

# "Nice little things like that": Oom the Omnipotent and the marketing of yoga to the American public

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“Nice Little Things Like That:” Oom the Omnipotent and the Marketing of Yoga to the American Public.

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Dr. Pierre Bernard, the American teacher of tantra often referred to as “Oom the Omnipotent,” has alternately been portrayed as a charlatan, a legitimate scholar of Sanskrit, and even a sort of black magician. Bernard famously described himself as “a curious combination of the businessman and the religious scholar.” By looking closely at the available sources Bernard seems to have approached this combination through two very different strategies of marketing Sanskrit, tantra, and yoga. By the end of this process, Bernard had pioneered the form that yoga would eventually take in America: A vaguely spiritual practice, primarily undertaken by the middle-class and the affluent, for the purpose of health and the cultivation of the self.

Bernard's first approach, which I characterize as esoteric, involved cultivating an exotic mystique that allowed him to earn money selling the services of a magician. This strategy led to opprobrium, at the height of which two teenage girls charged him with abduction. By contrast, the second approach was exoteric and was developed after meeting his wife Blanche de Vries. With her help, he worked to demystify tantra and yoga, aligning these practices with the physical culture movement. Yoga was now taught as a form of preventative medicine rather than a religious practice. By “trading his turban for tweed,” Bernard was able to negotiate entry into high society as well as academia. He also acquired a mansion and a fleet of luxury cars.

New religious movements tend to meet less resistance in America when they resemble Bernard's exoteric strategy. By contrast, groups that follow Bernard's first strategy, featuring initiatory knowledge, charismatic leaders with miraculous abilities, and prescribed forms of dress and behavior are typically regarded with suspicion. In short, because Bernard was deliberately applying a business strategy to Hindu practices, he revealed a great deal about America's market for Asian religions.

Very little is known about Bernard's early life and he went to great lengths to conceal his origins. Sources agree that he was not born Pierre Bernard and used several aliases.<sup>1</sup> Some say he worked in a circus, which would explain how Bernard had mastered skills like acrobatics and how to train elephants.<sup>2</sup> Bernard claims to have traveled through India where he learned Sanskrit and

achieved the title of Shastri, although some biographers doubt he ever left America.<sup>3</sup> At the start of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Bernard appeared in San Francisco where he ran a clinic healing with hypnosis. He was highly regarded as a hypnotist and once performed a samadhi “death trance” during which doctors were invited to cut him in an attempt to illicit a response.<sup>4</sup> Bernard’s clinic eventually became known as the Tantrik Order of America.<sup>5</sup> In 1906, he left San Francisco for New York, possibly in response to the San Francisco earthquake. After Bernard's arrival in New York, more historical details become available about his life.

### The Esoteric Strategy

It seems that Bernard's first attempt to combine the roles of “business man” and “religious scholar” involved cultivating a mysterious persona so that he could sell his services as a seer and healer. While Bernard used tantra as the foundation of this persona, I believe that he was not above borrowing elements from traditions that would have been more familiar to his American clients—namely spiritualism and vaudeville. This approach could have been influenced by his time traveling with a circus, where he likely observed Americans' appetite for the wondrous and the exotic.

On May 4<sup>th</sup>, 1910, Pierre Bernard was blasted onto the pages of *The New York Times* as “Oom the Omnipotent.” Two teenage girls accused Bernard of holding them against their will through a combination of intimidation and “hypnotic power.” When asked about the circumstances of Bernard's arrest, a detective stated:

When we got upstairs we saw eight elderly men and five women in tights and bathing costumes. They were just exercising. They were tumbling on a mat, which had strange figures on it. The defendant was standing by a crystal ball and was clad in tights that came to his knees and a jersey on which were some queer figures. . . . It’s a high class place, your Honor. Fixed up swell.<sup>6</sup>

What the detective described as “tumbling on a mat” could have been yoga postures or Bernard might have been teaching them acrobatics from his circus days. If they were doing yoga, this was probably the first instance of a modern American yoga class complete with mats and tights. Indeed, the tights that have become synonymous with yoga may actually be a modified acrobat's costume.

The detective also mentions a crystal ball, a thoroughly occidental feature. One source

mentions that during World War I, Bernard offered his services as a seer, charging \$50 to let clients see their loved ones in Europe through clairvoyance.<sup>7</sup> While Indian tantrics are not consulted for divination, the juxtaposition of an Indian mystic and a crystal ball had already been introduced to the American consciousness by vaudeville. Claude Alexander Conlin “the Crystal Seer” wore a turban and consulted a crystal ball during his vaudeville act—an act that was later parodied by Johnny Carson. Bernard also worked as a holistic healer. Both the alleged victims claim that they were sick when they met Bernard and that he offered to heal them. In addition to abduction, he was also charged with practicing medicine without a license.<sup>8</sup> One girl’s testimony suggests that Bernard was teaching her metaphysics and offering her some form of initiation.<sup>9</sup>

So by 1910, we have a picture of Bernard using whatever knowledge of tantra he had to market himself as a seer, a faith healer, and to offer occult initiation. These endeavors may have been profitable but they also wound him in jail. Bail was initially set at \$15,000 and Bernard spent three months awaiting trial in the New York City jail known as “The Tombs.”<sup>10</sup> In the end, the case was dismissed when the alleged victims fled the city's jurisdiction and could not be reached. Why the two girls suddenly refused to testify is not clear.<sup>11</sup>

After his release, the New York press developed an obsession with the figure they called “The Omnipotent Oom.” It is not certain where the name “Omnipotent Oom” came from. Bernard eventually made it clear that he disliked the name and considered it an invention of the media. One source indicates that during initiation, Bernard's group would chant, “Oom man na padma Oom.”<sup>12</sup> This is clearly a variation or corruption of the Tibetan mantra “Aum mani padme hum” and may well be the source of the name. For a brief period, the term “Omnipotent Oom” existed independently of Bernard and could be used to describe a variety of phenomena. In 1936, a sports writer described a boxer as “James 'Oom the Omnipotent' Braddock” after he performed a card trick.<sup>13</sup> Oom is also referenced in the comedic novel *But Gentleman Marry Brunettes*, published in 1927<sup>14</sup> and in a medical review on “psychological charlatans.”<sup>15</sup>

### The New York Sanskrit College

In response to this unwanted attention, Bernard seems to have shifted his strategy, emphasizing his role as a para-academic and downplaying his mysterious persona. Michaels et. al. suggest that after the abduction trial, Bernard ceased to speak of tantra, and emphasized only yoga.<sup>16</sup> Bernard opened a new institution with the respectable sounding name of the New York Sanskrit College. Again, there are

only a few clues as to what happened at the college. The neighbors spoke of night revels and claimed that, “women were in the habit of coming to the place in taxicabs at midnight and staying there several hours.”<sup>17</sup> The district attorney continued to scrutinize Bernard while the media continued to churn out rumors—including one that Bernard sought virgins to sacrifice to his elephants (Ironically, Bernard would not acquire elephants for several more years).<sup>18</sup>

In her autobiography, reporter Mary Doyle admits that she was sent to infiltrate Bernard's school. Her mission was to arrange a situation in which Bernard would be arrested and press agents would be present to report on it. However, her spying uncovered only Sanskrit lessons. If Bernard was still offering his services as a mystic, Doyle failed to detect this in her two-week observation.<sup>19</sup>

Regardless, police raided the New York Sanskrit College in 1911. A *New York Times* article on the raid, describes meeting an Indian man who taught yoga and Sanskrit at the college. This detail suggests that Bernard had some real ties to India. Although the raid found nothing, Bernard was eventually driven out of New York City. Emma Rosalsky rented out the Sanskrit College during the day and used the space to teach kindergarten. Reporters took it upon themselves to inform Rosalsky, in front of her kindergarteners, that she might be renting space from a sex cult. The last straw came when the New York Sanskrit College was targeted by the State Board of Education, who pointed out that Bernard had neither a degree nor a license.<sup>20</sup>

### The Success of the Exoteric Strategy

Bernard was eventually successful in recreating himself from a mystical healer with traces of vaudeville, to a respected but eccentric member of the community. This transformation depended on three factors: the contacts and direction of his wife, Blanche De Vries, the wealth of Anne Harriman Rutherford Vanderbilt, and a market for health fads pioneered by Benarr McFadden. Bernard married Blanche De Vries in 1918. De Vries was a dancer by trade but had contacts in the New York aristocracy. Some credit de Vries, rather than Bernard, with developing a “tantrik health system.” Because this system was preventative medicine rather than curative medicine, Bernard could no longer be indicted for practicing medicine without a license. More importantly, instead of offering to heal teenage clients, Bernard could now sell tantra to vain, upper class New Yorkers.<sup>21</sup>

It was probably De Vries who introduced Bernard to Anne Harriman Rutherford Vanderbilt and it was probably Vanderbilt who funded Bernard's highly successful country club in upstate New York. In 1919, Bernard opened a facility in Nyack that would eventually be called the Clarkestown Country

Club.<sup>22</sup> The people of Nyack knew of Bernard's reputation and were initially resistant to his presence. In addition to the rumors that Bernard ran a love cult, his title of "Dr." led to a rumor that he was performing abortions. The Nyack police refused to interfere, pointing out that Bernard was now a major tax payer. So citizens brought their complaints to the state police, who raided the club on horseback.<sup>23</sup>

Some accounts of this raid report that Bernard was performing a headstand when the police entered, teaching his students how to "reverse the course of their blood." Monica Randall gives the following account:

A squad of troopers galloped onto the estate, then burst into the room where Bernard was standing on his head wearing a loin cloth. The sergeant in charge did a double take then read off a list of licentious charges. Bernard, used to such things, righted himself with a single athletic flip and responded, "I'm a religious scholar, a man of common sense in love with beauty and that sort of thing. There ain't no nudist cult here. No, sir, nothing like that. Acrobat exercises for men and women, lectures on art and philosophy, nice little things like that. Now get off my property or I'll sue you."<sup>24</sup>

Bernard's claim that he was teaching only "nice little things" became the hallmark of his new strategy. By constantly presenting yoga as "common sense," "scientific," harmless, and secular Bernard was able to win acceptance and fortune in Nyack. The Rockefellers owned a home across the river from his Country Club and the Morgans visited at least once.<sup>25</sup> Bernard reinvested his capital, becoming an important member of the local community and adopting an increasingly mundane and legitimate persona. At the height of his career, Bernard owned twelve million dollars in real estate. He did, however, continue to make unusual investments such as his troupe of elephants as well as several other circus animals.

If vaudeville provided the elements for Bernard's esoteric model of tantra, than the physical culture movement, and its proponent Bernarr McFadden, became the prototype for the exoteric model. The two men were friends and neighbors in Nyack. McFadden and Bernard marketed their respective philosophies using similar models that emphasized preventative medicine, manliness, and sexuality. McFadden has been blamed for America's fixation with both large breasts and large penises as symbols of power and vitality. Curiously, McFadden is quoted as having said that "the perfect man should be

able to maintain it [sexual intercourse] for an hour's duration."<sup>26</sup> Many Americans associate tantra with prolonged sexual activity. However it was McFadden, not Bernard, who claimed to be able to teach this ability. What Bernard seems to have learned from McFadden was how to use sex appeal without actually *having* sex. Bernard was always known as “the loving guru” and this hint of sexuality attracted the same market that purchased McFadden's literature.

Although Bernard did not share McFadden's interest in bodybuilding, “manliness” was always a part of his sales pitch for yoga. Members of the Tantrik Order are described as, “men of thought, ambition, courage, and aggression.”<sup>27</sup> The Clarkstown Country Club eventually hosted boxing and wrestling tournaments. Bernard trained several heavy weight boxers, most famously Lou “cosmic punch” Nova.<sup>28</sup> The idea that yoga can offer athletes “an edge” is another feature of contemporary American yoga that can be traced to Bernard’s contact with physical culture.

By the end of his career, Bernard was the president of a county bank, owned several companies; and was the treasurer of the Rockland County Chamber of Commerce.<sup>29</sup> The public perception of Bernard was that he had “turned in his turban for tweed” and the papers became increasingly friendly towards him. In 1941, a Nazi sympathizer shot one of Bernard's associates, and Bernard used his money and influence to fund a manhunt for the fugitive. Articles that cover this story are extremely positive towards Bernard, calling him “a former cult leader.” One adds that Bernard had once been, “known to his distaste as ‘Oom the Omnipotent.’”<sup>30</sup>

### Conclusions: Bernard's Legacy

Bernard’s entrepreneurship shaped the routes by which yoga and other Asian traditions would enter American culture. The Clarkstown Country Club served as a breeding ground for individuals who would later be influential in importing Asian religions to America. Bernard's nephew, Theos Bernard, traveled to Tibet before receiving his doctorate from Columbia University and publishing a classical text on hatha yoga. Bernard's half sister married Hazra Inayat Khan, the founder of The Sufi Order International.<sup>31</sup> The biochemist Ida Rolf studied under Bernard and her technique of structural integration or “rofling” has clear roots in the scientific approach to yoga advocated by Bernard.<sup>32</sup> In her youth, Ruth Fuller Sasaki spent time at the Clarkstown Country Club as therapy for her asthma.<sup>33</sup> She went on to be instrumental in importing Zen Buddhism to America, translating several important texts into English.

More importantly, The Clarkstown Country Club foreshadowed what yoga would eventually

become in America. American yoga instructors almost never present their discipline as a route to *moksha* or “liberation;” instead, yoga is marketed to the middle class as a vaguely spiritual form of health and self-improvement and perhaps as a tool for athletic achievement. Bernard may well be responsible for the format of the modern yoga class, held in a studio with mats and tights. Indeed, an expensive country club might be considered remiss today if it did not offer a yoga class.

But the most important data to be drawn from Bernard's life regards America's market for new forms of religious practice. The factors that led to Bernard's acceptance in Nyack are the same ones that determine whether modern proponents of Asian religions will achieve celebrity status as did the Dalai Lama or whether they will be perceived as subversive and dangerous like the International Society for Krishna Consciousness (ISKCON).

The simplest lesson from Bernard may be that Americans are distrustful of gurus who recruit teenagers, but are very supportive of Asian religions when they are endorsed by the rich and famous. The Vanderbilt's patronage of Bernard foreshadowed the patronage of Tibetan Buddhism by Richard Gere. Bernard also showed that Americans admire entrepreneurship, even in religious matters. The fact that ISKCON is known for financial solicitation seems to have contributed to their negative image as a “cult.” Had Bernard subsisted entirely on donations from patrons, this would likely have encouraged the public to brand him as a con artist. The fact that he reinvested his capital, helping the local economy in the process, seems to have countered this label and added to his appeal. Finally, Bernard offered personal and material benefits in the form of health and the cultivation of the self. This has been another key factor for the successful import of many Asian religions exemplified by Soka Gakkai International, which promises material boons to those who chant the Daimoku, and the Dalai Lama whose book teaches *The Art of Happiness*. The check out aisle of any Borders or Barnes and Noble bookstore now contains cultural artifacts such as miniature Zen rock gardens or pocket-sized books of Taoist wisdom. These “nice little things” are the legacy of Pierre Bernard.

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2 Jeffrey John Kripal, *Esalen*, (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2007): 236; Mark A Michaels, Patricia Johnson, and Rudolf Ballentine, *The Essence of Tantrik Sexuality*, (St. Paul, Minn.: Llewellyn Worldwide, 2006):, xvii.

3 Nik Douglas, *Spiritual Sex: Secrets of Tantra from the Ice Age to the New Millennium*, (New York, N.Y: Pocketbooks, 1997):191.

4 Michaels et. al., *The Essence of Tantrik Sexuality*, xvii.

5 Catherine Albanese, *A Republic of Mind and Spirit*, (Yale: Yale University Press, 2007): 363.

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- 7 Charles Boswell, "The Great Fuss and Fume Over the Omnipotent Oom" in True: The Man's Magazine, January, 1965. Available online at <<http://people.vanderbilt.edu/~richard.s.stringer-hye/fuss.htm>>, (accessed 22 November, 2008).
- 8 A copy of the prosecution file was obtained from the New York City District Attorney Record of Cases.
- 9 "NAUTCH' GIRL TELLS OF OOM'S PHILOSOPHY :Gertrude Leo Says She Believed That He Had Supernatural Powers. SHE LOVED AND FEARED HIM Sister Interrupts the "Yogi Priest" Hearing and Berates His Lawyer -- The "Oom" Is Held for Trial. 1910. New York Times (1857-Current file), May 8, <http://www.proquest.com.ezproxy.bu.edu/> (accessed December 1, 2008).
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- 15 Ira S. Will (editor), Medical Review of Reviews, (New York, N.Y.: Medical Review of Reviews, Inc. 1912): 324.
- 16 Michaels et. al., The Essence of Tantrik Sexuality, xvii.
- 17 New York Times, 15 December, 1911.
- 18 Randall, Phantoms of the Hudson Valley: the Glorious Estates of Lost Era, 81.
- 19 Hitchcock, Life Was Like That, 188.
- 20 NIGHT REVELS HELD IN SANSKRIT COLLEGE :Tenants of Nearby Apartments Shocked, They Say, by What They Saw and Heard. RUN BY "OOM, OMNIPOTENT" Once Raided as a Hindu School -- Innocent Kindergarten Teacher Used the Rooms Mornings.. 1911. New York Times (1857-Current file), December 15, <http://www.proquest.com.ezproxy.bu.edu/> (accessed December 6, 2008).
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- 22 Hunt, Body Love: The Amazing Career of Bernarr McFadden,156.
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- 27 Tantrik Order in America, International Journal of the Tantrik Order, Vol. V. No. 1. (New York, N.Y.: Tantrik Press, 1906):, 90,
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- 33 Stirling, Ruth Fuller: Zen Pioneer, 6.