



deVolkskrant Bentinho Massaro Article

"Massaro's organization is a cover to give him everything he craves: power, money and women"

Spiritual influencer Bentinho Massaro (33) from Amsterdam teaches online followers from all over the world to 'raise their consciousness'. *De Volkskrant* spoke with three former followers who call Massaro a cult leader and state that he has abused them. They break their contract of silence to warn others.

[Ivo van Woerden](#) February 25, 2022 , 05:00



Image Micha Huigen

She has to play the victim. He will be the culprit. It is early January 2021 and American Jade Alectra is in her room with Dutch spiritual teacher Bentinho Massaro in the Shantidham Hotel Boutique & Spa, a wellness resort on the outskirts of the Ecuadorian capital Quito. He has just

informed her that they will be mimicking the sexual trauma confessed by one of the other members in the group.

Just before that, they and the group did a 'distortion reading' in a central area of the resort, slumped in spacious sofas and surrounded by cameras. The group members are convinced that they share 'an energy field' and that this energy field is negatively influenced by childhood traumas and old survival strategies – *distortions* . They can 'purify' themselves by confessing those traumas in the group, after which the group members talk to them for hours to make the disturbing thought or memory disappear. Much is at stake: the members have a mission, with their 'high energy field' they can realize the optimal version of themselves and thus create a new world full of love and light, of which Bentinho Massaro will be the leader.



Jade Alectra

The victim of the sexual trauma had confided in someone from the group. He betrayed to the rest that the victim was walking around with a secret. After all, such a secret would get in the way of 'the mission'. Peer pressure increased until the victim shared all the details with the group.

"They started making jokes about the trauma first, to see if it elicited a reaction from the victim, to test if they were over it," said Alectra, 34, a Los Angeles yoga and meditation teacher with more than seventy thousand followers on Instagram. She tells her story in a Facetime interview and has to slow down every now and then, in order to mention as many relevant details as possible. "And then Bentinho told me to go to my room."

Once there, his intention becomes clear: a role-playing game based on what has just been confessed. "He had sex with me," Alectra says. She pauses for a moment. Then he told the victim. Another test to see if it had really come free from the trauma.'



Jacqueline Graham

Jacqueline Graham (35), investor and mother of three from Toronto, Canada, heard about Massaro for the first time in 2013 through a YouTube video that appeared in her overview. She watches videos of all kinds of spiritual teachers. Graham is impressed by the clarity with which the young Massaro explains complex spiritual concepts and begins to watch more of him.

He becomes part of her 'happy list' of videos she plays to start the day. She also becomes a member of his Facebook group, and when an advertisement for a Massaro retreat in Baarlo, Limburg, comes along in 2018 on that channel, she decides that she will go there. Eventually she will become Massaro's girlfriend, work in his company and stay with him until September 2020. During that time she regularly travels back and forth between her children in Canada and Massaro in the Netherlands and also goes to his international retreats.



Videomaker Keilan McNeil, 27, of Orlando, Florida, finds himself socially isolated in early 2017 when YouTube offers him a Massaro video called "Super Accelerated Living." His timeline at the time is full of videos about conspiracy theories that he believes all. "I distrusted everything and everyone, including the government, I just didn't dare to talk about it with anyone," says McNeil. 'Massaro turned out to want to create an enlightened society, full of love and light. That seemed like a godsend to me.'

He starts making videos of Massaro's lectures and posting them to his Facebook groups, much to the delight of the community and Massaro himself. McNeil hopes to work for Massaro, and eventually he is offered a contract. At the beginning of 2018, he became acquainted with the group at a retreat in Egypt. He will work for Massaro's team, with an interval of one and a half years, until May 10, 2021.

A friend of yoga teacher Jade Alectra points her to Massaro, after which she clicks on the follow button of his Instagram profile in 2017. She doesn't understand much of what he teaches for a long time, until she listens to his podcast episode 'The Relationship Fallacy' in 2020, in which Massaro says that if you really love someone, you can't contract it, but that you have to set each other free. to leave.

'Something clicked', says Alectra. At that point, she has increasingly intense relationship problems with a friend she calls "toxic." "I had always been very conservative with relationships and it hadn't brought me happiness yet. Maybe Massaro had a point here and I should investigate?' She will join the group, which is currently in Ecuador, on January 7, 2021, leaving a few months later on the same day as McNeil.

contract of silence

All three had to sign a *non-disclosure agreement* (NDA). That happened to Graham and McNeil when they became part of Massaro's company. Alectra had to sign the contract as a condition of getting to know Massaro and the group. When asked, Massaro says that he uses NDAs "because we have been attacked by frustrated people in the past, and have seen that even the most innocent moment can be twisted to look very bad to the outside world."

Alectra, McNeil and Graham have decided to break their contract of silence. They each risk a sky-high fine of at least 90,000 euros, although there is American case law that such an NDA can be annulled when it comes to disclosing sexually transgressive behavior. The three no

longer want to remain silent about what they have been through, because they want to prevent others from falling into Massaro's trap.

Alectra, Graham and McNeil argue that Massaro leads a cult and uses spiritual techniques to exploit people for his own benefit. Alectra and Graham say that Massaro sexually abused them under psychological duress. McNeil witnessed Massaro's sexually transgressive behavior. All three claim to have been exploited financially and to have worked for Massaro without being paid, because Massaro believes it should be an honor to serve him and demands total devotion. "Massaro's organization seems to have started out as a group with good intentions to help the planet," says McNeil, "but has now become a cover that exists to give him everything he craves: power, money, and women."

They have not (yet) filed a report. Alectra: 'To start with, we have been to so many different countries with him. In which country should you knock? We're still considering it.' To substantiate their claims, they gave *de Volkskrant* access to photos, videos and hundreds of WhatsApp messages. They tell their story simultaneously, in the Netherlands, because Massaro is from here, and in the US, because he has built an international following that includes many Americans. Massaro says in a response that he denies all allegations.

spiritual teacher

Bentinho Massaro (33) is the Netherlands' most successful spiritual influencer. He calls himself a "spiritual teacher to the sincere seeker." Since 2010, he has been posting videos on YouTube in which he proclaims his wisdom in English that is a mixture of New Age-esque philosophies, in which the 'law of attraction' plays an important role. This pseudoscientific law gained a worldwide audience in 2006 through Rhonda Byrne 's bestseller *The Secret* . By law, you can get anything your heart desires by asking "the universe" in your mind: love, wealth, success—with the right intention, it all comes to you.

Massaro argues that people's true selves are covered by a veil of 'distortions' , which are based on old traumas and survival strategies. The 'ego', manifesting as a little voice in their head, prevents them from taking off that veil and reaching their full potential, their true selves.

To get rid of that ego, they must learn to 'raise their consciousness'. They can do that by following Massaro on the path of spiritual enlightenment. His goal is 'global awakening' in this field and the establishment of a 'fully enlightened society' by the year 2035.



Image Micha Huigen

Now, some 12 years after his first online video, Massaro has posted more than 500 YouTube videos, often lasting hours. In total, his videos have been viewed more than 16 million times (an average of about 32,000 views each, with the outliers nearly half a million views). More than one hundred thousand people from all over the world have subscribed to his channel. He has collected more than 46,000 followers on Instagram and almost a million on Facebook. Followers regularly see Massaro passing by, in a suit with a cigar, or at a tropical swimming pool, surrounded by beautiful women, to share a new insight or to promote one of his retreats and (online) courses.

Massaro offers a free online program called 'Trinfinity Academy' to help those interested get used to his jargon step-by-step and get to know his insights (students are encouraged to donate money at each lesson). He has also self-published two books to disseminate his knowledge: *Super Accelerated Living: How to Manifest an Epic Life* (2016) and *Spiritual Conversations with a Skeptic: On God Consciousness and The Absolute*(2020). The first book contains transcripts of some Massaro meetings from which the reader can get 'tools' to 'upgrade' his life. The second depicts conversations between Massaro and a neurologist friend who is performed under the pseudonym "Russell" and who is skeptical of Massaro's teachings.

If you want more, you have to pull out your wallet. There's Massaro TV (19 euros per month for access to even more videos than there are already on YouTube), a Meditation Mastery course (between 90 and 350 euros, where participants are encouraged to donate extra money), a subscription to No Limits Society (an 'exclusive training program for those on a mission to awaken the world' (at 180 euros per month) and there are retreats. Massaro will be on the Thai island of Koh Samui in March; a ticket to join to be able to be costs between 4,400 and 6,700 euros.

It is not clear exactly how much he earned. In the book *Super Accelerated Living* he mentions that he and his team spontaneously decided to move into an American rental house worth 4 million euros. In the Netherlands there is nothing to his name. In the US, he has founded seven companies, most with the word 'trinfinity' in their name. Between May and September 2019, a further seven companies were added, based in Ireland, the United Kingdom, Malta and Panama, which are considered tax havens.

Financial annual statements are missing. In the American state of Arizona, however, a tax debt is outstanding in Massaro's name. For the year 2019, he still owed the American government more than 68 thousand euros. When asked, Massaro says that he is not a millionaire and that he has always paid taxes. 'We are also paying off the tax that is still outstanding.'

Media attention

Massaro has already received media attention abroad. The channel *Vice* made a short documentary about the spiritual teacher from the Netherlands. The American *Playboy* interviewed him and the British newspaper *The Guardian* also devoted a large part to him. Part of their interest was not only Massaro's success on social media, but also the claims he has made. He has said that he is so spiritually 'enlightened' that he can manipulate matter with his mind. He says he can think his body fit, move objects with his mind and also change the weather.

International attention was also fed by two events that took place in quick succession. First there was the article by American Be Scofield who joined Massaro's team in the fall of 2017 under the name Shakti Hunter by volunteering as a digital strategist. Massaro was then in Sedona, Arizona, for several meetings. Scofield secretly taped conversations between his teammates, scoured all his social media, watched many videos and wrote an article she self-published on the website *Medium* on December 1, 2017 entitled: 'Tech Bro Guru, Inside the Sedona Cult of Bentinho Massaro'.

Scofield concludes that Massaro is trying to prepare his entourage for a collective suicide, as cult leader Jim Jones did in 1978 with his 909 followers in the jungles of Guyana. She introduces an anonymous team member who suspects this because Massaro has talked about 'the harvest'. There would also have been a shift in his lessons, in which he normalizes death. Scofield's piece went viral and it launched her career as a journalistic cult-fighter. She publishes her studies on the online platform Gurumag, which she founded herself, but they have also been used for other media, such as the talk show *Dr. Phil*, who made two episodes based on her research about another cult, "Mother God."

On December 10, 2017, a few days after Scofield's piece came out, Brent Wilkins, one of the participants in Massaro's retreat in Sedona, disappeared. His body was found in the ravine under Midgley Bridge. In his car, police found a suicide note that he had written on the back of a McDonald's receipt (the contents of the note have not been made public). The police report shows that among Wilkins' belongings, the police found a health questionnaire on which he wrote that he had been feeling unsafe for several months and that his "lower chakras felt constricted."



Image Micha Huigen

Several of Wilkins' housemates told police that he had long been confused and easily impressionable. A former business partner of Massaro told police that Massaro hadn't specifically set out to hurt others, but also called him "very narcissistic" and "able to persuade

and manipulate people into believing very strange things." . According to her, Massaro's classes had left Wilkins "fucked up" in the head. She also thought that Massaro should be stopped.

The police questioned Massaro and confronted him with Scofield's article. He dismissed that as something that was based on misleading information and was only "5 to 10 percent" true. The police also asked him about a remarkable statement. In a video of one of his gatherings, he told a follower, "Wake up, do something important, otherwise just kill yourself." Massaro said he didn't mean that literally.

In the end, because there was no hard evidence that he had directly incited Wilkins to commit suicide, the police let him go.

Switch point

Scofield's article and Wilkins' subsequent death represent a turning point in the development of Massaro's movement. Many followers gave up. In his newsletter, on December 28, 2017, he wrote that someone with "negative intent toward our mission" had written a mean and sensational article, and that he had received hate mail in response. He would henceforth take a different course, targeting "those who are truly committed, in smaller groups and mainly online."

Massaro has since also been suspected of being a cult leader on internet forums such as Reddit. When asked, he tried to give it a twist. He was the leader of a 'cult' (the English word for 'cult'), albeit if that word was an abbreviation of 'Curious Understanding Loving Tribe'.

Numbers

It is not known exactly how many Dutch people have joined Massaro – or even online sects at all. However, 693 people are members of his closed Facebook group focused on Amsterdam and the surrounding area. Sect expert Sjoukje Drenth Bruintjes says he has not heard of Massaro yet. And cult psychologist Jessica Terwiel did not yet know Massaro. She does report that in 2019 reports were received about abuses in 270 'closed groups' at the sect signal hotline, which has since been closed down. ' in the Netherlands.

There are no more recent figures, because the subsidy for Sect signal was discontinued in January 2020 and no new reporting point has yet been replaced, despite an approved

parliamentary motion to do so. Remarkable, because in France the budget for a comparable hotline increased tenfold to 1 million euros at the end of 2021, after research showed that the pandemic had resulted in about five hundred new sects.

On France Info, French Deputy Citizenship Minister Marlène Schiappa said in response to the news that new gurus have emerged who preach health-promoting methods, but in reality 'use psychological coercion to obtain money and goods'.

Cult psychologist Terwiel thinks that the pandemic has also caused an increase in sects in the Netherlands, and that social media plays a major role in this. 'A cult stimulates the ability to feel good about something, it's as simple as that. It is in our biology to rely on something that feels good, because it provides security, for example. And if, especially during a pandemic, you find yourself in a situation that feels unsafe and you can't leave your home, there is a very strong push to look for something that does offer something to hold on to. Everything is offered online to make you feel good: an explanation of why the world is the way it is, a doctrine for becoming happy, achieving success, never having to be afraid again, et cetera. You only have to click on it and if it stimulates you positively, that is the way to more.'

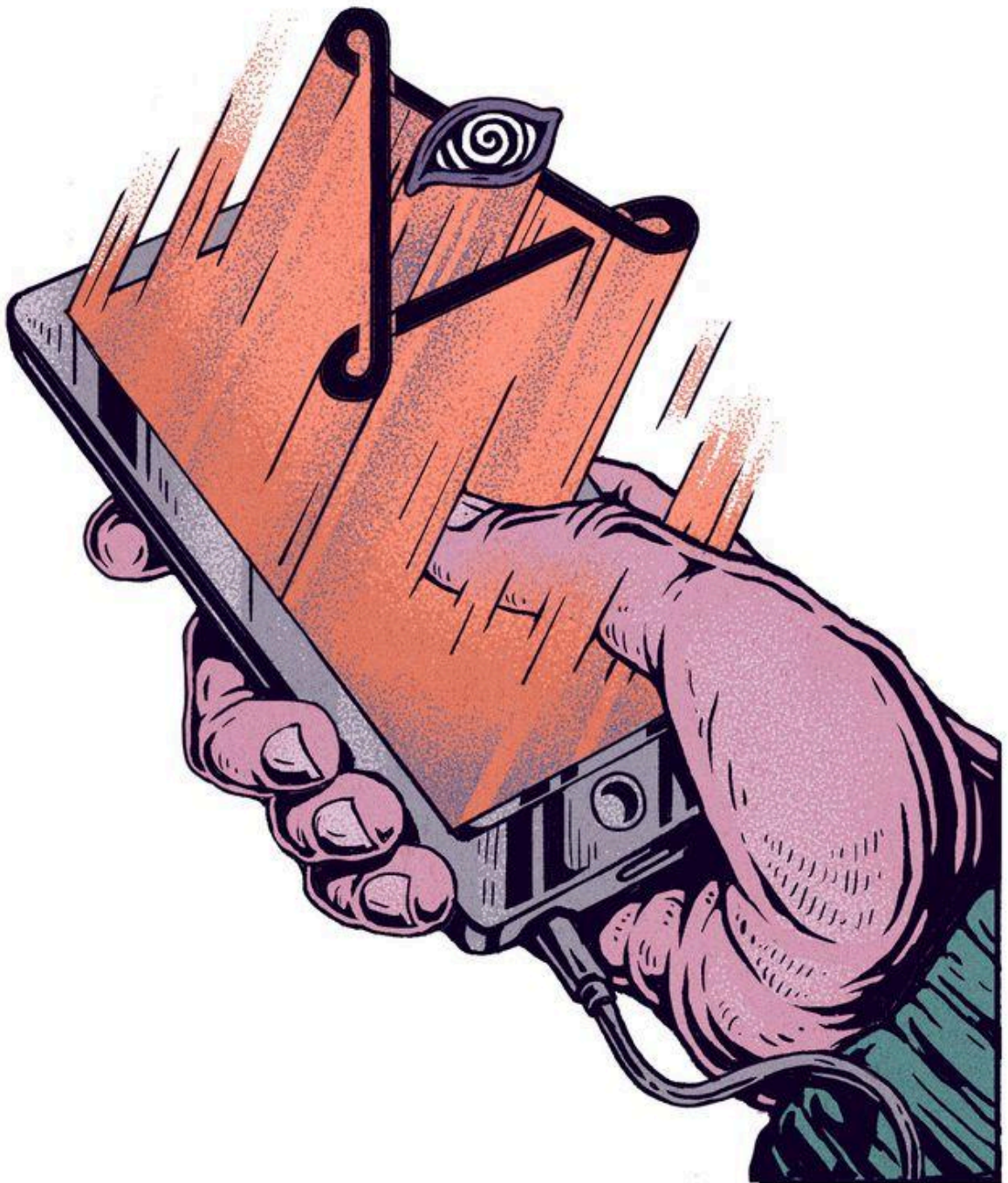


Image Micha Huigen

The interviews with Alectra, Graham and McNeil last for hours, because the three want to explain in as much detail as possible how they gradually became part of Massaro's inner circle.

They entered at the invitation of someone close to Massaro. They first became acquainted with it online, followed by a meeting in real life. Because there is a click, it feels like there is a form of trust, they say. In the group they all meet 'nice and lovely people' and they are warmly

welcomed. Everyone looks up to Massaro, he is the teacher who is way ahead of the rest on the path of spiritual enlightenment. He presents himself as the one who has all the answers and is believed in them.

Once they are near him, Massaro showers the women with attention and romantic gestures and says how special they are. Alectra: 'Bentinho showed the opposite of how my friend treated me: he held my hand in the street and put candles in my room.'

Graham: 'With me it was a mutual friend who invited me to meet him. When we were in a room together, she suddenly said aloud that she had an epiphany and that Massaro and I were soul mates. He completely ran off with it.'

As the women fall for his charm and the attention they get from him and grow hungry for more, his expressions of love wane. Massaro also sees more and more negative qualities in women that would stand in the way of becoming the optimal version of themselves. Alectra: 'Everything that used to be fun about me, for example that I made jokes and could be teasing, suddenly turned out to be bad. He also said that I was too skittish and that skittish people are hiding something.' Graham: 'I was too masculine and independent, and therefore out of balance.'

They learn that everything Massaro does is to help them further along the path of enlightenment. "If he says something mean, if he's being rude to you, it's because he's a mirror of your negative feelings," Graham explains. 'But that means he never has to account for his own behaviour: it's all up to you.'

As soon as they feel something negative, they have to confess it to the group and during 'distortion readings' they are asked until a trauma from their childhood comes along that must be the cause of their feelings. For example, they say they are slowly losing contact with their intuition and going further and further beyond their limits, until they do things that they would never do under 'normal circumstances'. Alectra: 'For example, he taught me to leave my body when he had sex with me.'

Conditioned

When they are in Mexico in April 2021, Massaro asks McNeil and two other guys how their masculine energy is doing. He calls Alectra over. "I want you to take off all your clothes," he tells her. McNeil sees her doubting. "I'm serious," he says. She does. Then she has to sit on his lap and he feels her breasts.

"I wondered if she was really okay with that," says McNeil. "What I'd seen of her was that she was actually quite conservative." But where he would intervene in the past, he does not now. 'I had been conditioned to think that it was my fault if I had a negative thought. Moreover, if I made it known, I would have to undergo another session to find out from which childhood trauma that thought had arisen.'

It is the same internal dialogue that causes Alectra to take off her clothes. Earlier that day, Massaro had asked another woman how it felt that everyone in the group had seen or done it to her vagina. When Alectra heard that, she was secretly relieved that unlike the other woman, she wasn't known as some sort of "slut." But now that he asked her to take off her clothes, she had become convinced that he had caught the thought, that this was her punishment; she had to do this to prove that she could overcome her fear of being labeled a "slut" to be with him. She then pulled her top over her head and sat on his lap.

Graham recognizes that story. She was also placed for that choice. 'I was with the group for the first time in the Netherlands and we were going to a restaurant, when he suddenly told me to stand and undress.' She didn't. "You don't trust me," he said to me. "Do you think I would be able to hurt you?" His disappointment made me regret it and decided to do whatever he asked in future to prove that I did love him.' Massaro denies the sexually transgressive behavior, saying: "No one is or is ever forced to do anything against his or her will."

GIEL BEELEN TAKES MASSARO PODCAST OFFLINE

In the fall of 2021, radio DJ Giel Beelen posted a long interview with Massaro on his YouTube channel Kukurū, where he shares 'useful tools for an optimal life' and offers space for spirituality. In addition, Beelen, together with Massaro and Thijs Lindhout, self-proclaimed 'happiness expert' and podcast maker, made an eight-part podcast, *The World Awakens*, in which Massaro was allowed to share his vision on subjects such as 'the ego', 'relationships' and 'energy'. Asked for a response, Beelen says: 'I am very shocked by the reporting. My condolences go out to the victims. Very brave and good that they have risen. Let it be an inspiration to others in similar situations.' He has since taken the interview and podcast offline.

The longer she is with him, the more anxious and confused Graham becomes, feeling constant panic and afraid he can see it. That's why she avoids him. When he comes to visit her with a new girlfriend, he looks at her and says, "I think Jacqueline needs to be fucked." He has sex with her in the new girlfriend's bed while she watches. Graham: "Then he did it to her, to celebrate that he had 'helped' me."

She says she was not traumatized, but looking back now, she sees that it was absolutely not right. "It's all about him. The question how I was doing and what I thought I needed was not asked.'

Shame

In retrospect, there are more things that the women feel ashamed of going along with. For example, the idea that Massaro's penis is a medicine for women. Graham: 'And that that's why he can't be with one woman, that would be sad for the other women.'

Massaro also says that he is already further along the path of spiritual enlightenment than Jesus was. In addition, he will trick them into thinking that they can become possessed by a demon called an 'STS' (*service to self*), a term he derived from the esoteric book *The Law of One* . "Because Massaro represents the ultimate good, he says there are evil forces out there targeting him," Alectra says. "They are out to destabilize the group's energy field and thereby try to thwart him and 'the mission'."

Several WhatsApp messages show how Massaro can suspect someone from one moment to the next to be possessed by such an STS. Alectra herself read in a group app that she was possessed. In a panic, she rushed to Massaro's closest aides, who gave her advice on how to deal with it and how to "purify" her "energy" again. Alectra: 'At a certain point you also try to do everything to keep him happy, because otherwise you will have to undergo a session until deep into the night if there is the slightest suspicion of an STS.'

It also leads to her and others in the group being in a constant state of paranoia. Massaro then uses that to bind them to him. "I will always do my very best to keep everyone who is completely committed to me safe and protected and attuned to the group," he wrote in a WhatsApp message, if there is a suspicion of an imminent STS attack.

out for money

Massaro seems to deliberately focus his attention on certain people. WhatsApp conversations show that he finds Alectra interesting because she has more than seventy thousand Instagram followers (tens of thousands more than he has) and connections with big stars. One of them is Alexis Ren, a model with over 15 million Instagram followers (Alectra's best friend is Ren's sister). Massaro informs McNeil that he would like to date Ren, implying that it is possible

through Alectra. In a WhatsApp group of which Alectra is not part, he writes about Alectra: 'She has hundreds of thousands of followers. She's in touch with others with millions of followers and she'll be happy to let me deconstruct them when the time is right.'

Graham said he was after her money. "When I first met him, he wanted to know what I was doing," she says. 'I told him that I had run a vegan restaurant and that I could live on investing. He replied that maybe I could cook for him sometime or give him financial advice.'

At that time, he tells her, Massaro had virtually no money and wanted to earn a whole mountain in one go with smart investments, so that he could use it to reach as many people as possible and to found an enlightened society.

Later, Massaro would comment that Graham lives too frugally, that she has to let 'the universe' know that she wants more by spending more, for example by living in a more expensive house. Because of the law of attraction, more money should be coming her way. "Then suddenly he had a 'download' from the future, a vision," says Graham. "He saw that we should merge our bank accounts."

Graham isn't sure if that's a good idea. "But I also thought I was being tested and had to show the universe and Bentinho that I meant business," she says. "That I wanted to help him complete 'the mission'." She links her bank account to his, giving him hundreds of thousands of dollars (she doesn't want the exact amount in the paper).

Then when they are in Panama for a luxurious retreat, Massaro calls her to him. "He said he made an investment that had gone wrong," Graham says. "He had lost more than a third of my money." At that moment she still reacts laconic. Then he said that his 'download' had also involved a larger amount and that is why it had failed. So it was my fault that this happened, I should have given him more money.'

He would also lose the rest of the money a month and a half later, according to Graham. In a response, Massaro confirms that the money has indeed disappeared after the collapse of the crypto market.

Graham becomes part of his team and commits to organizing retreats. "Hopefully to be able to earn it back," she says. She is not paid for her work. She will never see the full amount he lost again. According to Massaro, it was a gift and not a loan, but he still considered it a loan and eventually made an agreement with Graham to pay off part in one go. Graham states that Massaro made it a gift, but confirms that she has agreed to a partial refund. "I just wanted so badly to get rid of him," she says, "and that's why I took my loss in the end."

Alectra says that in the time she spent with Massaro, she lost more than 35,000 euros, which she spent to support the group with groceries and dinners, for example. In addition, she has worked unpaid for Massaro. 'My job was to take care of him. That also meant that I had to search town and country for the best products, because he is picky and only tolerates the very best. So I had to look for a certain kind of prosciutto... in Quito, the capital of Ecuador.'

Shopping lists

WhatsApp messages indeed show that Massaro constantly has shopping lists that the team has to work with: the right shampoo and conditioner, cigars, candles that are wind resistant. They also need to arrange for him to have the right pillows to sleep on, or arrange for the furniture in his hotel room to be replaced if it's not to his liking.

McNeil also says he has not been paid for the long days he puts in producing videos to promote retreats and for the help he provides during those retreats. There are also a lot of meetings, and anyone who is even a minute late will get hit, as is also apparent from WhatsApp messages. Massaro demands complete devotion and considers his own time more precious than others'. Working next door for someone else is not and is not allowed.

When asked, Massaro says that his team members are paid for their work: 'The team is fully provided. In the field of finance, housing and travel, everything is arranged and paid for for them.'

McNeil is annoyed by the way Massaro treats women: 'He is always looking for new women, instead of being busy with the mission. There are also strategy meetings about when to approach who and what they can bring him, such as Alectra, who was found interesting for her Instagram followers and her connections. Once those women are there, he pays attention to them first and then ignores them completely, in order to give someone else a lot of attention. And then when they get jealous, we all have to psychologize that "distortion" in endless sessions to "help" them further. I thought we better put that time into completing the mission.'

He has sometimes expressed this criticism, after which it was also interpreted as a 'distortion' and a session was necessary.

"You know what's so stupid," McNeil says, looking back at it with some distance. 'Actually, I know so little about him. I once asked him why he never had to share childhood trauma with the group. His answer was that he doesn't like it when others get power over him.'

Only child

Bentinho Massaro was born on March 13, 1988 in Amsterdam. He is the only child of Arturo Massaro and Monique Prague. From the age of 6 he grew up in the Gein 3 district, in a terraced house on the Reindert Limastraat, within walking distance of the Gaasperplas and the greenery of the Gaasperzoom nature reserve.

His primary school teacher Ruud Postma has seen him running across the square of primary school Het Gein and calls him calm, contemplative and charismatic. "A boy who was on his own, but it didn't bother me."

Father Arturo, who works as an inspirer and trainer through his own Dream School, did not want to participate in this article. Information on the Dream School website shows that in 2001, when Bentinho was 12, he had a dream, after which he eventually quit his job at an energy company to give (inspiration) training from now on.

Many spiritual self-help books are read at home, as is apparent from an interview in *Playboy* with Bentinho. After his parents received training on the Silva Mind Control Method, which would improve brain functions and make it easier for practitioners to relax and develop clairvoyance, they invited Bentinho to participate in the children's version of that course.

THE MONASTERY

According to the land registry, Bentinho Massaro has no house to his name in the Netherlands. Yet he regularly stays here in the former Mariënborg monastery in the center of Bussum. There is a group of his followers. They call the place 'The Monastery'. After ringing the bell, the gate remained closed. After a request for an interview by email to one of the residents, she acted as spokesperson for the group and for Bentinho Massaro, and wanted to pass questions to his team.

When Bentinho begins to lose his cheerfulness in high school and finds himself less and less connected with others, he thinks back to what he learned during Silva training. He decides to follow his urge 'to find the truth that does not change, so that everything can be understood', he says in old interviews.

He immerses himself in spiritual theories, gurus, books and films. From Deepak Chopra to *The Matrix*, he reports to *Playboy*. He also follows pseudoscientific courses such as Neuro-

Linguistic Programming (NLP) and Emotional Freedom Techniques (an alternative method of treatment for pain and stress), and focuses on yoga, reiki, meditation and self-hypnosis.

At the age of 20 he goes to India with his girlfriend to discover himself. He follows training courses and courses to live more consciously in the here and now, he writes in a travel blog on Waarbenijj.nu. In India he feels that 'it is good for me to admit my arrogance'.

swallow statements

Massaro writes that he has often swallowed insights and statements. Statements that I personally think contain much wisdom and insight (arrogance? self-knowledge? intuition?), powerful, but often also somewhat sharp and slightly painful or confrontational statements, or statements that go against the teaching or thoughts of teachers or 'advanced' enter. Statements that I think would prove a (contrary) part, or at least reveal a hidden truth after which the person in question will immediately have to adjust his 'image' (sic) because they simply do not care about the logic and simplicity of that can overcome complex statements.'

His mother Monique, who did not want to participate in this play, encourages him and writes below: 'After reading your story, I now feel a bit like the mother of the Dalai Lama.'

Massaro will later say that during that experience in India he found that the lessons and teachers he had followed up to that point took him further away from himself instead of giving him more answers. On the website Vrolijkverlicht.nl he writes that there is always a 'natural presence' in him and that if he trusts it more, he will do better, that he will be enlightened if he continues to build on that feeling. He feels he has caught up with his teachers and is ready to start teaching himself, to help others walk the path of spiritual enlightenment.

Arthur Versluis, head of the department of religious studies at Michigan State University's College of Arts & Letters, therefore classifies Massaro in his book *American Gurus: From Transcendentalism to New Age Religion* among the 'immediatists', a new religious phenomenon. He coined the term for people who no longer have to study or meditate for a lifetime to eventually become spiritually enlightened, but declare that they suddenly are. 'They can be seen as the religious response to the consumer society, in which the emphasis is on immediate satisfaction of needs, where 'instant relief without much work' is the product that is sold,' writes Versluis.

Lost

Alectra, McNeil and Graham are completely lost when they finally leave Massaro's group. McNeil has anxiety attacks and gets stress eczema on his face. He's broke, but he can't work. Nothing works.

Alectra is so upset and depressed that when she is in Sedona and driving over the Midgley Bridge, she considers driving into the ravine. "I thought, I'm going to go after Brent Wilkins."

Graham's departure begins with an Instagram ad for the HBO documentary series *The Vow*, about the NXIVM cult. She watches the trailer and sees a group of happy people trying to improve themselves, until under the influence of their cult leader Keith Raniere they go beyond their limits and he takes advantage of it. That's when she realizes she has to leave. She already suffers from panic attacks, doesn't know who she is anymore and lies lifeless in bed for days. "I knew if I didn't leave now, I couldn't be a good mother to my kids," Graham says.

She begins to read about cults and cult leaders. In her view, although no official diagnosis has been made as far as is known, Massaro is a 'traumatizing narcissist'. She bases this, among other things, on the article 'The Relational System of the Traumatizing Narcissist' by psychoanalyst Daniel Shaw, who is affiliated with the International Cultic Studies Associations. Almost every paragraph in that article, which deals with what makes someone a "traumatizing narcissist" and how such a person can manifest themselves as a cult leader, reminds her of her experience with Massaro.

"The deficiencies of the followers are grouped under the umbrella of 'the ego', [...] which is seen as a harmful appendage or blockage to the true self and therefore must be purified by the leader so that the follower can reach their full potential. can achieve," Shaw writes. "In the case of cults, purification usually means subjecting them to various forms of sadistic belittling and humiliation. [...] Purity can also be proven by a person's willingness to give up a lot of his or her money, or the willingness to endure sexual abuse, or both.'

Alectra and McNeil pull together when they start making videos for Massaro. Little by little they dare to tell each other how they really feel in Massaro's group. They decide to leave and, once disengaged, they start dating each other.

They make contact with other former members and carefully try to gauge the experience of others because of the contracts of silence. When they hear Graham's story, and they hear theirs, the puzzle pieces fall into place. It is clear to them that they must take action, that Massaro has shown a pattern for some time in which he uses spiritual techniques to take

advantage of people and to benefit himself. A pattern that they hope to break by making their stories public, in order to prevent more victims from falling.

Talking about thoughts of suicide is possible at 113 Suicide Prevention. Call 0800-0113 for a conversation. You can also chat at www.113.nl

ACCOUNTABILITY

For this article, *de Volkskrant* has spoken with more than twenty people since March 2021, including (cult) experts and supporters and opponents of Massaro. The advocates we spoke to watched the occasional video and were not deeply involved in his organization. Two opponents had suffered psychological problems from their contact with Massaro and his teaching methods. *De Volkskrant* has been able to view all company data up to 2021, insofar as they were filed in the various international Chambers of Commerce, and has received help from the Organized Crime and Corruption Reporting Project (OCCRP). In the context of a rebuttal, *de Volkskrant* approached both Massaro's regular contact person and one of his close associates. Massaro's full response can be read below.

REACTION BENTINHO MASSARO

Although Massaro was sent a draft of this article, he says he has not read it; he won't say why not. He gave a general response to questions that *de Volkskrant* had previously sent him:

“I have never and will never sexually abuse or otherwise abuse anyone. I have an unusually deep respect for the phenomenon of free will. It is central to all my work and teachings. Such an accusation is therefore one hundred percent false and will always be one hundred percent false. I can promise this with all my heart and soul.

“We use NDAs because we have been attacked by frustrated individuals in the past, and have seen that even the most innocuous moment can be twisted to appear very bad to the outside world.

“To get out of an NDA, there has to be a violation of the law. Like with sexual abuse. We think they were advised by a lawyer and decided it was worth it to accuse me of sexual abuse so they could legally violate their NDA and vent their emotions on the internet and find support for their worldview and unresolved emotions, regardless of the truth, any honor, or consideration of the consequences for others.

“All sexual relations I've ever had were fully consensual, and always will be.

“Jacqueline's money was a gift, not a loan. We have this in black and white, with her signature underneath. She wanted to donate this to support the team's operation at the time and it was never intended to be repaid.

'Later she changed her mind and said it would feel better if it was returned. We agreed, although we were not obliged to, as this was not the initial arrangement or intention. We started donating amounts whenever we could (sic) to the point where she asked if we could give more and we agreed with her to make a large donation all at once, which was considered complete by both. We also have this in black and white.

“The portion of the money invested at the time was intended to enrich Jacqueline's portfolio and also create some equity for the company, but things turned out differently. Literally two minutes after we opened a position with margin, the crypto market unexpectedly completely collapsed and we lost our entire position before any action could be taken. It was annoying but unintentional and the timing was bizarre; but all this was undertaken at the time with full agreement and even with enthusiasm from Jacqueline.

“The team is fully equipped. In the field of finance, housing and travel, everything is arranged and paid for for them. We operate more like a family than a conventional business. In recent years we have also had some volunteers who helped us. We are not millionaires and are constantly reinvesting money in our mission and the activities we organize.

'We have always paid tax, and we are also paying off the tax that is still outstanding.

“No one is or is ever forced to do anything against their will. Not by me and not by my team.'

A LITTLE BIT CULTY

Alectra, Graham and McNeil also shared their story extensively with Sarah Edmondson and Anthony 'Nippy' Ames on the podcast *A Little Bit Culty*. Their story can be heard in two parts. Edmondson and Ames are former members of the NXIVM cult. They also feature in the HBO documentary series *The Vow* about that cult and the unmasking of leader Keith Raniere. With the podcast they try to contribute to awareness about cults.

IN THE CROSSHAIRS

American cult expert Rick Ross, author of the book *Cults Inside Out* and founder of the Cult Education Institute, has had Massaro's sights for several years. In his book he defines three characteristics of someone who leads a destructive cult. In the first place, there is an individual leader who bears no responsibility and is not transparent. Second, that leader uses a mind-reshaping program and techniques that allow him to exert "undue influence" on his followers. And thirdly, there is a group that is destructive, where they exhibit behaviors that cause people stress, where people are bullied, where they are told they are not good enough. In a telephone interview, Ross, who at the time has not yet seen the contents of this piece, says: