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Spiritual Festivals as Embodied Sites of Becoming 'Porous Selves'

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Abstract

Contemporary spiritual festivals attract heterogeneous crowds of adherents of emergent religions, practitioners and aficionados of fringe knowledge, self-seekers, and many others. Focusing on the ethnographic context of Estonia, this paper approaches such festivals as occasions of self-transformation, where festival participants collectively engage in various practices that encourage them to 'open up' – to themselves, to others, and to the world. The physical body often takes centre stage in these ritualized activities, which are typically performed in unison and involve interacting with other bodies through synchronized movement and sound, dance, touch, or at the very least deliberate eye contact with others. Charles Taylor's (2007) distinction between the 'buffered' and the 'porous' self provides a suitable analytical framework for exploring and understanding these activities' transformative potential and effect.

Keywords: *spiritual festivals, body, self-transformation, buffered and porous selves, Charles Taylor, Estonia*

A large crowd has gathered at a stupa-shaped building on a hot summer day in July 2021 for the opening ceremony of a festival called 'High on Life', though its Estonian name '*Ühenduses*' roughly translates to 'In connection' in English. This annual four-day event attracts several hundred participants and is held at a retreat centre owned by a prominent Estonian entrepreneur with a keen interest in spirituality.[1] According to the festival website 'High on Life' allows participants to get in touch with and become part of a 'mindful and conscious communal existence' to 'discover' and 'create magic together'

1 'Spirituality' is admittedly a contested term. In this article I adopt a meaning similar to Ratia's (2023, 6), who defines it as 'contemporary non-institutionalised religious traditions with an emphasis on individual religiosity'.

by 'being connected with oneself and others' during the 'most profound and consciousness-expanding weekend of the year'. It is intended for everyone who 'desires to experience themselves, other persons, and the whole world more deeply and colourfully'.

The atmosphere in the building is serene. People are sitting on mattresses, some in the lotus position, eyes closed, while soft meditative music plays. More attendees quietly enter the hall, carefully squeezing in between those already seated, who, with faint smiles, make room for the newcomers. On a slightly elevated stage four festival organizers – three women dressed in white and a man in a burgundy robe – greet the crowd. They introduce the festival's code of conduct and outline the programme, which consists of roughly forty workshops to which the organizers refer as 'processes', using various metaphors to describe the transformative outcome they are expected to trigger. One organizer compares it to an 'awakening experience'; another calls it 'software upgrading'. 'Here we can all be without masks, and that's how magic happens,' a third adds. The festival grounds are declared a space of 'trust', 'harmony', 'acceptance', and 'safety', where attendees can transcend their own bodily and mental boundaries.

Following this introduction a female guitar quartet performs a modified refrain from the song 'The Power Is Here Now' by British singer-songwriter Alexia Chellun, alternating between the original English lyrics and the Estonian translation of the following words: 'The power of love is here now, the power of now is here now, the power of you and me is here to create magic on earth.' The ceremony concludes with the division of the crowd into six-person 'families', which are intended to constitute one's unofficial support group during the festival days. Finally, everyone is asked to begin strolling around the hall, making eye contact with others and sharing a light touch or a gentle hug when passing another person.

This ethnographic vignette effectively captures the atmosphere, rhetoric, and bodily interactions characteristic of events that have proliferated in recent decades, particularly in contexts where institutional religion is in decline. Generically labelled as 'spiritual festivals', these events aim to foster spiritual growth and a sense of community among participants (Dowson 2019). Using the example of such spiritual festivals in Estonia, this paper approaches these events as embodied occasions of self-transformation. As I will demonstrate, participants often engage in collective practices in workshops and rituals at these festivals that encourage their 'selves' to 'open up' to and experience a wider connection with 'others'. Although 'others' in this article primarily refers to other people, in reality this category can take a

multitude of forms, depending on the festival context. For example, 'others' can also be ancestral spirits, other-than-human species, or nature in general.

Scholarly approaches to the 'self' in the study of 'new spiritualities',[2] particularly those that adopt an emic perspective and examine the self as an object individuals assume to be themselves, often build on Jung's ([1928] 1966) theory of individuation. As a central concept in his analytical psychology, 'individuation' refers to the process through which an individual becomes psychologically whole, integrating conscious and unconscious aspects of the self to achieve personal maturity and self-realization. A sizable body of literature on new spiritualities either directly or indirectly draws on Jung's notion of the self, further conceptualizing it and examining its relationship with personal experience (e.g. Clarke 2006; Hanegraaff 1996; Heelas 1991; 1996). Perhaps most notably, Heelas (1991) demonstrates that these new forms of spirituality, in his words 'self-religions', focus on personal growth, self-discovery, and self-transformation. Unlike 'traditional' religions, which generally draw on external authorities, new spiritualities allow individuals to define their own spiritual paths and construct unique religious identities. This trend is aligned with what sociologists like Giddens (1991) and Beck (1992) have more broadly described as 'reflexive modernity', in which individual choices replace traditional sources of identity such as family, class, or religion.

Although these studies, especially Heelas's, are useful for conceptualizing the self – as opposed to an external religious authority – as the locus of meaning, fulfilment, and empowerment in new spiritualities, their analytical gaze tends to be rather static for providing an ethnographically nuanced and higher-resolution approach to the *process* of self-transformation. What happens to participants' sense of self in the actual ritual context? How is the self's transformation achieved? What tangible actions facilitate this change, and how can the transformation to an altered state of self be described analytically? I demonstrate that this transformation can be fostered through various ritualized practices, with certain forms of bodily interaction at their core among participants. Charles Taylor's conceptual distinction between the 'buffered' and 'porous' self, outlined in his *A Secular Age* (2007), is particularly helpful for analytically understanding the transformative impact of such embodied activities. Taylor's approach provides a refined

2 I use this term in both its singular and plural forms throughout the paper. The singular form refers generically to contemporary spiritual practices, beliefs, and movements that arise outside traditional religious institutions, while the plural form accounts for the diverse and heterogeneous range of these beliefs and practices.

and historically sensitive framework for exploring the self-transformation sought more broadly in contemporary culture, but it also offers valuable insights into the dynamics of the self during spiritual festivals. As this paper argues, embodied activities in festival workshops often deliberately aim – using Taylor's terms – to dissolve the 'buffer' between the self and others, thereby rendering the self 'porous'. This study therefore contributes to the research on spiritual festivals by using an ethnographic lens to explore bodily interactions during festival rituals and workshops as potential catalysts for self-transformation, and by framing the essence of this transformation using Taylor's illuminative yet previously untapped approach.

The paper unfolds as follows: after a brief discussion of the 'festivalization' of contemporary spirituality and research on spiritual festivals, and an overview of the scene of new spiritualities in Estonia, I introduce the ethnographic context and my methods and data. I then zoom in on a specific ethnographic example – the High on Life festival, also introduced in the opening vignette, providing a more detailed account of some of its workshops and festival participants' experiences of them. The subsequent section scrutinizes these workshops' and rituals' potentially transformative impact, drawing on Taylor's distinction between the 'buffered' and 'porous' self, arguing that the workshops often aim either implicitly or explicitly to trigger a shift from the former to the latter.

The 'festivalization' of contemporary spirituality

Although 'self-religions' imply spiritual individualism, this does not necessarily entail practising spirituality in solitude. Spiritual festivals are an eloquent manifestation of this communal aspect. The use of the term 'festival' in this context, however, warrants some further justification. Studying festivals has a long history in anthropology especially, with festivals serving as focal points in research on topics ranging from kinship and religion to political economy (Frost 2016, 570). Additionally, festivals have frequently been contexts for exploring social group formation and collective identities (Leal 2016, 584). Generally, however, the term has been applied to celebrations of commemorative or calendar events, whether 'traditional', revitalized, or 'invented' (e.g. Costa 2002; Crociani-Windland 2011; Gibson and Connell 2011).

In recent years, however, the meaning of the term 'festival' has broadened, now encompassing a wide range of festive occasions that in some cases have even supplanted 'traditional' festivals (Fournier 2009, 20).

Frost (2016, 569) notes that the number of events identifying as 'festivals' is growing, spanning 'expositions of high culture, to large-scale popular music extravaganzas, to religious commemorations or thanksgivings, to neighbourhood celebrations of a migrant presence, and to statements of alternative sexuality or national pride'. While 'traditional' festivals involved relatively homogeneous and predefined social groups, these new forms of festivals tend to attract individuals with diverse interests, backgrounds, and preferences (Fournier 2009, 19).

Contemporary spiritual festivals are well aligned with such a broader, more flexible conceptualization of 'festival'. These events often combine various culturally appropriated forms of tantric, shamanic, breathwork, meditation, and yoga practices, as well as ecstatic dance sessions and personal development workshops, to name a few. Spiritual festivals cater to increasingly heterogeneous audiences whose motivations range from long-term dedication to esotericism and new forms of spirituality to a more modest interest in self-exploration. These festivals' participants can be adherents of 'alternative' but also 'traditional' religions, as well as dedicated or aspiring practitioners and aficionados of 'fringe knowledge'. Spiritual festivals are thus events where distinct identities and lifestyles are not merely expressed and performed but also constitute spatio-temporal occasions where these identities and lifestyles are dynamically constructed (e.g. Taylor et al. 2014; Boissevain 2015).

The increasing prominence of festivals as spatial and temporal contexts for the expression and practice of spirituality and religiosity has led some scholars to conceptualize this trend as 'festivalization' (Dowson 2019) or more broadly as the 'eventization' of faith (Pfadenhauer 2010). Given this trend, it is unsurprising that studies of spiritual festivals have proliferated, often emphasizing their transformative nature. Sometimes referred to as 'transformational festivals', these events are allegedly designed and organized to provide not merely entertainment but opportunities for experiences of 'ego death' and the 'wearing down of the self' (Ruane 2017). Countercultural festivals like Burning Man (Bottorff 2015; Li and Zhang 2024; Ruane 2017) and many others (de Carvalho et al. 2022; Lucia 2020; Ratia 2023) are claimed to create environments that disrupt everyday identity, engendering emotional vulnerability and opportunities for introspection and personal growth. Such festivals can be considered 'heterotopias' (Hetherington 1997) or 'liminal spaces' (Turner 1987), where normal social roles are often suspended, facilitating unique expressions of self and shared experiences of unity and transcendence (see also Ruane 2017, 3).

While in many of the studies cited above psychedelics are key if not necessarily essential elements of achieving self-transformation, the spiritual festivals this study examines are substance-free. Instead, self-transformation is induced and encouraged in these festivals through deliberately choreographed interactions between participants' bodies.

Setting the scene: 'New spiritualities' in the 'most secularized country'

Historically predominantly Lutheran Protestant, Estonia is allegedly one of the 'least religious' nations in the world based on declared religious attitudes and affiliations, and the country has even been called a 'special case' among secular societies for defying the 'typical secularization path' (Heelas 2013; R. Altnurme 2021; Remmel and Uibu 2015; Ringvee 2021). The reasons for and circumstances of dechristianization in Estonia are manifold and generally attributed to the Communist era, when institutional religion was suppressed (L. Altnurme 2021a; R. Altnurme 2021). The 'Singing Revolution' in 1987–91, which led to Estonia regaining its independence, sparked a heightened but temporary interest in Christianity that had again declined by the middle of the 1990s (L. Altnurme 2021a, 22).[3] According to various surveys conducted in recent decades only around 16 per cent of Estonia's population considers institutional religion an important part of their daily life (LFRL 2015; Religio 2 2017).[4] Such a low level of religious engagement persists despite Estonian society and the state being explicitly liberal and tolerant of both mainstream religions and new religious movements (Ringvee 2012; Freedom House 2022; Pew Research Center 2024).

Irreligious Estonians are not necessarily atheists, however. As Uibu (2021, 118) aptly argues, limited belief in God and the minor role of institutional religion in Estonia do not imply the absence of a transcendent dimension in people's lives. As in many other countries institutionalized beliefs and practices in Estonia have gradually made way for more individualized, personalized, privatized, self-designed, spongy, and non-institutionalized beliefs and practices, or, in Heelas's and Woodhead's (2005) terms, religion has been giving way to spirituality. New spiritual beliefs and practices in Estonia, as elsewhere, often focus on embodied activities and general well-

3 Russians, the country's largest ethnic and linguistic minority, have a stronger affiliation with Christianity and religious belonging in general than ethnic Estonians, with Orthodoxy serving as an important marker of Russian group identity (Uibu 2016b, 271).

4 A comparative discussion of the results of various surveys can be found in Remmel and Uibu (2015) and Uibu (2016b).

being, drawing selectively from both Eastern and other religious traditions (e.g. L. Altnurme 2005; 2013; Uibu 2016c). Participation in these new forms of spirituality tends to be demand-based and situational, driven mainly by a specific need at a particular moment in a person's life (Uibu 2021, 118).

The term now commonly used in Estonia for these new beliefs and practices is *uus vaimsus* (also *uusvaimsus*), which means 'new spirituality'[5] (e.g. L. Altnurme 2013; 2021b). This term has a layered and nuanced meaning for Estonian speakers, as the Estonian word for 'spirituality' (*vaimsus*)[6] carries both religious and intellectual connotations, can refer to any intellectual activity, and thus also has secular meanings (L. Altnurme 2021b, 102). Yet studies have shown that many adherents of new forms of spirituality in Estonia consider themselves 'spiritual' rather than 'religious', associating the latter with constraints to human self-development (L. Altnurme 2021b, 104). Estonians identifying as 'spiritual but not religious' (SBNR) now constitute approximately a third of the country's population (L. Altnurme 2021b, 102). According to some estimates SBNR is on the cusp of becoming the dominant form of religious identity in Estonia (Uibu 2016b, 271). The growing popularity and possible mainstreaming of new spiritualities in the country are intertwined with trends of privatization, customization, and commercialization similar to those observed in neighbouring Finland (Broo et al. 2015).

Studies of new forms of spirituality in Estonia are now extensive, encompassing a range of topics, from general historical, cultural, and sociological accounts of the overall spiritual milieu (L. Altnurme 2021b; Uibu 2021) to more specific and focused case studies. These include investigations of the spiritual use of crystals (Teidearu 2023), the purported impact of 'water veins' and 'energy columns' on health (Kivari 2013), the use of ayahuasca in neo-shamanic rituals (Kaasik 2019), the blending of spiritual teachings and healing (Uibu 2016a; 2020), the dynamics of spiritual web forums (Uibu 2012), and the perception of the body among Source Breathwork practitioners (Koppel 2013). These studies' analytical conclusions are aligned with those conducted in various other ethnographic contexts, emphasizing themes such as the celebration of the self, personal growth, self-discovery, the 'sacralization' of modern values, eclecticism, a close association with healing, critiques of established religion, complex relationships with science and pseudoscience, and intersections with consumer culture (Hanegraaff 1996; Heelas 1996; Tacey 2003). Despite the breadth of such research, spir-

5 Unlike in English, this term cannot take a plural form in Estonian.

6 The word *spirituaalsus*, essentially a foreign word in Estonian, is also commonly used.

itual festivals have thus far remained outside the focus of studies of new spirituality in Estonia.

Ethnographic context, data, and methods

Although Estonia is a small country, its spiritual festival landscape is relatively diverse. Among the most notable such events are the Shaman Days, the Estonian Tantra Festival, and the High on Life festival, all of which are organized annually and attract large crowds. These three festivals have served as my primary focus and sources of firsthand data, though the more detailed discussion in this paper focuses on the High on Life festival.

Shaman Days (*Šamaanipäevad*), also called the Shaman Festival (*Šamaanifestival*), have been organized for nearly a decade at the 'Wholeworld' Archaic Traditions Centre in Northern Estonia. The centre has become a popular venue for various events which, according to its website, 'enable a broader and deeper understanding of the inner and outer world' and assist participants in 'noticing their senses and perceptions and learning to manage them'. These events are grounded in a 'shamanistic-holistic worldview', focusing on experiential learning aimed at exploring different states of consciousness. The centre provides a suitable physical environment for these practices, featuring megalithic buildings, stone circles, spirals, labyrinths, caves, a herb garden, a sweat tent, and a tepee, all constructed according to the principles of 'energetic separation and specificity'. During the Shaman Days festival participants engage in workshops where they learn to use shamanic drums, craft shamanic paraphernalia, observe ritualized healing practices, and interact with stone labyrinths, spirals, and circles. These activities facilitate connections with various 'others', including plants, animals, nature at large, and ancestral spirits.

The four-day Estonian Tantra Festival, another popular annual event, has been organized since 2013. It attracts participants from around the world, drawing on modern Western appropriation of the term 'tantra' and its philosophical underpinnings. Its website states that the festival's mission is 'to unite people [in] a […] loving community and show the way to self-awareness through high-quality spiritual practices'. Participants are encouraged to 'grow together in […] connection with [their] hearts'. Building on the fact that 'tantra' in Sanskrit means 'woven together', the festival also emphasizes the importance of uniting 'one's body, mind, and soul, and thereby find[ing] divinity and enlightenment […] in oneself, as well as in *other* people and in the surrounding world'.

While the Shaman Days and the Estonian Tantra Festival have relatively specific thematic foci, the High on Life festival, introduced in this article's opening vignette and discussed in greater detail in the next section, offers a veritable smorgasbord of diverse spiritual practices. Many border on the secular, including relationship advice, psychological counselling, and massage therapy.

Any attempt to produce a demographic profile of an 'average' participant at these spiritual festivals would inevitably be an oversimplification. Certain generalizations, however, can be made based on my own fieldnotes and festival organizers' estimates. Female participants tend to dominate slightly, and relatively more participants at these events attend them as singles than as couples. Participants in their early thirties to early fifties dominate.[7] All this accords with the results of various surveys showing that the appeal of new spiritualities is strongest among both the younger and middle-aged population, and women (L. Altnurme 2021b, 116).

The ensuing discussion builds on my participant observation since 2021 at these three spiritual festivals, open-ended conversations with seasonal and occasional participants at these events, and my close observation of their discussion forums, websites, and advertising practices. Connecting with 'others' and the resulting self-transformation is at the core of all three festivals. However, to keep my ethnographic gaze and analytical focus sufficiently targeted, this paper draws primarily on the High on Life festival. As an 'all-encompassing' and 'something-for-everyone' event, it explicitly caters to the most diverse audience of the three. In presenting my data, I have deliberately prioritized generalized and impersonalized observations during this festival above high-resolution portraits and individual stories to respect and secure participants' privacy and anonymity. With one exception quotations from specific festival attendees have been taken only from publicly available testimonials on the festival website. Their names in this paper are the same as they appear on the festival website.

In analysing the collected data, I first iteratively and recursively examined fieldnotes from participant observation, conversations, and online visual and textual materials. The aim was to identify occasions during festival workshops when the workshop organizers encouraged participants to interact with one another, particularly through verbal or embodied engagement. I focused on generating thick descriptions of these interactions, the organizers' guidelines, and retrospective statements from participants regarding their

7 Some festivals have age restrictions to participation. For example, participants of the Estonian Tantra Festival must be at least 18 years old.

experiences. The resulting accounts were then subjected to thematic analysis to discern how the notions of 'self', 'other', and 'transformation' were either implicitly or explicitly addressed during these interactions. Ultimately, the results of this analysis were reframed using Taylor's conceptual vocabulary, especially his distinction between 'buffered' and 'porous' selves. I argue that this framework effectively captures the workshops' transformative essence.

Zooming in: The High on Life festival

The following is a higher-resolution ethnographic glimpse of the High on Life festival and some of its workshops, referred to as 'processes' by the festival organizers. Held annually in July at a retreat centre relatively close to Tallinn, the grounds of the High on Life festival feature three buildings called 'temples'. The 'Temple of Connection' is a permanent wooden structure; the 'Main Temple' and the 'Temple of Power' are large tents erected for the festival's duration. In the inner open area between these temples are massage tables, small meditation tents, and several stands selling incense, crystals, medicinal plants, and spiritual literature. This space serves multiple purposes: vegetarian food is offered twice a day; and ecstatic dance sessions featuring psycho-trance music are held during lunchbreaks and in the evenings, providing an energetic and communal atmosphere.

The festival workshops and events mainly take place in the three temples. One can join and leave the 'processes' whenever one pleases, though in some cases late arrivals or early departures are frowned on. During most workshops the tents' walls are rolled up, allowing those festival attendees who prefer not to engage physically in the rituals to observe them from outside. The workshops' nature and content are varied, as the festival seeks to attract individuals with a wide array of interests and preferences. For example, several workshops entail culturally appropriated forms of meditative practices such as 'shaking', 'pulsation', 'circling', 'Kali', and 'Osho dynamic meditation'. The same applies to several forms of yoga, including 'acrobatic yoga', 'yoga nidra', and blindfold yoga, as well as ecstatic dancing like the 'Mandala and Tandava dance'. The festival also features workshops that explore 'shibari' or 'Japanese rope bondage', as well as breathing exercises based on the Wim Hof Method. Participants can also engage in tea and fire ceremonies and experience shamanic drum processions. One night of the festival is dedicated to an all-night Gong Puja.

Although gender is not an explicit focus of this paper, and it should be noted that my data did not reveal significant gender differences regarding

this paper's primary analytical focus – the self-transformative impact of embodied practices during festival workshops and the dynamic of becoming a 'porous self' – it is relevant to highlight the gendered nature of various workshops at the High on Life festival. A binary conceptualization of gender tends to underlie the festival's dominant rhetoric, and heteronormativity is implied in most workshops.[8] The 'others' with whom participants are encouraged to connect, open up to, and establish increased intimacy – through various embodied activities as demonstrated below – are often though not exclusively individuals of the 'opposite sex'. The workshops' gendered nature is often evident in their names, particularly in those intended exclusively for men or women. Examples of such explicitly gendered workshops are 'Women's and Men's Circle of Power', 'Conscious Masculinity', and 'Female Sexuality, Orgasm, and Pleasure'. Other workshops are primarily designed for heterosexual couples, including 'Tantra Date', 'The Art of Hugging', 'The Ecstatic Awakening of the Body', 'Conscious Touching', and 'Energetic Tantric Massage'. While public nudity is tolerated in some of these workshops, it is rarely practised. It is also noteworthy that all the workshops are predominantly designed for able-bodied participants.

Although most 'processes' begin with participants focusing mindfully on their own bodies and selves, two recurring ways challenge the boundary between the self and other selves, and simultaneously that between one's own and other bodies. The first involves establishing deliberate eye contact with another person, often accompanied by light touching. In various workshops participants are explicitly encouraged to choose a partner, preferably a person they do not know, and sit or stand facing each other while maintaining eye contact. One such example occurred in a workshop called 'The Marriage between Inner Man and Woman'. This workshop commenced with approximately fifty women dressed in white dancing in the Main Temple, while a similar number of men, also in white, waited outside the tent, facing inwards. Soon the men also entered, forming a circle around the women. This formation quickly dissolved into a more fluid arrangement, during which participants were encouraged to establish eye contact and find a partner. Once paired, they were asked to hold hands and lightly touch their partners' bodies, first agreeing on and respecting the other person's boundaries. The pairs were then instructed to lie down, hug, and maintain this position for nearly fifteen minutes.

8 That said, festival guidelines emphasize the openness of the event and its workshops to all sexual orientations.

Although not all the pairs were comfortable with such intimacy, most adhered to the guidelines.

Triin, a participant in this workshop with whom I later discussed the experience, found it perplexing how 'astonishing energy', to use her own words, had surfaced during the ritual, and how quickly and intensely her body felt an 'energetic connection' with her ritual partner, despite being twice his age and not knowing him beforehand. Her experience well captures what Frost (2016, 572) describes as characteristic of festival-like events in general: a sense of being carried away by the event's momentum through improvised action and kinetic excitement, the experience of a peculiar intensity that comes with a collapsing of time and space, and a blurring of the distinction between participating individuals. Various other festival participants also highlighted deliberate and prolonged eye contact with others as an extraordinary and transformative bodily experience. Kristel, for example, argued in a post-festival testimonial that by looking deeply into other people's eyes, she had gained considerable confidence and courage, and learned something new about herself and her feelings.

The acoustic background for the 'Marriage between Inner Man and Woman' workshop was Estonian composer Arvo Pärt's well-known '*Spiegel im Spiegel*' ('Mirror in Mirror'). The choice of this piece of classical music fitted what was meant to be happening during this 'process'. The festival's information leaflet, provided to all participants during registration, explicitly stated: if people chose to be 'the mirrors of one another', they could 'look more deeply than ever into themselves, others, and the world'. Indeed, the trope of 'reflection' was frequently used in festival participants' retrospective accounts of their interactions with others during rituals. Anni, for example, described the effect of participating in the 'processes', which had helped her connect more deeply with herself and others:

> These activities brought me into contact with interesting pathfinders and teachers who allowed me to experience myself through the *reflections* of others.

The deliberate engineering of a connection with the 'other', similar to that described in the 'Marriage between Inner Man and Woman' workshop, was also frequent in many other rituals. The terms 'body' and 'energy' featured prominently and often together in participants' recollections of these experiences. In the case of many new spiritualities, as Johnston and Barcan (2006, 25–29) have argued, the concept of the 'subtle body' is often

used to describe a model of embodied subjectivity in which matter and consciousness are not understood as ontologically distinct but as varieties of 'resonating energy' that extend beyond the corporeal self into the 'space' between the self, the other, and the world.

Participants in the workshops that required establishing deliberate eye contact with and light touching of partners were often asked to share their experiences after the session. Many reported feeling pushed out of their comfort zones, but like Kristel, quoted above, they considered this experience revelatory, rewarding, and extraordinary. However, they often found it difficult to verbalize this bodily experience's 'true' essence. This is hardly surprising, as the relationship between language, experience, and the body is complex, as Barnes (2016, 261) has eloquently demonstrated. In a phenomenological analysis of divine experience and religious conversion that transforms the body into something new, namely a habitation of divine presence, Barnes describes the challenges social actors face in expressing this novel bodily experience and state in words. Bodies that have 'opened up' to often sensory aspects of the new experience and the worlds that include the divine need to be rendered 'speaking bodies' that translate these experiences using vocabulary from more familiar everyday realms, and this can be a challenging endeavour. Importantly, as Barnes (ibid.) notes, these bodily experiences often emerge in situations of social relatedness with other bodies rather than in solitude, and the workshops at spiritual festivals, where participants collectively engage in various embodied rituals, are thus appropriate settings for triggering such experiences.

The second recurring practice of contesting the boundary between the self and others, in addition to deliberate eye contact and light touching, involves ending the rituals with the formation of concentric circles or a spiral of participants' bodies that, as the ritual approaches its conclusion, move increasingly tightly together. During this process the ritual's participants slowly but steadily push themselves and other bodies from the circle's edges towards its centre. These acts of 'swarming' are performed while dancing, chanting, and singing, ultimately aiming for maximum touch and contact between all bodies. This was the case at the end of the shaking meditation session, also known as TRE (Trauma Release Exercises), in the Main Temple. The workshop began with everyone 'working on' themselves individually yet in unison with others, shaking their bodies to a psycho-trance rhythm, inhaling and exhaling loudly, and occasionally shouting. The 45-minute session concluded with the formation of the Circle of Power (*väering*), in which all the by then heavily sweating bodies joined tightly together,

participants holding each other by the shoulders and waists and pushing towards the pack's centre, thus becoming 'one tribe' as the workshop organizer put it. Indeed, the 'tribe' metaphor was also frequently used in many other workshops that included such 'swarming'. Other studies have made similar observations: Duffy et al. (2011) argue that ego boundaries may be 'softened' through feelings of connection and *communitas* in shared enjoyment of rhythm and movement while dancing.

The powerful and profoundly transformative effect of challenging the boundaries between participants' selves and bodies – by shifting the focus of ritual activities from the individual to an interaction between them – features prominently in many participants' testimonials posted on the High on Life festival's website. Pille, for example, recounted:

> What an amazing and life-changing experience! How many experiences of healing and transcendence! How easy it [was] to find love within yourself and be in that feeling of love. I've never seen such a group before, where there are no judgments, only understanding and true togetherness. I'm moved to tears.

Various testimonials emphasize 'opening up' as the transformative experience's key aspect. Kairi used explicitly spiritual vocabulary when describing this:

> I felt my heart opening up by the end of the festival. It was something I desperately needed and was actually looking for – some form of higher-level opening […]. I felt […] that I was a fully Enlightened Being.

Anni described the experience as follows:

> All these moments and events […] helped me sense more deeply this space of being held, where it's safe to open up and to express myself and my truth.

Anni also highlighted the healing effect of taking care of her body and mind 'through joy and pleasure'. Other testimonials like Tom's emphasized the healing aspect of such self-transformation. For him the festival meant and contributed to 'the heart space and healing'. Various other metaphors were used to summarize the transformative experience of the festival's workshops. Kaie emphasized the resulting feeling of 'extraordinary lightness, being fulfilled, and connected'. Siim claimed the festival experience 'expanded

my world and took me to new heights'. Anton defined the experience as the creation of 'more clarity and space within myself'.

Rendering 'buffered' selves 'porous'

What is common to all the experiences described above is a certain sense of increased 'connectedness', which can mean different things to different participants. A festival organizer explained this in a promotional video for the event:

> What does 'being connected' mean? First and foremost it means being in touch with yourself but also with your surroundings, your partner, your femininity, your masculinity, the universe, your emotions. It involves a more conscious and deeper look at life [… in order] to know yourself and to discover […] all the energies that we can experience when we're present in ourselves, or when we're relating to others.

Charles Taylor's (2007) distinction between the 'porous' and the 'buffered' self is useful for theorizing the shifts during the festival workshops outlined above, from taking care of oneself and one's own body to opening up and connecting with other selves and bodies. Building on Weber, Taylor describes modernity as a disenchanted condition and moral ordering where the self is buffered from the external world's contingency. Pre-modern selves resided in an enchanted world and were by definition porous, which meant the sources of their most powerful and important emotions were outside the 'mind' (Taylor 2007, 38). The pre-modern self's porosity rendered it 'vulnerable to spirits, demons, [and] cosmic forces' (ibid.). In contrast, being a modern buffered subject entails the closing of the previously permeable boundary between one's inside – the thought or the mind – and the outside – nature, the physical, and the universe at large.

As Taylor (ibid.) suggests, the disengagement that becoming a buffered self historically entailed was carried out in relation to one's whole surroundings, both natural and social. Smith (2012, 58), engaging with and elaborating on Taylor, further clarifies that such disengagement means 'we have come to see ourselves as significantly independent of others – i.e. as individuals in an atomistic or monadic sense who can "objectively analyse" and dispassionately act in any given situation'. While 'the enchanted world […] shows a perplexing absence of certain boundaries' (Taylor 2007, 33), to modern individuals, 'Westerners' in particular, 'meanings are understood to

be created "within" the human subject; [and their] responses to the external world are "internal"; there is (or appears to be) a sharp boundary between self and other, individual and society, subject and world' (Smith 2012, 59). This boundary, or 'buffer' in Taylor's vocabulary, leads to a 'new sense of the self and its place in the cosmos' (Taylor 2007, 27).

According to McClure (2020, 464) Taylor's 'buffered self' accounts for many social realities of modern life, including a more general disengagement from larger institutions and social organizations: when explaining the rise of this new cultural consciousness, Taylor carefully points out that the buffered self did not emerge in a vacuum. Certain historical conditions enabled this: Taylor (2007, 239) describes these changes as an 'anthropocentric shift' that contributed to a new 'social and civilizational framework which inhibits or blocks out certain of the ways in which transcendence has historically impinged on humans, and been present in their lives'.

Being a buffered self means being invulnerable to a world of spirits and spiritual powers, some of whom can be malign, and it also endows the self with a sense of independence and the capacity to order one's own world and oneself (Taylor 2007, 300). At the same time, however, it leads to an impoverished existential condition, as it is distanced and disengaged from everything outside the mind. According to Taylor (2007, 38) this is why in the contemporary world many people – disengaged rational agents – allegedly look back nostalgically to the world of the porous self.[9]

Although occasionally criticized,[10] Taylor's distinction and theoretical lexicon have been used in many thematic contexts (e.g. Murison 2015; Murphy 2019) and constitute a helpful tool for scrutinizing the self-transformation that spiritual festival rituals encourage and aim to trigger. What seems to be at stake in the workshops of the High on Life festival, for example, is an attempt to revert to a more connected and essentially porous sense of

9 Taylor's conceptualization of the porosity of the pre-modern self, with its capacity to be open to otherness, bears some similarity to what anthropologists have described as 'dividual' or 'partible' persons, first in Indian (Dumont [1966] 1980), then in Melanesian, contexts (e.g. Strathern 1988; Wagner 1991). Taylor's juxtaposition of porous and buffered selves is in turn congruent with the distinction made in these studies between relational, permeable, fractal, composite, socially embedded, engaged 'dividual' personhood on the one hand and bounded, non-divisible, monadic, atomistic 'individual' personhood on the other. Smith (2012) has extensively discussed the differences and commonalities between these anthropological approaches and Taylor's distinction.

10 For example, Smith (2009) suggests that Taylor's argumentation is framed as a polarization that clearly defaults porous subjectivity as the preferred option and is oriented as an attack on the buffered self.

self, which is why the festival organizers' description of these practices as 'processes' is particularly apt. Becoming a more porous self, not buffered from other selves and the world, is deemed to lead to a more 'authentic' and comprehensive state of moral existence which concurs with Taylor's (2007, 38) claim about nostalgia for the world of the porous self and for the more intimate and fuller engagement that he claims to be 'perhaps the clearest sign of the transformation in our world' (ibid.). During the opening ceremony of the High on Life festival described at the beginning of this article, festival organizers frequently used the Estonian word '*päriselt*', which means 'truly', 'really', or 'genuinely', to outline the forthcoming festival experience and its transformative potential. The word was used when suggesting the festival's aim was to 'learn to be authentic and genuine, and to communicate honestly', emphasizing that the festival was 'a truly authentic' occasion, allowing participants to 'really meet' and 'genuinely sense the magic that this meeting of others engenders, […] through being in touch with one's partner, with oneself, and with one's own feelings'.

As became evident, the shift during the 'processes' from being a buffered to a porous self directly involved one's physical body. In the case of rituals at the High on Life festival, as argued above, this body is often gendered and assumed to be heteronormative in its sexual orientation. In new spiritualities the relationship between the body and the self is often seen as deeply interconnected, with the body acting as both an expression and a medium for the self. This view departs from traditional dualistic conceptions that separate body and mind, instead promoting an understanding in which physical and spiritual or mental aspects are intertwined and influence one another. It is therefore unsurprising that the transformation of the *self* in the workshops is implicated in and forged by *bodies*. As Zygmunt Bauman (1983, 41) notes, 'the urge "to do something about my life" is most eagerly translated into a precept "to do something about my body."' A more accurate way to put it in the context of this discussion, however, would be: '…to do something with my body in relation to other bodies.'

A shift from being a buffered to a porous self often entails the establishment of greater intimacy with other bodies, as was evident in the above descriptions of touching ritual partners' bodies and acts of 'swarming'. This intimacy is not necessarily sexual – though it can be. As Taylor (2007, 142) also argues, the bufferedness of the self not only presumes a firm boundary with the world which has been disenchanted, but further barriers are raised against strong physical desires and fascination with the body, drastically

narrowing the range of permitted intimacy. According to Taylor (ibid.) buffered selves are trained to relate to each other outside the narrow circles of intimacy which remain as dignified subjects of rational control, whose defining relations are no longer intimate. In other words, bufferedness is also a state of separation from other bodies. Returning to increased porosity in turn implies the widening of the spectrum of intimacy, which is precisely what happens in festival workshops that encourage bodily contact, often between total strangers.

Of course, opening up to strangers can be challenging, or as Taylor puts it, the self's porosity renders it more vulnerable. Participants in spiritual festival workshops that require increased physical closeness to and intimacy with other bodies often feel emotional and sometimes physical discomfort, as shown above, yet consider the experience transformative and ultimately positively exhilarating. Becoming a porous self by being in touch and more connected with others can thus be interpreted as an act of embodied learning and growth. Although festival workshops entail going beyond one's comfort zone, it is precisely this moment of discomfort in the rituals when learning and growth occurs. As has also been argued concerning the connection between religion and self-inflicted pain, for example, the body's limits may be explored out of a person's desire to grow beyond their 'normal' self, and pain appears to serve as an indicator that the limit has been reached, and 'self-enhancement' has begun (Roessler 2006).

Conclusions

New spiritualities typically position the self, rather than external religious structures, as the ultimate source of meaning and guidance, prompting individuals to seek spiritual truths within themselves. Yet new spiritualities encourage self-transformation and a more pronounced sense of connectedness with various 'others'. Both acts – cultivating an enlightened sense of self and striving to transcend it – represent forms of self-transformation that in the broader subculture of new spiritualities constitute continuous pathways to spiritual growth. This paper has sought to contribute to the study of new spiritualities more generally and spiritual festivals more specifically by analysing the latter as embodied sites of fostering such self-transformation. As I have argued, Charles Taylor's conceptual distinction between the buffered and porous self provides a fitting and dynamic analytical framework for examining the *process* of self-transformation during spiritual festivals. I have demonstrated through the ethnographic example of the High on Life

festival in Estonia how festival workshops and rituals can afford their participants' transcending of their ordinary sense of 'buffered' self and render it more 'porous'. Deliberate choreographed engagements and interactions between participants' bodies facilitate this transformation during the workshops, underscoring physicality's pivotal role in spiritual practices aiming for self-transformation. Activities such as establishing sustained eye contact, mutual touching and hugging, synchronized bodily movements especially while dancing, and acts of 'swarming' during the rituals and workshops this paper describes serve as tangible and potentially powerful tools for challenging, if not dismantling, the 'buffer' between the self and others. These practices foster heightened levels of connectedness and intimacy, which participants in spiritual festivals may regard as the most meaningful and even life-changing aspects of their festival experience.

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