

Extraordinary Bodies, Invisible Worlds

Somatic Pedagogy in Neo-pagan Ritual Practices

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.30664/ar.138268>
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Numerous scholars have signalled that neo-pagan practitioners use their body and their senses to interact with the divine and elaborate a spiritual experience. However, the learning process followed to achieve and produce a sensing body capable of communicating with summoned entities has not been properly assessed, until very recently. For over a decade, I have conducted ethnographic research on neo-pagan ritual practices held at European megalithic sites to understand how practitioners learn to co-construct their somatic experiences culturally. Collected data allowed me to develop a model I called somatic pedagogy, which is a progressive sensory learning process applied by ritual specialists organizing practices. In this review article, I present a synthesis of published material where I have developed this model extensively. Specifically, I will go through the elements that permit this kind of somatic education to be implemented within analysed practices: the specificities of neo-pagan ontologies about the human body and world, the potential of neo-pagan rituals to function as learning sites, and the main stages of this progressive bodily education.

Neo-pagan ontologies on extraordinary bodies and invisible worlds

Neo-paganism, among other religious phenomena that emerged in the Western hemisphere in the 1960s, has been considered as an umbrella term for a myriad of spiritual movements that promote alternative hierarchies of senses, mind-body skills,

and worldviews that differ from those prevailing in Western societies. Applying ethnographic methods and phenomenological approaches, researchers have collected data among contemporary pagans who value touch over vision, instinct over logic, and interconnectedness over duality (Greenwood 2005; Harris 2013). Additionally, such studies have signalled that neo-pagan ritual practices can function as learning sites where practitioners discover and incorporate alternative corpora of knowledge regarding the human body and the world we live in. Collected data on bodily sensations felt during neo-pagan ceremonies have also provided examples of the kind of somatic experiences practitioners associate with the presence of non-human beings summoned during rites. Examples recovered in neo-shamanic workshops, neo-pagan ceremonies, and mediumistic sessions include hot or cold sensations on the skin that are allegedly not caused by a change of temperature in the environment; a feeling of being touched by someone on the hands, arms, or shoulders when unaccompanied; or tingling in the palms when touching a standing stone or a tree trunk (Ostenfeld-Rosenthal 2011; Rountree 2006). The similarity to bodily sensations collected in

various geographical and cultural contexts highlighted the existence of a trans-national circulation of alternative knowledge of the body and the senses. Collected information called attention to the significance practitioners give to their bodily sensations but needed an analytical framework to understand the reasons behind this valorization.

For the last ten years, I have been conducting research on the specificities of sensory models and somatic experiences taking place during neo-pagan practices in France, Belgium, and the United Kingdom (Dansac 2020, 2022a, 2022b, 2023, and in press). In this review article, I offer a synthesis of my work on embodied interactions by exploring the main elements that make up a learning process I call “somatic pedagogy”. Because of the importance neo-pagans accorded to their body, I decided to turn to Thomas Csordas’s (1990) concept of embodiment. This term invites us to consider how we experience the world with our culturally constructed body, and emphasizes that mind and body are interconnected, and all imagery is to some extent embodied. Csordas uses the term “somatic modes of attention” to consider the body’s situation in the world and the intersubjective milieu that gives rise to a specific sensation. Pondering the embodied dimensions of neo-pagan rituals allows us to delve into the various ways in which these spiritual practices are enacted, while it also permits a consideration of the way practitioners experience them with their culturally constructed bodies. To understand how neo-pagans make sense of their bodily sensations during ritual practices, we need to take a closer look at the qualities and capacities they attribute to the human body, to nature, and to the world they inhabit.

Neo-paganism is a term used to designate a large variety of religious and spiritual movements such as Wicca, neo-druidism,

the goddess movement, and eco-paganism. Neo-pagan phenomena have often been seen as holistic, non-anthropocentric, and ecological. Its adherents regard nature as alive and as having a spiritual dimension (Greenwood 2005, 10). Within their practices and beliefs, they incorporate eclectic elements from local folklore, traditional foreign religious traditions, ecology, and esotericism. Neo-pagan spirituality followers value human relationships with nature and embrace polytheistic and animistic cosmologies. Additionally, neo-pagans consider that they share the world with non-human beings, both visible and invisible, to whom they attribute knowledge, emotion, and reflexivity (Harvey 2006, 47). Ethnographic studies have noted that neo-pagans develop meaningful engagements with this enchanted world inhabited by visible and invisible non-human beings through ritualized interactions framed by organizing principles (Dansac 2022b).

Embodied performances of rituals are at the heart of neo-pagan inter-being relationships, because they allow participants to get in touch creatively with supernatural entities thought to inhabit nature (Magliocco 1996). Performing a ritual can also be understood as the creation of a reality as it should be, a set of actions capable of healing our body and soul, a collaboration between ritual specialist and participant, or a symbolic enactment of a shared kinship or lineage between human and summoned entities (Rountree 2012; Pike 2001, 23). Embracing holistic conceptualizations allows neo-pagans to consider the human body as capable of interconnecting with nature and partaking in its sacredness. In contrast to the dualistic conception that distinguishes body and soul, in holistic spiritual practices the body is considered as a unity that also includes mind, spirit, and cosmos (de la Torre and Gutiérrez 2016,

154). Thus, the body is the space where neo-pagans sensorially experience a sense of reconnection or belonging on a cognitive and meaningful level.

For many neo-pagans, the human body has its own innate wisdom and intelligence (Pike 2001, 198). It is the only tool needed to verify the presence, agency, or absence of invisible entities such as energies and nature spirits (Dansac 2020, 312; Harris 2013, 404). That is why neo-pagans associate specific bodily sensations with the presence or agency of specific entities, or with a particular sacred space or sacred date. Neo-paganism is also known for promoting energy metaphors, mostly in the form of discourses regarding the idea of a life-force energy capable of flowing through everything, including the human body (Ivakhiv 2003, 111). Practitioners share the idea that a healthy or balanced human body is one in which this flow of energy is unimpeded. The act of relating to “earth energies”, “nature spirits”, or “sacred places” constitutes for them an embodied interaction, meaning one in which they rely on their somatic experiences or sensations as tools to verify the presence of these entities.

Neo-pagan rituals as sites of learning

The collection of ethnographic data on heterogeneous interpretations of the body, especially the sensitive body, has made it possible to explore the meaning accorded to specific somatic experiences in neo-pagan ritual contexts. Examples include animistic ceremonies and mediumship sessions in which participants learn to interpret certain bodily sensations as produced by the presence of non-human beings (Dansac 2020; Rountree 2006); neo-shamanic rituals in which different sensory experiences are placed in value by ritual specialists as evidence of the agency of invoked entities (Ostenfeld-Rosenthal 2011); and energy

healing sessions in which certain sensations are presented to participants as evidence of their interaction with “invisible energies” (Pierini, Groisman and Espirito Santo 2023). The omnipresence of references to the body in the discourses of those who indulge in this type of experience seems to be due to the organizing principles that frame practices.

An interesting analysis of a ritual protocol that allows participants to elaborate an embodied spiritual experience was developed by Renée de la Torre and Cristina Gutiérrez (2016, 168). The ritual practice they studied is called *temazcal*, a pre-Hispanic collective steam-bath session. This experience functions as a device oriented to the production of bodily sensations through ritualized interactions of the practitioner with elements of nature, such as water or fire. The different phases organizing these practices guide practitioners through several exercises, where they progressively learn how to interpret the sensations that they are experiencing. Other analyses explore how knowledge and skills associated with the body and senses are developed to communicate with invisible sentient beings. An example is Emily Pierini’s (2016) study of the learning process followed by Brazilian mediums. Applying ethnographic methods, she identified how actors develop their dexterity to communicate with invoked spirits. Her research revealed that such learning takes the form of a multi-dimensional experience, one that is at once bodily, intuitive, performative, conceptual, and intersubjective. A further example is David Dupuis’s (2018) research on what he terms “visionary learning” in neo-shamanic *ayahuasca* rituals taking place in the Peruvian Amazon. He reconstructed specific processes of progressive learning and socialization of experiences. His study identified

the discursive and pragmatic interactions that frame the consumption of a hallucinogenic concoction, and shape the interpretations that participants give to their visions or hallucinations.

Although these three studies contributed to an assessment of specific learning processes implemented to accomplish different objectives, the core of somatic education needed further attention. Seeking to understand how participants produce and achieve a sensing body capable of interacting with summoned entities, I have developed a model of bodily learning I call “somatic pedagogy” (Dansac 2023, in press). This specific kind of education is implemented through the progressive learning of a sensory language, the execution of body techniques, and the interpretation of somatic imagery. This model could have the capacity of integrating other elements, such as practice of visualization, cultivation of bodily attention, or verbalization of bodily sensations, among other things. It is a model that could be modified by scholars to consider the multiplicity of bodily techniques and body conceptualizations promoted in contemporary spiritual practices.

The somatic pedagogy model draws mainly on ethnographic data I gathered in Carnac from 2014 to 2019 (Dansac 2020, 2022a, 2023, in press). In the next section, I will first present the tools applied to collect data, and next I will describe the three main components of the somatic pedagogy that my informants followed to achieve and produce a body capable of sensing the presence and agency of energies.

Learning through somatic pedagogy

Seeking to understand how neo-pagan practitioners learn to use their body and their senses, I conducted an eight-year study of embodied spiritual experiences

among groups consisting of adults who hold neo-pagan-inspired rituals in Carnac, a megalithic site in north-western France. In diverse articles resulting from my research, I extensively analysed and illustrated how practitioners experiment during these alternative spiritual practices with, in and through their body (Dansac 2020, 2022a, 2022b, 2023, in press). Collective neo-pagan-inspired ritual practices held in Carnac are strongly prescribed, and framed by organizing principles that allow the participants to acknowledge the presence of “energies” considered to be emanating from local standing stones, to interact with “nature spirits” considered to inhabit local megaliths, and to identify the exact moment when these non-human entities physically enter into contact with the human body and spirit.

My ethnographic research differed from others’ because of the tools I applied when collecting data about somatic experiences (Dansac 2020, 308–11). The methodological corpus was influenced by Sarah Pink’s (2009) sensory ethnography model, as well as by the approach of scholars such as Paul Stoller (1997) and Jason Throop (2012), who use their own body, senses and experiences as means of ethnographic analysis. Along with traditional methods like participant observations and semi-direct interviews, I carried out somatic interviews and sensory participations. Inspired by Jaida Samudra’s (2008) research on kinesthetic experience, the somatic interviews consisted of asking participants questions about how to perform a bodily movement, and then following their directions while they supervised me performing it. During these interactions, I played the role of an apprentice. By being monitored, guided, and directed by others, I was able to identify when and under what conditions different types of somatic experiences take

place. The “sensory participations” are a tool developed by David Howes (2019) and consisted of using my own body as a tool to analyse the spatial positioning of participants, their movements, and the relationship of a bodily movement with a certain bodily sensation.

Data collected through these tools allowed me to identify the existence of a specific ritual protocol which organizes practices and divides them into several stages. From one stage to the next, a progression takes place, implemented by the execution of bodily techniques that prepare the participants for the ultimate encounter: the moment when the practitioner’s body comes into direct contact with the surface of a megalith. In general, participants engage in five main actions following a pre-established order that is shared by all the ritual specialists I met. First, participants slowly walk towards a megalith. Then, they place themselves near the stone to collectively perform body techniques such as breathing exercises accompanied by slow movements of upper and lower limbs. Next, ritual specialists accompany the participants through visualization exercises to “see” and interact with the nature spirits and energies considered to inhabit the stones. After that, each participant slowly approaches the stone and touches it with their palms, torso, forehead or back. Finally, participants stand in a circle near the megalith and engage in verbal exchanges to compare their somatic experiences with one another. Practices usually take place over a few hours, and on rare occasions participants fail to attain the practices’ objectives.

Within the proposed activities, the sensory and bodily attention of participants is intense. They are constantly reminded by the ritual specialist that they must pay particular attention to their own body and their senses, as well as to the body and

senses of the other participants. Claiming a holistic conception of the body, as well as horizontal relationships between humans and non-humans (Dansac 2022b), the devices that these practices provide are supposed to allow practitioners to use their somatic experiences as tools to verify their effectiveness. The type of pedagogy implemented by this protocol is based on three main elements: the progressive learning of a sensory language, the interpretation of somatic imagery and the execution of bodily techniques.

The three main components of the somatic pedagogy

From beginning to end during the rites, practitioners must learn a new sensory language, one that differs from the language that they use in their daily life. This language mobilizes a specific interpretative framework relating to bodily sensations, as well as a particular hierarchy of senses. Thus, sensations of cold or heat are reinterpreted as evidence of the penetration into the body of the energies of the megaliths. The sensations of heaviness in the limbs become for the participants tangible proof of the presence of these energies. Touch is valued as a primary sense for experiencing the effectiveness of these practices. Discovering, adopting, and reproducing such interpretations of bodily sensations is very important because it allows the participants to make sense of what their body feels during the ritual.

In the practices I observed, participants discovered and integrated this sensory language through an embodied learning process that was experienced on somatosensory and intersubjective levels (Pierini 2016, 311). This meant that they had to pay simultaneous attention to their body and their emotions, as well as to the body and the emotions of the other participants.

Both levels were experienced during the individual and collective exercises that prepared the participants for the ultimate encounter: the moment when they would touch the megalith. Sensory language was mainly provided by ritual specialists, and to master it participants had to respect three distinct injunctions that were juxtaposed during the execution of bodily techniques.

Each participant was encouraged to become “aware of their body”, not by considering it as an object, but as a living and sensitive body. Simultaneously, each practitioner was supposed to “awaken their body” and “develop their bodily attention” by becoming aware of the functioning of their own bodily sensations, breathing and thoughts. To respect these three injunctions, participants had to perform all the exercises, consider the instructions given by ritual specialists, imitate the movements and gestures of other participants and concentrate on their bodily sensations at all times. In addition, they had to establish precise relationships between the kinesthetic patterns and the meaning given to these patterns. For this reason, this pedagogy also included the incorporation of somatic imagery that was formulated by associating a body technique with a specific body sensation (Csordas 1990, 18).

Somatic imagery was inculcated through bodily techniques, meaning that participants learned to associate a specific bodily movement or position with a particular bodily sensation. For example, before asking participants to walk slowly towards a megalith, ritual specialists would warn the participants that they would most likely experience a sensation of heaviness in their upper and lower limbs. Before touching a megalith, they would also make them aware that tingling and pins and needles might be felt in the body when touching the stones. The data collected show that ritual

specialists constantly evoke this imagery, from start to finish of the rites. First, the participants, who are mostly beginners, discover and assimilate this imagery. Then, they reproduce it by putting it into words in order to share their body sensations with others. By transmitting somatic imagery, the ritual specialists shape the participants’ bodily experiences, encourage them to adopt a reflexive look at their bodies, and encourage them to associate their sensations with the presence of the entities evoked. Learning somatic imagery allows my interlocutors to inscribe their bodies with the sensory language of these practices.

Afterword

The possibility of learning to experience the unity of body, mind, and spirit is one of the main features that attracted my informants to take part in the practices analysed. For many of them, these activities acted as thresholds to access other realities and other knowledge about us and the world we live in. Through practice, their ordinary body could develop “extraordinary” capacities and physically experience the presence of invisible non-human beings. Moreover, in neo-pagan practices such as those I observed, learning was also about building confidence and embracing positive thinking. Hence, the progressive sensory education implemented by ritual specialists included elements to build self-assurance among informants, such as verbalizing and sharing experiences, collectively experiencing alternative knowledge, and valorizing any bodily sensation as proof of the practice’s effectiveness.

It is also important to state that the content learned by practitioners, such as the sensory language, bodily techniques, and somatic imagery, constitutes transposable knowledge. It can be applied, reformulated,

and nourished in a multiplicity of spiritual settings that promote animistic cosmologies, holistic conceptions of the body and the self, and mind-body techniques, among others. Somatic pedagogy is part of a learning process that practitioners can continue developing throughout their life, or the beginning of their learning path. The access to alternative ontologies of the world is one of the main benefits promoted in neo-pagan practices. Further analysis would be needed to determine other learning processes implemented to discover and adopt neo-pagan corpora of knowledge about our body and its potentials. ■



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