

Lorita Tinelli, legal psychologist, President of CeSAP - Centro Studi Abusi Psicologici (Italy)

Introduction of a case and presentation of a witness

"Crazy Therapies, inertia, and collusion of professional orders in Europe: the "Anidra" case"

Good afternoon, everybody.

Today I want to tell you about a current and still intensive case in Italy, exemplary of how Institutions and Professional Orders make decisions often without understanding the issue of cult undue influence leading to abuse and crimes.

Anidra is holistic centre situated in a 294,000€ worth property in the heart of the Ligurian Apennines. It was founded in 2004 by Paolo Bendinelli, Master of Martial Arts with Teresa Cuzzolino, the future administrator of the entire project, and 21 other partners. *The Anidra Centre is part of the WWF NaTuRe Places and Responsible Tourism circuits offering quality in genuine cuisine, ideal well-being for body, mind, and spirit.*

Various activities are organized such as agritourism, training in varied subjects, they promote a yoga school, they build and protect eco-museums, medieval vegetable gardens, organise camps in the woods and offer wellness centres, for individuals, families, and school groups. Weddings and private parties can also be organised in a welcoming and beautiful natural environment.

Commendable principles, worthy of promotion after all!

Over the years, the Anidra Centre hosted many idealistic and vulnerable young people through a shared facade, which involved doctors and psychologists registered in their respective professional orders in training courses and user assistance, enhancing the appearance professionalism of the organisation.

Two years ago, a young woman who assiduously frequented the Centre died. Soon we will hear her story told by her sister, Rita.

Roberta Repetto, a follower of the Anidra Centre, died following an operation on a mole, performed by a doctor, also adept of the Centre, *without anaesthesia and without a histological exam.*

The Guru of the Centre seems to have cautioned this method of intervention, because with his *"third eye"* he was confident that the operation would be successful.

The picture that emerged from the trial files and from declarations by the members of the Centre was that the founder, who called himself *'Maestro'*, was a highly charismatic figure, who seemed to have power over everything that moved in the Centre.

I spoke with an adept who knew Roberta very well, he told me: *"For us the Master was an important reference". "He had", he said, "cured a paralytic in a wheelchair who had walked again. We believed that this was a sign."*

I asked him: *"But did you witness this?"* He replied: *"No, but I believe it. There are people who have special powers, and he has them».*

Various documents and expert reports deposited during the trial highlighted by the Centre an approach to health based on natural and purification phenomena. A team of doctors, prosecution consultants, although not experts in the phenomenon of manipulation, identified a very suggestive climate and the Guru's use of persuasive communication methods. The doctors read all the emails between Roberta, the Guru and the Centre's psychologist. They highlighted that Roberta received a great deal of misleading information, often contradictory, likely to have provoked confusion, strong cognitive and emotional discomfort for her, which then led her to submit to suggested choice.

The Court, in a first instance sentence, condemned the guru and the doctor who operated on Roberta for negligence and acquitted the psychologist who had suggested that Roberta relieve her suffering with herbal teas and baths in the sacred river; *"Suffering is a way of overcoming your limits"* she had been told.

Experts asked themselves *"what kind of person in all lucidly entrusts her life to others? Unless she is strongly involved in the relationship with them."*

Is it possible that this intelligent woman had not felt the need when so ill, to call her family who had never expressed bitterness towards the Centre? Is it possible that she had chosen to have surgery without anaesthesia and decided that a histological exam was unnecessary, just because her Master said all would be well? Is it possible that a doctor, who also worked in a public service, had not felt the obligation to insist on the histological examination that perhaps would have saved Roberta?

The Master expected that his adepts should write a report on the events and their feelings to him every day. Roberta therefore wrote to her Master every day. However, when Roberta wrote asking questions and for help, she received answers urging her to follow her journey of enlightenment, saying that the pains she she complained about after the operation served to atone for the faults accumulated in her life, that this suffering was useful to undo what she had done in the past. Sometimes she didn't get any answers at all and that caused her to fall into despair. Roberta wrote to her Master about her frustrations and the hurt she felt when he deliberately didn't greet her or when he didn't invite her to go to the sauna with him. Invitations to the sauna by the Maestro was a special event, a privilege. Roberta's writings reveal a relationship of total subjection to her Guru.

Roberta had placed her whole life in the hands of her Guru and also found reassured by the presence of the doctor and the psychologist.

We are convinced that Roberta's story is one of undue influence, but in Italy there is no law on mental manipulation and those who have to judge these cases ignore the dynamics of this phenomenon.

To this can also be added the strange behaviour of some professional orders.

While the Order of Doctors suspended the negligent doctor right from the beginning of investigation, the Order of Psychologists preferred to abstain, with respect to the position of the psychologist who gave unscientific advice, pending the judgment of the courts, relinquishing its role as guarantor of deontology.

Art. 5 of the Italian deontological code states that "The psychologist uses methodologies whose sources and scientific references he is able to indicate and does not raise unfounded expectations in the client and/or user".

Cases like this are very common in Italy and elsewhere.

CeSAP, which has been operating in Italy since 1999, tries to dialogue with all the institutions to make people understand the danger of not taking into consideration the characteristics of undue influence. Today there are many scientific studies on this matter, and it is impossible not to be aware of them.

We also believe in networking. We believe it is important to contribute to building knowledge with all the available associations of FECRIS, through three actions:

- 1) elaboration of a legal database, which even if coming from different legal institutions, can be of help to lawyers in the various actions of defence of victims and of the associations that continue to be legally harassed by cultic/sectarian groups and their apologists for intimidation purposes.
- 2) elaboration of a commonly used database of all scientific studies coming from various researchers from all over the world

3) elaboration of a network of professionals in the field of psychology, jurisprudence, and spirituality, who can always interface to create methods of common and effective help and above all a replicable scientific model for analogous cases. And on this last point, we will shortly present a project.

We therefore need systematic action, with continuous feedback.

Unity is strength and puts us all in a position of advantage and greater utility.