



Membership

# This Peruvian Shaman Became a Popstar—Now He’s Accused of Sexual Abuse and Leading a ‘Cult’



Roger Bardales turned his ayahuasca practice into a multinational empire, but some of his students tell a much darker story.

By **Mattha Busby** May 15, 2025, 8:56am

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Like many who decide to try ayahuasca, 24-year-old Tania was depressed and searching for meaning when she first experienced the plant-based psychedelic potion in Vienna in 2015. It wasn’t until Tania’s third ceremony that she had a breakthrough; overwhelming feelings of pure bliss that she equated to the

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**presence of God. “It was a state of being,” she recalls of the experience, which was facilitated by a cousin of hers. “It was love, peace, and light.”**

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But the joy Tania felt that night would soon curdle into something else entirely. In her ecstatic, highly suggestible state, Tania (whose name we’ve changed at her request) was told that her cousin was recruiting Europeans to go to Peru to drink ayahuasca with an Amazonian shaman. His name was Roger Bardales, a globetrotting member of the indigenous Shipibo community. Tania’s cousin had himself been trained by Bardales a few years earlier—just as the shaman was beginning to turn his ayahuasca practice into a multinational empire.

One of Bardales’ first apprentices, Tania’s cousin completed a rudimentary training course that lasted less than a year before being dispatched back to Europe to recruit new students of the mysterious shamanic arts. Healthcare worker Tania signed up in the midst of her ayahuasca afterglow. Soon, she was on a transatlantic flight to the Amazon. “I left everything,” she tells VICE. “I quit my job as a hospital nurse and my flat. My family was devastated but I went there naively full of hope and faith that it was my path.”



ROGER BARDALES

What many Westerners fail to grasp is that, in the Amazon, being a shaman hasn’t always been an honorable profession. Historically, many

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shamans have eked out at least part of their living by getting involved in feuds, and there can be darker aspects to the practice: some have told anthropologists that they practice *brujeria*, otherwise known as black magic. The uptick in affluent Western interest in ayahuasca has created an interesting dynamic: today, a global bourgeois class of frequent ayahuasca drinkers are throwing millions of dollars at these formerly marginalized men, who are now earning far more than anyone in their villages could ever hope to.

“Possibly, he has made millions of dollars,” says a source in the northeastern Peruvian jungle city of Pucallpa, a 30-minute boat ride from Bardales’ simple jungle camp, detailing the shaman’s expensive car, motorcycles, motorboats, multiple homes, and the constant presence of European students at his camp.

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**“He tells the students you have to confide in the maestro, believe in the maestro, have faith.”**

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On first meeting, new recruits are sometimes unimpressed by Bardales, who turns 40 this year. He’s usually seen wearing bright, embroidered robes with Shipibo patterns and a Christian cross; sporting gold teeth and often drinking booze. Former followers say he talks about himself near-constantly, and his ego recently received a boost when he became a somewhat popular cumbia singer (one clip of Bardales and his band has racked up 500,000 views on [TikTok](#)).

Bardales is a man with a limited vocal range but big dreams: his next wish is to become Peru’s president. He certainly seems to have a politician’s gift of manipulation; those formerly enamored with Bardales say that he lovebombs at will. “He tells the students you have to confide in the maestro, believe in the maestro, have faith,” Tania says. She is among several former followers to accuse Bardales of being a sexual predator, who uses his psychedelic sacrament to hypnotize followers into emptying their bank accounts and performing sex acts.

Back in 2015, Tania paid a few thousand dollars to receive ayahuasca shamanic training immersion at his camp. But as soon as she arrived—



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joining a rotating cast of a dozen or so European disciples who each had their own huts—the shady nature of Bardales' operation became clear. Following Tania's first jungle ceremony, in the darkness of the early hours of the morning, Bardales swooped and suddenly pressed his lips against hers with a French kiss. "I was in shock," she says. "He just did it, and that was it. He's the maestro and I was the student... You think you have to do it." At the time she thought she was special, but later learned it was a script he would play with other women.

In the next ayahuasca ceremony, Tania had a vision that she interpreted as a sign she was destined to be with Bardales, and they began having sex soon afterwards, as first reported in Jules Evans' [Ecstatic Integration](#) blog. Tania did not say no at the time, but looking back she is clear that it was non-consensual since she was often under the befuddling influence of ayahuasca and did not provide active, sober consent. "I was under his spell," she says. Tania wasn't the only one: "He sleeps with all the women unprotected," she adds.

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## **"He's like an energy vampire, playing mind games all the time."**

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Tania stayed for four months, becoming Bardales' mistress even while he was with his ex-wife and mother of four of his children. Then, she was sent back to Europe to help run the ceremonies operated by his barely trained novice followers. From these, Bardales allegedly earns thousands of dollars per month. "He's like an energy vampire," Tania says, "playing mind games all the time." She went back to the jungle for another eight months in 2016, during which time she claims to have been physically mistreated. Tania was unceremoniously ejected from the tribe by Bardales after she began experiencing intense symptoms of psychosis and neurosis that she believes were a result of the regular ayahuasca use, as well as mental and physical mistreatment. "It fucked up my brain so bad," she says.

But the ayahuasca abuse continued, and little by little Bardales used his newfound wealth to turn himself into a local kingpin. He sponsored sporting events, was appointed the head of his village by the controversial Ucayali regional governor Manuel Gambini Rupay, and



through his contacts got bookings to perform his music at official city events.



BARDALES WITH MANUEL GAMBINI RUPAY, REGIONAL GOVERNOR OF UCAVALI, PERU

As his star has risen, more women have begun to come forward. Viktorija, a Lithuanian woman who preferred not to use her surname, visited Bardales' camp while her husband was a student there. "After the last ceremony I attended with him, he started extorting our friends for large sums of money for some 'ethereal' spiritual gifts he supposedly gave them," she says. Those sums allegedly went as high as \$60,000.

When Viktorija and two other Lithuanian women published blogs blowing the whistle on Bardales last year, the stories started to spread. Leaders within his Shipibo community issued a statement denouncing him after the Ecstatic Integration post, stating that Bardales had no right to call himself an ambassador of their indigenous nation.

Despite the growing criticism, a number of students—as many as 15, according to one count—are still living at Bardales' camp, while others based in Europe remain loyal to him. "The women who stayed there are trapped," says Eva, a 36-year-old spiritual influencer from Lithuania who stayed with Bardales at his home for three months in 2022. "I'm so thankful that I opened my eyes, realized, and ran away."

She then used a word that shamans like Bardales tend to rail against.

"In the cult, you just believe that the whole world is against us."

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**“I thought this man is doing something like Jesus, that he was some kind of enlightened being.”**

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Eva first met Bardales at an ayahuasca retreat that he was running on his 2022 world tour. At the peak of the second ritual, while Eva was in an extremely vulnerable state due to the vomit-inducing psychedelic, Bardales kissed her, as he had Tania years before. He then placed an invisible ‘ring’ on her finger. Similarly, Eva felt sudden urges to accompany Bardales back to Peru. She says the maestro cast a love magic spell upon her.

It may seem fanciful, but talk of such spells is common in the Amazon. “Amazonian shamans have never claimed to be either wise men or saints,” writes anthropologist Jeremy Narby, author of the *Cosmic Serpent*, a classic text on ayahuasca shamanism. “When a male ayahuasquero enchants his female client, the relationship between them changes; it is no longer based on consent, but on subjugation.”



In the mid-1980s, when Bardales was born, few people in his community had traveled far outside of their ancestral homeland. Now, Amazonian shamans are often received as royalty within monied communities the world over, with ayahuasca seen as a one-stop shop to healing and

transcendence, and an escape from the drudgery of modern life. Bardales says he started learning to become an ayahuasca master at the age of five, after being initiated into shamanism by first his great-grandfather, then his grandfather. His website claims that he spent “the majority of his youth alone in the jungle,” undergoing an initiation of sorts, before heading to Europe for the first time in 2012 aged 27. That’s when he first met Tania’s cousin.

“It was the best thing I ever experienced,” the cousin told Ecstatic Integration, who gave him the alias ‘Anton.’ (He did not return VICE’s requests for comment.) “I thought this man is doing something like Jesus, that he was some kind of enlightened being.” Fast forward 13 years, and Anton has a very different opinion. “Now, I understand that even in those ceremonies he was approaching women,” he said.

According to Bardales’ world tour poster, he visited Europe, Asia, and Australia in 2022 alone. Who knows how many women he came into contact with during that time?

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**“I truly feel sorry for his students, who are at their core beautiful people, but still under his spell.”**

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Bardales is just one of many alleged abusers catapulted from obscurity into the spotlight by the psychedelic boom, but even with the truth laid bare, he seemingly remains untouchable. “He’s a brujo, not a healer,” says another source in Pucallpa. “Brujeria is real and more than half of shamans in the Amazon are not doing good things.” According to *In Darkness and Secrecy*, a 2004 tome examining traditions of ‘assault sorcery’ in the Amazon, shamans are actually quite often morally ambiguous individuals, but there has been a recent tendency “to emphasize the positive, therapeutic, and socially integrative dimensions of shamanism—a trend that shows no sign of diminishing”.

Bardales’ proximity to powerful local figures like the former governor, coupled with the personal fortune and power he’s amassed, makes it unlikely that he will see justice anytime soon. Tania continues to rebuild her life, returning to work at the hospital, reconciling with her family, and

mothering a child. In the absence of some kind of justice, all she can do is hope that Bardales one day faces a reckoning. “I want him on Netflix,” she says. “It’s not that easy to get out of the cult.” Viktorija agrees: “I truly feel sorry for his students,” she says, “who are at their core beautiful people, but still under his spell.”

VICE reached out to Bardales for his response to the allegations. A group of his current students, who call themselves “the Mukanranko family,” said: “It is easy to present Roger as a greedy person who only has his profit in mind. However he is a very generous person who takes care about many other people. As the medicine work is his main profession, he does charge for his medicine work in [the] form of ceremonies, diets etc. Roger works personally as well as in distance and its possible for European students to agree on healing work or other support while they are in Europe.

“In a few cases there have been talks with participants about extra treatments or trainings. Each case was different as is every person. When Roger considered the treatment would be difficult or a long term issue he would ask a bigger amount of money. As does every doctor in the normal health system, too. But if the participant would not agree or have less money to give also this was accepted. In the case of students wishing for long term studies in Peru, we try our best to communicate about all the topics before coming to Peru.

“What we would also like to point out is, that we don’t want to convince anybody to become a ‘follower’ of Roger Bardales. All the connections we are making in Europe are based on the guidance of medicine. Many people want to study or learn from Roger. But we are encouraging very little people to actually come to Peru because we know the path of medicine is difficult and not to play with. To go this path is some commitment and can take years, but everyone has the free choice to walk it or not. And every one has to take responsibility for their own paths.

“We, as students who stayed with him through all processes and beyond that for many years, can claim Roger Bardales a very honest and truthful person with the heart on the right spot. He has our full trust and we are very grateful for all the development we could do under his guidance, and for all the healing we experienced through him.”

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