Authorizing yoga: the pragmatics of cultural stewardship in the digital era.

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The so-called Digital Age, many claim, is marked by a shift from a global economy based on material industry to one based on the manipulation of information/knowledge. Whether or not one agrees with this assessment, the increased realization of information/knowledge as a prime source of market value has led to a consequent growth in the reach of intellectual property (IP) rights and in the diversity of individual and cultural ownership claims considered possible. This expansion has sparked heated debates marked by a broad sense of crisis that the very foundations of culture, creativity, and even humanity, are increasingly subject to privatization.

This article explores a key issue in these debates by examining processes of appropriation with respect to intangible heritage and the consequent development of “stewardship” as an authoritative claim over future interpretations of culture-as-resource. The discussion focuses on the complexities of fashioning contemporary cultural stewardship claims with respect to South Asian classical medicine, generally, and yoga, specifically. I examine the emergence of a particular understanding of cultural stewardship that enables certain parties, such as the Indian state, to be identified as legitimate guardians of South Asian intangible heritage while others, such as private individuals, come to be labeled cultural pirates.

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