

Research Notes

Liselotte Frisk and MISA: An Emic View of a Yoga School and Its Perils

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ABSTRACT: A student of MISA herself, the author describes her personal journey and how she decided to investigate whether the accusations against her yoga school were true and where they came from. In the process, she met several scholars, including Liselotte Frisk, and also came across judges and prosecutors, whose perspective was obviously different. The article, the author's contribution to a panel on Liselotte Frisk's research on MISA at the Göteborg 2024 conference of the European Association for the Study of Religions (EASR), where the papers of Introvigne and Šorytė published in this issue of *The Journal of CESNUR* were also read, discusses the differences between the respective approaches by academics and by certain prosecutors and judges by examining a previously unpublished 2023 decision on MISA by the Court of Florence, Italy.

KEYWORDS: MISA, Movement for Spiritual Integration into the Absolute, Gregorian Bivolaru, Liselotte Frisk, Natha Yoga, Atman International Yoga and Meditation Federation.

Introduction

Many studies and research have been carried out over the years on the MISA (Movement for Spiritual Integration into the Absolute) yoga school, the Atman International Yoga and Meditation Federation, of which it is part, and its founder, yoga teacher Gregorian Bivolaru.

Sociologists, psychologists, religious scholars, specialists in the fields of political science and human rights, among whom I would mention only a few university professors and activists—Sara Møldrup Thejls (2015), Liselotte

Frisk (1959–2020: 2024), Susan Palmer (2024), J. Gordon Melton (2017), PierLuigi Zoccatelli (1965–2024: 2017), Rosita Šorytė (2022), Zdeněk Vojtíšek (2018), Raffaella Di Marzio (2017), Gabriel Andreescu (2005, 2007, 2008, 2013a, 2013b, 2016), Willy Fautré (2013), and Tova Olsson (2024)—have published on and debated the teachings of the yoga school, the legal context that accompanied its progress, and its integration into society.

In addition to these studies, which have each contributed to clarifying or understanding the context surrounding the school and the teaching of its founder Gregorian Bivolaru, in March 2022 Italian sociologist Massimo Introvigne published his book *Sacred Eroticism: Tantra and Eros in the Movement for Spiritual Integration into the Absolute (MISA)* (Introvigne 2022a). I would call this the most significant and richest work on the MISA yoga school and the teachings of Bivolaru, touching on different controversial perspectives such as: occultism; the conflation of esotericism with eroticism, which the school regards as separate from sexuality; the possible tensions arising from the combination of eroticism with spirituality; legal controversies, taboos, and slander. Presenting the full context makes it easier to understand and collocate in its proper place the study on MISA and Helsinki's Natha Yoga Center by Liselotte Frisk.

Also to clarify the context, I will add a few personal comments. I have been a student of the MISA yoga school for more than thirty years. Between the years 1995 and 2004, there were many media campaigns in Romania and since 2004, when the legal problems started, the slandering publications about the yoga school started to be more vicious and spread to several countries. In the meantime, the yoga school had also developed in more than thirty countries, so that its visibility had become higher. In what has been published about the school two main accusations were mentioned, sexual abuse and human trafficking.

These accusations are very broad and are very easily directed against several spiritual groups stigmatized as “cults.” In the case of the MISA yoga school, however, they come with a special sensationalism: accusations of sexual orgies, sexual perversion, and more recently, in France since November 2023, rape and abuse of vulnerable women. How did these horrific accusations come about?

In the beginning, as I was personally not greatly affected by the situations that arose, I decided to ignore all these media campaigns. I believed that eventually justice would be served and the accusations would be proven to be false and fabricated. However, after years of directly feeling the effects

of both social and institutional discrimination, in 2012 I became a human rights activist for religious and spiritual freedom. I wanted to shed light on these developments, first of all for myself, to understand why there was so much hate against certain yoga schools, including MISA. In my long experience, in our yoga classes we were always taught peaceful principles and treated with integrity and respect. The legal accusations, the sensational speculations in the media, had nothing to do with what I knew directly and practiced weekly.

I personally practiced in MISA and Atman yoga schools in Romania, Denmark, India, and Belgium. Everywhere, the teachings of the yoga schools were the same, based on the courses of yoga teacher Gregorian Bivolaru. The classes were based on yoga practice, with the corresponding theory, in an atmosphere of soul-searching and sacredness, where I saw commitment and enthusiasm from both instructors and students.

Although this was the reality that I was living at the yoga classes, both relatives and friends, who were not MISA students, kept telling me that “there should be a grain of truth” in what was being said in the media about the school and Bivolaru. Maybe I just had not been able to notice what was really going on. So, I embarked on a personal search. I started a study of the school from a different perspective: not just as a yoga student, but as a human rights activist and as if I were an outsider observer.

After years of research, during which the legal and media abuses against the yoga school and Gregorian Bivolaru continued, both in Romania and in other countries, I found myself at the same point. I still did not understand how things could be interpreted so tendentiously. I still did not find anything in MISA that could be regarded as illegal. So, the question remained. What exactly was disturbing somebody and creating these legal and social problems?

Since 2016, I have also had the chance to get in touch with academics and meet some truly remarkable people who have helped me understanding things from a different point of view.

In fact, I would like to thank everyone who has helped me, along the way, to broaden my perspective and to be able to understand the causes of some of the problems that the yoga school is facing.

It is in this context that, in 2018 and 2019, I met on several occasions Professor Liselotte Frisk. She impressed me with her humility and kindness

and at the same time with the rigor with which she examined every detail and every aspect when conducting a study. Her research was carefully documented and supported by multiple elements. I appreciated both the woman and the scientist, a very harmonious and visible combination of female compassion and academic integrity.

In her works, I noticed that she managed to present complicated subjects in simple words, understandable to everyone, no matter how difficult the subject matter was. She also did this in her study of the Natha Yoga school in Finland. She left, as they say, no stone unturned and also asked questions about difficult or controversial aspects of the school's teachings and activity.

Academics, Prosecutors, and Sacred Eroticism

As mentioned by Rosita Šorytė (this issue of *The Journal of CESNUR*), both Liselotte Frisk and her Swedish colleague Karl Nylund, who had a quite different point of view on spirituality in general, examined the subject of sacred eroticism as a teaching of the yoga school. Liselotte Frisk, however, went one step further, touching on the subject of erotic initiations and intimate, loving relationships.

The concept and practice of sacred eroticism is perhaps the aspect that attracts the most both attention and misunderstanding, although it is only one among many areas addressed by MISA teachings. For those desiring more knowledge in this field, in his aforementioned book Massimo Introvigne discusses the history of sacred eroticism as it has emerged over time in various esoteric movements.

In the conception of the MISA school of yoga, sexuality and eroticism are two distinct subtle energies exhibiting distinctly different vibrational frequencies (one lower, sexuality, and the other higher, eroticism). “Gross sexuality” is a descending energy leading to manifestation, separation, procreation, objectification, materialism, and so on. On the contrary, “pure eroticism” is an ascending and uplifting energy, leading to universality, unity, and sublime inspirations. Unlike in sexuality, in eroticism, based on male continence, ejaculation is avoided.

To clarify, I would briefly mention the yoga school and yoga teacher Gregorian Bivolaru's vision of: (1) Eroticism as a combination of two divine attributes, of Eros and of Love; and (2) Sacred Eroticism as a combination of three divine attributes, of Love, of Eros, and of Divine Holiness.

About the Godly Attributes, the school teaches that they are endless, eternal, free energies. To achieve spiritual progress, it is necessary to create in the human being the favorable conditions for triggering processes of occult resonance with these sublime, Godly energies. These premises of the school's approach to sacred eroticism are often ignored in the controversies.

As Liselotte Frisk pointed out,

To a great extent, however, the roots of Natha Yoga conform to some historic strands of yoga and Tantra. There is an emphasis on the polarity between male and female principles in the macro- as well as in the microcosm, and a perspective of eroticism as spiritual and sacred (Frisk 2024, 29).

In his book, Introvigne notes that with such an understanding, it is clear that, from the perspective of MISA, the accusations of being a “sex cult” are perceived, if not as absurd, at least as paradoxical if one considers that sexuality in itself is firmly rejected by the movement. Initiated practitioners of the MISA school of yoga are even advised to “discard gross sexuality as obviously inferior, like old, shabby clothes, and embrace only eroticism” (Introvigne 2022a, 65).

After in-depth studies and many interviews conducted with yoga practitioners, both Frisk in 2019 and Introvigne in 2022, as well as other academics who have studied the yoga school such as Susan Palmer (2024), argue that the violence of the media and legal campaigns against the MISA yoga school and Gregorian Bivolaru are disproportionate, somewhat unprecedented, and truly international in scale, most likely due to the fact that our societies do not tolerate the combination of eroticism with religion or spirituality.

Police actions, in several countries, against groups of “sacred eroticism” have been documented by researchers, described in detail by witnesses, and summarized in court decisions. They follow a strikingly similar pattern, one that raises the question of whether the repressive scenarios were inspired by each other. We can say that, following the parallel investigations, there is no doubt about the way in which the facts unfolded, in many cases, in different countries, against different spiritual groups: Argentina, Romania, Czech Republic, Italy, Finland, France.

We could say that in all the interventions motivated by the practice of sacred eroticism (real or imaginary, as in the Argentinian case of the Buenos Aires Yoga School there were in fact no teachings on eroticism except in the imagination of one opponent: Introvigne 2023), spiritual movements were

targeted because their unconventional practices were perceived by the authorities, without any reasonable basis, as anti-social and criminal.

In her report on the Natha Yoga Finland school, Liselotte Frisk (2024) analyzed the standard anti-cult definition of a “cult” and its elements. She did not believe in this definition. However, by analyzing its components one by one, she concluded that even if one adopted that definition, Natha Yoga Finland could not be called a “cult.” She reported that the students at the Natha Yoga Finland school made fully informed choices about what they wished to practice, their lifestyle, interactions, and relationships. This also applied to intimate relationships, when it came to choosing a path of erotic love continence and sacred eroticism.

Obviously, there is a difference between the approach of academic scholars and the prosecutors or the police. However, both should investigate objectively, evaluate sources critically, and try to overcome prejudices.

An Italian Case

These different approaches emerged in the case of the Natha Yoga School in Finland studied by Liselotte Frisk and in an Italian parallel case. In Finland, the Natha Yoga Center legal saga started with a police raid on October 31, 2012, in Helsinki.

Also in the same year, on December 6, 2012, raids took place against the headquarters of the Italian branches of the Atman Federation (to which MISA also belongs) and the homes of members, with the involvement of a special anti-cult squad of the Italian police. The prosecutor who ordered the investigations accused the yogis of conspiracy, enslavement, human trafficking, and sexual violence. Documents, diaries, electronic equipment, and cell phones were seized.

After eleven years of investigation, the Florence Court on March 28, 2023, closed the investigation against the yoga school practitioners without any indictment. Although the judge did not find any crime, her decision expressed “agreement” with the prosecutor’s comments that

a large number of cases have been identified in which it is not easy to establish whether this condition [of participation in community life] is the result of a free choice on the part of female students or whether this choice is only apparently free, in the sense that it is the result of subjugation [‘plagio’ in Italian] and manipulation of the personality or whether it is, in any case, a voluntary adherence to a certain lifestyle, albeit not one we could agree with (Tribunale di Firenze 2023).

Note that this is a decision favorable to the yoga students, who were found not guilty of any crimes. The prosecutor himself asked to declare the defendants not guilty. Note also that Italy is a country where “mental manipulation” is not recognized as a crime, as the provision on “plagio,” or mental subjugation, of the Criminal Code, dating back to Fascist times, was declared unconstitutional by the Constitutional Court in a historical 1981 decision, which stated that “mind control” was not an accepted scientific theory (Introvigne 2022b, 50–2). While the Constitutional Court declared in 1981 that “plagio” does not exist, as late as 2023 the Florence prosecutor was still using the word “plagio” and claiming that the Atman-affiliated school was practicing “psychological subjection,” although without committing any crime. The prosecutor also felt the need to add that he did not agree with the school’s “lifestyle.”

The Florence decision, which came after a long cooperation between prosecutors, judges, anti-cultists, and hostile ex-members of the school, shows how prejudices even in a comparatively liberal country as Italy are stronger than the laws. It almost looks like the prosecutor and the judge would have liked to find that the yoga students had committed some crimes and were disappointed that eleven years of investigation confirmed they had always acted as good and law-abiding citizens. In other words, they had to declare the defendants innocent but were not pleased about it. Perhaps, this also explain why the investigation lasted for eleven years. They kept looking for evidence of crimes that, as they had to reluctantly conclude, never existed.

Romanian political science professor Gabriel Andreescu in a recent article on the repression of sacred eroticism groups refers to this case in Italy, and comments that,

The doubt in the argumentation, using stigmatizing suggestions, is a denial of the presumption of innocence that suggests the lack of good faith of the judge (Andreescu 2024, 46).

Conclusion

These prejudices were also at work in the recent French case. On the morning of November 28, 2023, SWAT teams of approximately 175 police officers wearing black masks, helmets, bulletproof vests and semi-automatic rifles stormed eight houses and apartments in Paris, the surrounding area,

and Nice that housed less than one hundred peaceful yoga students, who had full legal rights to be and, in some cases, to work in France, most of them of Romanian origin. Masked police handcuffed several of them, dragged them out of their homes, without clothing or shoes appropriate for the cold weather, and took them by bus to the police station. Gregorian Bivolaru was in France at that time, was also arrested, and is still in detention (Palmer 2024).

The charges were of “human trafficking,” “forcible detention,” and “abuse of vulnerability” by an “organized gang.” And in this case, as in others, the brutal interventions of the investigative bodies took place after long periods of surveillance of the yoga movements, years in a row, according to the official statements of the prosecutors. Thus, in the raid in France, ignorance of the yoga practitioners’ activity and their lifestyle was excluded. Note also that, after nine months, all the women the French police claims were held in captivity and were “liberated” in November 2023 continue to testify they were not victims, they went to France voluntarily and were happy to participate in spiritual activities that in some cases included sacred eroticism (Palmer 2024).

As Susan Palmer (2024) and other scholars have noted, with arguments similar to Liselotte Frisk’s about Finland, what happened in France is a continuation of a long series of attacks against MISA and Bivolaru by forces that regard any combination of eroticism and spirituality as intolerable.

Unfortunately, the academics’ studies, although they have been published, have not yet counterbalanced what the media campaign has created for years: the image of the yoga school as a “sex cult” guilty of “brainwashing” and “sexual abuse.”

Nor did those legal decisions in Sweden, Romania, and other countries that affirmed the yogis’ and Gregorian Bivolaru’s innocence (Introvigne 2022a, 31–36) matter. The portrayal of the yoga school was and remains a tool of discrimination and slander, in the hands of the mass media, used as a springboard for unfounded legal accusations.

As a yoga practitioner, I can say that every such police action is also reflected in my life. Every time I feel that I have to decide whether to continue the spiritual practice, which I find so effective, with results and personal confirmations of the application of yoga techniques. I am aware that by choosing to continue I will face the public reproach and the terrible accusations that will be indirectly brought against me as well.

Unfortunately, over time, some of my fellow yoga students could not bear the pressure and gave up the spiritual path, fearing the consequences of associating their name with the yoga school. Others gave up due to the doubts awakened in their hearts by the series of accusations and scandalous publications. I think it would have helped them if they had met Liselotte Frisk and discussed with her the context of the campaigns against the school. Sadly, this is no longer possible. There are, however, other scholars willing to study the school without prejudices. We are open to answer all their questions, and trust that, although they may disagree with some of our teachings, they will report objectively on the unconventional spiritual path we have chosen and ask to be free to pursue.

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