinary dialogue.

At least for Madero and his Spiritualist colleagues, the package of cultural transfer (Krishna's teachings, *karmayoga*, Spiritualist ideals, and Theosophical discourse) informed the narrative of an ethical struggle of quasi-mythological propositions. That narrative had enduring consequences in Mexican history. Madero's Spiritualist and yogic agenda enabled a transcendent political event and inaugurated a new chapter in Mexican modern history. It also inaugurated a long history of adaptation of the yoga culture in Latin America.

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Notes

1. The present article is part of a wider research project, "Globalización, percepción y adaptaciones del Yoga en México," financed by the Consejo Nacional de la Ciencia y la Tecnología of the Mexican government. First presented at the European Conference on South Asian Studies (ECSAS) in 2018, this text has had numerous incarnations, throughout which many people have provided me with useful comments and observations. I would like to specifically acknowledge José Ricardo Chaves for corrections and details in two different readings of the text. I also thank Bernd Hausberger, Keith Cantú, the editors of this special issue, and the anonymous reviewers for their valuable suggestions.

2. Simões (2018) offers a pioneering, brief overview of this Latin American history; see also Muñoz (2021b) for a more detailed introduction.

3. In strict sense, the so-called New Age phenomenon began as a movement during the counterculture of the 1960s, boosted by the activities and writings of influential figures such as Peter Caddy and the Findhorn Foundation, David Spangler, Alice Bailey, Benjamin Crème, and the Esalen Institute, among others. A loose compound of beliefs and practices, the New Age movement has affinities with both previous and newer approaches toward spirituality and the development of human potential, for example: Immanuel Swedenborg, Franz Mesmer, New Thought, Spiritualism, and Theosophy. For a more profound and better insight, see Clarke (2006, 22–37). Important monographs on this are: W. Hanegraaff (1996), and James Lewis and Gordon Melton (1992).

4. See Muñoz (2021a, 182–88) for a nuanced discussion of Mexican Indology.

5. Similarly, Simões (2022) focuses on interesting cases in Brazil in order to shed light on the dynamics of some yogic developments that do not depend on South Indian lineages.

6. To cite but one example: Venezuelan Simón Bolívar (1783–1830) inspired and promoted the independence not only of his land but also of Bolivia, Colombia, Ecuador, Panamá, and Perú. He became an admired figure in the rest of Hispanic America. In consequence, different Pan-American or Pan-Hispanic and nationalistic discourses—opposed to imperialism and expansionism, especially of Spain and the United States—that have developed in the region since the nineteenth century are known as Bolivarianism.

7. The Theosophical Society is an international organization that promotes "a divine wisdom" (Theosophy) that is to be found in the amalgamation of Neo-Platonism, Vedanta, Kabbalah, Buddhism, and other philosophies and religions (predominantly Eastern), and which was formerly opposed to Spiritualism. It was founded in 1875 in New York by Helena P. Blavatsky, Henry Steel Olcott, and William Q. Judge. They started their own journal, *The Theosophist*, protested the colonial regime, and experienced several internal struggles. Their headquarters

were moved to Adyar, Madras (India) some years later, and they soon opened branches around the globe (Krämer and Strube 2020, 6–9). For more in-depth information, see Rudbog and Sand (2020), Godwin (1994), and Chajes and Huss (2016).

8. That is, an adept with firm and steady wisdom, as characterized in BhG 2.55.

9. The history and context of Spiritualism in Mexico is rich and long; I will not try to survey it here. For a good historical account, I refer readers to Tortolero Cervantes (2004), and Bubello, Diniz-Silva, and Villalba (2021).

10. There is a linguistic differentiation in Spanish: "*espiritismo*" refers to Spiritualism in general, whereas "*espírita*" specifically designates its Kardecian version. Similarly, in French "*spiritisme*" can be distinguished from "*doctrine spirite*," Kardec's development. I owe José Ricardo Chaves this pertinent reminder. "Spiritualism" is the larger term, "Spiritism" a specific form therein. For the sake of fluidity, I will be using Spiritualism as a general name for these practices.

11. The strong influence of Kardecian Spiritualism in Brazil is attested by the release in 2019 of the biographical film *Kardec*, directed by Brazilian filmmaker Wagner de Assis. As of 2024, it was still available on Netflix.

12. All translations from Spanish are my own, unless otherwise stated.

13. It is also worth mentioning that Madero's own personal physician was no other than Arnold Krumm-Heller (1876–1949), a German occultist who worked in Mexico for a long period not only as a doctor, but as an occultist, a Rosicrucian, and an intelligence agent. He also participated in Spiritualist activities. After Madero's death, Krumm-Heller continued to work with other Mexican leading figures. Germany saw a shared interest with Mexico in trying to resist the advance of the United States (Villalba 2018). Still more work on this relationship is needed.

14. Ignacio Solares (1945–) is a well-known Mexican writer and playwright. Among other works, he has published *Madero, el otro* (Solares 1989), a historical novel based on the political figure and legacy of Francisco I. Madero.

15. *Helios* was published by a Spiritualist Mexican organization that depended on various benefactors, including Madero. It had domestic circulation mainly. Yet, due to links with other Spiritualists, it probably also reached—albeit in very limited numbers—countries such as Spain, Argentina, Cuba, and maybe Costa Rica. Among *Helios*'s editors was the Costa Rican politician and writer Rogelio Fernández Güell (1883–1918), himself a Freemason and noteworthy Spiritualist. I thank José Ricardo Chaves for this information.

16. Madero owned a ranch in the mountain range of Coahuila State, in North Mexico. The ranch was known as "Australia"; it was a rather modest, one-storied house located in an isolated spot. This was a favorite place for Madero to take some time off and to host Spiritualist séances. He even gave instructions that no metal should be placed in any of the rooms, lest it hinder his mediumship efforts.

17. Cf. "The Yogee constantly exerciseth the spirit in private. He is recluse, of a subdued mind and spirit; free from hope, and free from perception," and "Seek an asylum, then, in wisdom alone," as translated in the popular, first translation to English by Wilkins (1871, 38, 57).

18. The first one was an 1893 Argentinian version from the French translation by Burnouf; the second one was Roviralta Borrell's. For the history of the early editions and translations of the *Bhagavadgītā* into Spanish, see Figueroa Castro (2017, 324–29). Annie Besant's translation/edition

of the *Gītā* had appeared in 1895, just a year and a half before the Spanish version resorted to by Madero.

19. Theosophical Orientalism was a complex, multifaceted phenomenon. It depended on joint processes of transculturation and deculturation, relied on an established community of intercultural learners, and saw itself as "the Easternized Other." See Baier (2016, 310, 318–24).

20. *mayā tatam idaṃ sarvaṃ jagad avyaktamūrtinā / matsthāni sarvabhūtani na cāhaṃ teṣv avasthitaḥ* // "This whole world was spread abroad by me in my invisible form. All things are dependent on me, and I am not dependent on me" (Wilkins 1871, 69).

21. The debates and tensions between Kardecian spiritualism and broader Theosophical interpretations of reincarnation have been addressed in Chajes (2019).

22. That is to say that we have to remember that the BhG primarily employed here is not the Sanskrit original but a Spanish translation, with a Spanish-language commentary by Madero. Both the translation and the commentary (as other primary sources) have been translated into English by me.

23. "It had before been observed by me, that in this world there are two institutes: That of those who follow the Sankhya, or speculative science, which is the exercise of reason in contemplation; and the practical, or exercise of moral and religious duties" (BhG 3.3., cited in Wilkins 1871, 43).

24. The reference is very likely to Mohini Mohun Chatterji (1858–1936), a Bengali Theosophist who often spoke of a cooperation between Hinduism and Christianity. Irish poet William Butler Yeats composed a poem in praise of him.

25. *taṃ vidyād duḥkhasaṃyogaviyogaṃ yogasaṃjñitam / sa niścayena yoktavyo yogo' nirviṇṇacetasaḥ* // "This disunion from the conjunction of pain may be distinguished by the appellation Yoga, spiritual union or devotion. It is to be attained by resolution, by the man who knoweth his own mind"; Wilkins (1871, 58).

26. Vasconcelos was reassured by his friend. After the revolution, Vasconcelos became an important intellectual figure and key actor in the modernization of public education in Mexico. His project was dependent on his own philosophical theories and understanding of South Asian cultures; in 1920 he authored *Estudios indostánicos* (Vasconcelos 1938), probably the first Mexican Indological monograph. For a detailed discussion of this interesting case, see Muñoz (2021a).

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