MISA and Natha: The Peculiar Story of a Romanian Tantric Yoga School

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Introduction

In 2004, one of the most extensive operations of the Romanian police since the fall of the communist regime took place in Bucharest. It involved searching 16 locations inhabited by members of the yoga group, Movement for Spiritual Integration into the Absolute (MISA). The police confiscated computers, mobile phones, papers and books, and the residents were taken to the police station. Among these was the founder of MISA, Gregorian Bivolaru, who usually goes by the name Grieg. Charges ranged from tax evasion, organized crime – including drugs and human trafficking – to money laundering and prostitution. Most of the yoga practitioners were released relatively quickly, some after being compelled to sign prepared statements about MISA. Grieg and a seventeen-year-old girl, Madalina Dumitru, were held and a charge of a sexual relationship between the two was made. Dumitru gave a testimony composed under pressure from the prosecutors stating that there was an intimate relationship between herself and Grieg. Later the prosecutors linked this testimony to the purported fact that Grieg was her teacher; therefore an eventual sexual relationship would be illegal. Dumitru later withdrew her statement in front of the Swedish Supreme Court, affirming that it had been made up by the prosecutors and signed under pressure.

This incident was the culmination of many years of persecution of MISA by the Romanian secret service, Securitate, a persecution initiated under the communist regime that continued into the post-communist period. Eventually Grieg fled from Romania to Sweden where, following a lengthy trial, he was granted political asylum on 31 December 2006. To my knowledge, Grieg has made no public appearances since then and communicates with the members of MISA through letters and personal contacts with the highest ranking members, in particular the leader of the Danish branch, Mihai Advaitananda Stoian. However, the latest development in the case took place on June 14th 2013, when the Romanian Supreme Court of Justice sentenced Grieg to six years of prison for sex with a minor, namely the aforementioned Madalina Dumitru, who does not herself support any charges against Grieg. Since Grieg’s flight to Sweden,
the Romanian government has tried to have him extradited without success. Whether this will eventually happen is currently uncertain.

It is not within the scope of this paper to try to determine whether the different charges aimed at MISA are fact or fiction. But the persecution of MISA, whether merited or not, is crucial to understanding their self-perception and their worldview which will be the focus of the present chapter. Throughout the following pages I will outline the different strands of religious thought and practice in MISA with primary focus on the Danish branch, Natha. MISA presents a peculiar mixture of modernized tantric yoga and conspiracy theories, while saturated with a strong scent of orthodox Christianity and New Age rhetoric. As will be argued, MISA can fruitfully be viewed as an example of conspirituality that is a combination of an esoteric epistemology and conspiracy discourse.

Background

MISA was founded in January 1990, immediately following the fall of the communist regime in Romania. The organization was the official culmination of years of yoga practice and teaching by Grieg. Due to the prohibition of yoga during the Ceausescu reign, Grieg was forced to practice in secret; nevertheless, he was arrested twice and once detained in a psychiatric clinic. Apart from teaching yoga, he was also under rigorous surveillance by the Securitate because of his correspondence with the exiled Mircea Eliade, a prominent scholar of religion who was also a vehement critic of the communist regime. As noted above, the persecution of Grieg and MISA culminated in 2004 and led to Grieg’s exile in Sweden. However, the discrimination against MISA and its adherents did not end there, as the case continues in the Romanian courts and the group is repeatedly harassed by the media. The media campaign is not restricted to Romania, but is rather taking place on an international scale as well. In Denmark, the MISA branch Natha has been under heavy attack by newspapers and television programs which, have presented a rather one-sided view of the group. So, what is it that makes Natha/MISA so provocative and dangerous as to invite legal prosecution and an aggressive media campaign? The key to the question is probably to be found in the structure of the movement and their characteristic religious eclecticism.

Natha is divided into several branches or circles which are mutually entwined but which also serve the practical purpose of allowing students of Natha to easily choose their degree of involvement and paths of interest. They have a branch of ordinary yoga classes, including yoga for pregnant women, a