

## Article

# Achieving a Sensing Body: Visualization and Bodily Attention in Alternative Spiritual Practices

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**Abstract:** This article explores the learning process to develop a sensing body through visualization and bodily attention in alternative spiritual practices held at Brittany's megaliths, located in northwest France. Drawing on the sensory ethnography approach, this article argues that participants achieve the experience of their sensing body following four main actions: Practicing visualization techniques to interact with summoned entities, learning another sensory language, establishing relationships between bodily techniques and somatic imagery, and cultivating and verbalizing bodily sensations. Collected data provide an understanding of practitioners' elaboration of a meaningful experience, while also suggesting how meditative and bodily techniques partake in these activities.

**Keywords:** alternative spirituality; Brittany; bodily attention; embodiment; France; holistic practices; reflexivity; sensuous body; visualization

## 1. Introduction

In the region of Brittany in general, and in the megalithic site of Carnac in particular, New Age and contemporary Pagan-inspired practices are held on a regular basis. From an emic point of view, their aim is to access the local megaliths' "healing powers" through the intervention of non-human entities named "spirits of the place". These activities convey a framework of heterogeneous beliefs and practices based on a holistic ideology that considers the physical, spiritual, and psychological aspects of a person to regain a harmonious relationship with his or her environment (Tighe and Butler 2007, p. 415). Individuals who participate in practices value human relationships with nature, embrace polytheistic and animistic cosmologies, and focus on their personal development (Chryssides 2007, p. 22; Rountree 2015, p. 1). To establish these interactions with a place, the non-human beings thought to inhabit it, themselves, and the other human participants, actors practice visualization and learn to pay attention to their bodily sensations and those of others. Practices involve a large amount of physical contact, such as touching the trees, the megaliths, and, in some exercises, the bodies of other participants. Concretely, practitioners walk in silence around the megaliths, touch them with their palms or other parts of their body, and verbally exchange and compare what they felt with others. Although somatic experiences, somatic imagery, and bodily techniques have been identified as the three main elements that construct participants' spiritual experiences (Dansac 2020a), little attention has been paid to the individual and collective processes for achieving specific bodily and somatic experiences related to these ritual contexts. Drawing on my ethnographic research regarding alternative spiritual practices held at the megaliths of Carnac, I will analyze how practitioners learn to develop their sensing body through visualization and bodily attention following four main actions: Practicing visualization techniques to interact with summoned entities, learning "another" sensory language, establishing relationships between bodily techniques and somatic imagery, as well as cultivating and verbalizing bodily sensations.

The ethnography of bodily sensations is not a recent method in anthropology. Since the 1980s, the "sensory turn" has drawn attention to how the senses corporeally inscribe our



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socializations (Mascia-Lees 2011, p. 2). Despite previous openings in the literature about the body and the senses (Lévi-Strauss 1962, p. 25; Mauss 1934), anthropologists such as John Blacking (1977), Thomas Csordas (1990, 1993, 1994), Constance Classen (1990), David Howes (1991), and Paul Stoller (1989), among others, were among the first to question, with different approaches, the culturally specific patterns of sensory perception that shape human experience. In the last twenty years, Csordas's (1990) concept of embodiment has been particularly useful in thinking about cognition as something always embedded in a body that is situated in a social and physical environment. His proposal is strongly influenced by the work of Maurice Merleau-Ponty (1945, 1964) who sought to break away from Cartesian dualism that separated the body from the mind. He also draws on the works of Pierre Bourdieu (1977, p. 124) who pointed out that the body consists of senses, emotions, and consciousness. For Csordas (1990), the body is seen as the existential ground of culture, and not as an object to be analyzed in relation to a certain culture. For this reason, he uses the term "somatic" to refer to the bodily sensations that we use to account for our experiences. Thus, the somatic experience becomes, for him, a conceptual tool to capture the ways in which individuals experience their environment using their culturally constructed bodies (Csordas 1993, p. 138). The embodiment paradigm allows us to examine the lived experiences of participants (Csordas 1994, p. 10). To accomplish this task, major importance must be given to the situation of the bodies surveyed, as well as to the intersubjective environment where sensations are inscribed and generated.

Seeking to explore the role of somatic experiences in alternative spiritual practices, diverse scholars have conducted ethnographic research among diverse groups. For example, Kathreen Rountree's (2004) work on Goddess spiritualities in New Zealand has pointed out how participants associated specific somatic experiences with an affective state named "connection to nature" (Taylor 2000, p. 277). Other studies have pondered the relationship between practices' somatic imagery and participants' bodily sensations, highlighting how they learn to interpret their somatic experiences during rituals. According to the German mediums studied by Ehler Voss (2011, p. 173–74), non-human beings such as spirits have the power to affect human beings, influence their lives, and "possess" their bodies and minds. During mediumship sessions, they had to pay attention to cold or hot sensations in their skin because these indicated them when they were being "possessed" or "guided" by an entity. The Danish neo-shamans surveyed by Ann Ostefeld-Rosenthal (2011, pp. 158–59) experienced equivalent somatic experiences while visualizing different entities with which they wanted to interact. In these three cases of study, spiritual experience and interactions with non-human beings became more authentic, effective, and truthful for participants when they experienced certain bodily sensations previously associated, by themselves or by other actors, with these types of activities.

Visualization is a meditative technique that stimulates actors' senses. When practicing visualization in contemporary-Pagan rituals, "the physical landscape is charted onto an imaginative framework where the participants in a guided meditation visualize themselves progressing along particular routes and reaching the site in question" (Butler 2020, p. 624). In those ritual contexts, visualizations are sometimes an imaginary place, a non-human being such as a fairy, or a light coming out of a megalith (Greenwood 2020; Magliocco 2018). As a widespread practice inspired by shamanism, visualization takes part in the elaboration and interpretation of bodily sensations of people who adhere to alternative spiritualities.

In this article, I will highlight the data collected on learning processes to achieve a sensing body through visualization and bodily attention in Brittany's megaliths. The text is divided into five parts to present the singularities of each process. First, I will expose the characteristics of the two kinds of actors who compose groups, as well as the applied methodology. I will then address the practice of visualization of "spirits of the place" who are considered to have the power to release the megaliths' energy. Next, I will describe the sensory language and hierarchy of senses mobilized in practices, along with the actions participants must do to pay attention to and with their bodies. Later, I will expose the relationship between bodily techniques and somatic imaginaries proposed by

ritual specialists. The final section will focus on the procedures to cultivate and verbalize bodily attention, the roles of ostentatious behaviors, and the translation of bodily sensations into words.

## 2. Characterization of Actors Engaged in Alternative Spiritual Practices at Brittany's Megaliths

Brittany, a region located in northwest France, holds an exceptionally dense collection of megalithic sites dating from the Neolithic period. In the south of Brittany, where the megalithic site of Carnac is located, the quantity of monuments, their size, the singularity of their engravings, and the archaeological wealth of the objects they have yielded is remarkable. A recent analysis of nineteenth and earlier twentieth-century documents has highlighted the existence of a longstanding tradition of religious, political, and cultural interactions between inhabitants and local megaliths (Dansac 2021, pp. 5–7). Associated with pagan survivals from the Middle Ages to the earlier twentieth century, Brittany's megaliths have been the object of a sacralization process that continues today in the form of a vast repertoire of therapeutic and spiritual techniques, notably from the New Age universe. Indeed, Brittany is a very attractive area for the development of an alternative spiritual market because of its natural landscape, and its archaeological, touristic, and folkloric resources (Dansac 2020b). As in the case of pre-Hispanic sites and pre-Historic monuments, which are constantly being converted into Contemporary-Pagan and New Age places of worship (De la Torre 2019), Brittany's megaliths are associated with human history and transcendence, while also being re-signified as sacred and energy places.

Practices are proposed mainly through websites where future participants can choose among a variety of techniques, such as Carlos Castañeda's Tensegrity movements, Shiatsu, Yoga, or neo-shamanism. Practices take the form of workshops, which can last six to eight hours or even two days. The only condition for participating is to pay the inscription fee established by the ritual specialist who organizes activities. Regardless of their technical or discursive singularities, all practices are held in local megalithic sites and follow a similar protocol framed by organizing principles that produce liminal spaces and ritualized relationships between human and non-human participants (Dansac forthcoming). According to data recovered at Carnac, groups that perform alternative spiritual practices at local megaliths are led by ritual specialists who are primarily men, aged between forty and seventy years old, and come from Paris. They have trained abroad often, and they rarely establish social relations with other colleagues. Nevertheless, all of them share similar techniques and discourses because their knowledge on the subject usually derives from the same esoteric literature about the "powers and energy of megaliths". When meeting practitioners for the first time, they present themselves as specialists and underline their degree of expertise by briefly recounting personal life-changing events, travels among non-Western societies, or their sensorial skills. Participants are mainly women between twenty-four and seventy years old who hold university degrees and live in Brittany. Practitioners' attraction to local megaliths arises from their interests in a wide range of subjects such as psychotherapy, archaeology, esoteric beliefs, astrology, occultism, and personal development. By taking part in the prevailing ethos of contemporary spirituality, participants elaborate and develop a personally crafted package that is their individual quest (Bowman 2005, p. 169).

Steven Sutcliffe (2008, p. 466–77) regards both kinds of actors as "spiritual seekers", people who make periodic trips to specific places where they can reflexively engage in self work. Participants act mostly as "serial seekers" who rarely follow the same ritual specialist's workshop, preferring to invest themselves in learning different techniques and notions concerning megaliths. The periodic engagement of participants and limited duration of workshops demands specific strategies to promptly achieve the objective of practices, which is to experience an embodied engagement with the megaliths. Seeking to provide such an experience, practices become sites of learning where most practitioners discover, assimilate, and reproduce a theoretical and technical framework designed to produce embodied engagements with a living world inhabited by human and non-human beings.

### *Methodology*

To understand how participants achieve a sensing body during practices, from 2015 to 2019, I conducted ethnographic fieldwork in twenty workshops held at the Carnac megalithic site. To collect data, I decided to use five main tools: Participant observations, semi-structured interviews, in-depth interviews, somatic interviews, and participant sensations. Bodily and sensory involvement is practically a must for anthropologists who wish to examine embodied interactions in ritual practices. Therefore, during participant observations, I decided to collect data about my own body, bodily sensations, and somatic experiences. This approach was also applied for analyzing somatic experiences in ritual contexts (Stoller 1989; Throop 2012; Turner et al. 1992).

The semi-structured interviews consisted of exchanges that took place during or at the end of the workshops. I always tried to address three main themes: Interpretation of individual and collective bodily experiences, learning processes to master the practice, and theoretical and practical foundations of participants before, during, and after practices. The order of the topics discussed depends on the responsiveness of the informant. Olivier Schmitz (2006) used this type of interview to construct an anthropological portrait of the healers in the Wallonia region and collect their technical framework.

The in-depth interview was a space for the researcher and the informant to meet. It aimed at understanding the experiences that my informants had while taking part in practices. This type of interview was conducted during appointments outside of workshops. It allowed me to deepen my knowledge of the themes addressed during the semi-directed interviews. Christophe Pons (2004) uses this method to identify the heterogeneity of the new cosmogonies, the non-human beings summoned, and the techniques used by mediums in Iceland.

The somatic interview was a tool adapted from the method devised by Jaida Samudra (2008, p. 670) in her investigation of kinesthetic experience. It consisted of asking participants questions about how to perform a bodily movement and then following their directions while they supervised me performing it. In doing so, I would elicit physical and verbal responses from the participant-mentor, who would then begin to correct my body posture and body movements. At the same time, he was physically carrying out the instructions he had just given me. During these interviews, I played the role of an apprentice. By being watched, guided, and directed by others, I was able to identify when and under what conditions these types of experiences take place. I also carried out “participating sensations” (Howes 2019), which consisted of using my own sensory and bodily experiences as tools to analyze the spatial positioning of the other bodies, their movements or lack of movements, and their relation to a certain bodily sensation (Blacking 1977, p. 6). Both methods are among the tools developed by sensory ethnography (Pink 2009), an approach interested in collecting data related to somatic experiences, affective states, and phenomenological experiences.

### **3. Practicing Visualization to Stimulate the Actors’ Senses**

The group’s meeting place is usually a parking lot located a few kilometers away from a specific megalith. In that place, participants meet for the first time the other practitioners and the ritual specialist who organizes practices. He begins activities by pronouncing a speech that highlights the energetic characteristics of the megalith that will be visited during the workshop. At the end of this discourse, participants are invited to “open their mind and to pay attention to their body”. Next, groups follow the ritual specialist’s footsteps, and start to walk slowly and in silence along a specific trail that led them into the forest surrounding the megalith. During this walk, the ritual specialist explains, without going into detail, that the path is crossed by several thresholds protected by non-human beings. He identifies them as “spirits of the place.” As they walk slowly, participants are invited to pay attention to their bodily sensations to identify the precise location of the “invisible barriers of energy” that mark the location of these thresholds. For Stephan, a ritual specialist I met in Carnac in 2016, these barriers compel the human body to suddenly

stop and remain motionless for a few seconds. Whenever he saw someone execute those gestures during practices, he would gather the group around that participant and invite everyone to close their eyes and concentrate on their sensations. Specifically, he encouraged participants to be aware of sensations such as tingling in the skin or heaviness in the legs. According to him, such somatic effects indicate the presence of “spirits of the place” located nearby.

During the practice organized by Stephan on 21 June 2016, this walk continued until arriving at a specific megalith named the “Manio Giant”. This is a standing stone seven meters high and one meter in diameter, located in an open space in the forest. Before touching it, Stephan indicated that we needed to ask the “spirit” for permission to approach the stone, because that entity was guarding its energy and was the only being capable of releasing it. According to him, the “spirit” that we had to contact was sitting close to the standing stone. A participant asked him to describe this non-human being. However, instead of transmitting us a description right away, Stephan invited us to close our eyes, focus on the “here and now”, and visualize an anthropomorphic form. While we had our eyes closed, he shared with us what he was seeing. According to him, the “spirit” was a small gnome formed by a green light that was sitting cross-legged in the lotus position. According to Stephan, the gaze of this being was on the Manio Giant. Once he had described its form and body positioning, he asked us to address this being in silence to ask permission to approach the megalith and touch it. This action, which lasted barely a minute, was equivalent to a prayer performed in silence.

After requesting permission, Stephan invited us to approach the megalith slowly, and “as if we were walking through a labyrinth”. While walking, he told us to visualize waves emanating from the base of the megalith and moving upwards. For him, these waves represented the energy pulsations of the megalith. Following his indications, I observed that most participants walked in a zigzag pattern and appeared to adopt a reverential attitude, showing respect and admiration, and stopping for a few seconds before continuing to advance toward the standing stone. Once we all arrived, Stephan invited us to stand in a circle around the standing stone, close our eyes, and pay attention to our bodily sensations. After a few minutes, the final and most important moment of practice arrived: The body-to-body contact with the megalith. Before starting, Stephan gave us all instructions to approach the megalith one by one. There was no set order. One participant volunteered to go first. Remaining motionless, he touched the stone with his eyes closed, and put his palms, forehead, and stomach in direct contact with the surface. After three or four minutes, he turned his body to touch the stone only with his back, still with his eyes closed. Then he opened his eyes and left the stone to join Stephan, with whom he discussed his body sensations. Among the following people, some preferred to touch the stone only with one part of their body, others repeated the same body techniques as the first participant and one of them tried to hug the stone. I was one of the last to pass. At the first contact, I felt the rough surface of the stone. Then, the coldness of the stone. At the end of practice, Stephan asked us to form a circle around the megalith one last time, close our eyes, and thank the “spirit of the place.” Some of the participants whispered a “thank you” and the others spoke the word without making a sound. After this last action, we started walking back to the parking lot.

#### 4. Learning “Another” Sensory Language

From the beginning of practices to the end, participants discover, incorporate, and reproduce a specific sensory language, a language that is different from the one we usually use in our daily life. It consists of interpretations of bodily sensations such as the ones promoted in contemporary-Pagan and neo-shamanic ceremonies (Ostenfeld-Rosenthal 2011; Rountree 2004; Voss 2011). By examining this language, it is possible to account for bodily techniques and sensory hierarchies that are unique to alternative spiritual practices (Meyer 2006, p. 27). The language to which I refer mobilizes an interpretive framework relating to bodily sensations and a specific hierarchy of senses. Thus, sensations of cold or

heat are reinterpreted as evidence of the allocation of “megalithic energies” in the body. The sensations of heaviness in the limbs become, for the participants, tangible proof of the presence of these “energies.” Touch, for its part, is highlighted as the primary sense for experiencing the effectiveness of the practices. Data show to what extent the meanings given to bodily sensations and the hierarchies of the senses are not universal models. They change according to different cultures and societies (Classen 1990; Stoller 1997, p. 47). Outside practices, bodily sensations such as being cold or hot, would be interpreted as indicators of the presence of health problems in our organism or a change in the temperature of the environment. Feelings of heaviness in the limbs would be associated with poor blood circulation in the veins or fatigue.

If the human body is “a system of systems dedicated to the inspection of the world” (Merleau-Ponty 1969, p. 110–11), bodily sensations are the primary tools for carrying out this inspection. From a cognitive point of view, they are an important source of information for a person. They transmit various data about the body and the physical context. However, for the “message” transmitted by our bodily sensations to be complete, it is necessary to consider information from our social and cultural context (Philippot 2004, p. 41). In the hierarchy of meaning mobilized in Western societies, bodily sensations have a secondary place. As early as the Renaissance, the sense of sight was associated with the person’s ability to reason (Kambaskovic-Sawers and Wolfe 2016, p. 112). The other senses such as taste, smell, hearing, or touch are usually relayed to the role of verifiers. That is, they serve to corroborate what we see. However, within alternative spiritual practices, touch is emphasized as the primary sense. For my interviewees, somatic experiences, particularly those apprehended through the tactile sense, have primacy in the examination of the experience lived during the training courses.

For participants to apprehend this specific sensory language, they simultaneously must engage in two processes. During practices, the ritual specialist encourages participants to become aware of their body not as an object, but as “an embodied awareness of a living and sensitive body present in the world and also experienced in itself” (Andrieu 2010, p. 349). This awareness leads participants to conceptualize their body as a subject animated by a potential for expressive communication and endowed with a gestural language that it is possible to recognize even in other bodies (Martin-Juchat 2001, p. 56). At the same time, participants are invited to “awaken” their bodies by paying attention to their sensations. A similar request to engage in “bodily awakening” is verbalized by Western yoga instructors who invite participants to be aware of the functioning of their body, emotions, bodily sensations, breathing, and thoughts (Nizard 2020, p. 285). Phenomenology scholar Natalie Depraz (2014, p. 98) prefers to use the term “bodily attention” instead of “bodily awakening” because it highlights the process participants achieve when they focus their attention on their bodily movements and sensations.

The fulfilment of the two processes described above can only be achieved by respecting the following conditions: Participants must actively engage in practice by doing all the exercises proposed by the ritual specialist; when touching the megaliths, for example, they must consider his instructions; they must seek to imitate the bodily movements and gestures of other participants; they must focus on their bodily sensations at all times; and they must establish clear relationships between kinesthetic patterns and the meanings given to these patterns. Therefore, learning this sensory language also includes the incorporation of somatic imaginaries. This set of significations regarding how practices affect the body is formulated by associating a bodily technique with a specific bodily sensation (Csordas 1990, p. 18), and is usually provided by ritual specialists.

## 5. Relating Bodily Techniques to Somatic Imagery

During practices, participants reproduce and incorporate a wide variety of somatic imaginaries that ritual specialists transmit to them verbally. Thus, before asking participants to perform a technique, such as walking slowly and silently towards a megalith, the ritual specialist warned them of the fact that they would most likely experience a

sensation of heaviness in their upper and lower limbs. Moreover, before touching the megalith, they made them aware of the fact that tingling sensations could be felt in the body when touching the stones. Data show that ritual specialists constantly evoke these imaginaries, from the beginning to the last minute of the courses. Participants, who are mostly beginners, first discover and assimilate these imaginaries. Then, they reproduce them by putting them into words to share their bodily sensations with others. For example, during practice at Carnac megaliths on 27 March 2016, a participant named Nora<sup>1</sup> shared with me that she experienced a tingling and warm sensation in her palms when she touched a megalith. Others, such as Thomas, a practitioner I met in Carnac on 20 May 2017, reported experiencing a heavy feeling in his legs and feet as he approached a megalith. By transmitting somatic imaginaries, ritual specialists shape participants' somatic experiences, encourage them to adopt a reflexive view of their body, and prompt them to associate these experiences with the presence of summoned entities (Berthomé and Houseman 2010, p. 66). Thus, learning these somatic imaginaries allows my interviewees to experience this specific sensory language.

The mobilization of somatic imaginaries has also been identified in other contemporary spiritual practices. In Catholic charismatic rituals, a somatic imaginary is inculcated through bodily techniques, i.e., specific bodily movements or positions that are supposed to produce a certain bodily sensation (Csordas 1990). In Western yoga practices, instructors explain to practitioners how to perform a bodily movement while also telling them what they "should feel" (Nizard 2020, pp. 272, 282). These two examples show that somatic imaginaries are used not only to make sense of somatic experiences, but also to check whether the practice has been effective (Berthomé and Houseman 2010, p. 66).

## 6. Cultivating and Verbalizing Bodily Attention

Because practices are mostly frequented by beginners, ritual specialists implement discursive strategies to help them achieve and refine bodily attention in a short period of time. For example, they often say phrases such as "let your body act freely" or "do not think too much". These kinds of statements reveal to us reflexivity that concerns a not very lucid and elaborated bodily experience (Le Breton 2015, p. 183). Bodily experiences are provoked by actions that participants are supposed to perform without thinking about them, but not without reflexivity. Paradoxically, to experience the bodily sensations mentioned by ritual specialists, participants are supposed to let their bodies react "freely" to the presence of the megalith's energy, while remaining attentive to their emotions, perceptions, knowledge of the world, and skills acquired in other workshops or past experiences. As in Western yoga practices, participants must exercise an "embodied self-reflexivity" (Pegis 2009, p. 265) by anchoring their "self" in the reflexive capacity of bodily sensation. To do this, participants must relate their bodily sensations to their emotions, mental state, and what they have felt in other similar experiences. As I will discuss next, the conscious and voluntary refinement of "bodily attention" requires participants to invest themselves physically during practices and to respond ostentatiously to the utterances of ritual specialists.

### 6.1. Roles of Ostentatious Behaviors

On several occasions, I observed that participants transformed their behaviors into ostentatious injunctions that responded to the ritual specialist's speech. To illustrate this, I will first refer to a practice held on 21 June 2016, close to the megalith named the Manio Giant. We had just completed a slow, silent walk to approach this megalith and had taken our place encircling it. At this point, Eric, the ritual specialist, said aloud, "The energy of the megalith has just been released. You will feel its power. It is quite strong, as it is the most important megalith in the area". This statement was an invitation to visualize the "energy" and stimulate our senses. A few seconds after hearing it, Martine, a participant who was standing near me, took a big step backward. Her body then remained approximately forty centimeters away from the rest of the group. At the end of practice, I approached her to ask her why she did that. She answered in a low but clearly audible voice: "the

energy of the megalith is so powerful, it pushed me". It seems to me that, in this case, Martine's ostentatious behavior responded to a feeling of uncertainty. Considering that Eric's and all the ritual specialists' discourses are heavily infused with esoteric and New Age notions, perhaps she struggled to understand the ritual specialist's remark. Instead of interpreting Eric's statement as a description or an explanation, she seems to have taken it as an instruction that required a reaction/action on her part.

Typically, ostentatious behavior occurs immediately after the ritual specialist speaks about the purpose of an exercise, the quality of a megalith, or the presence of non-human entities such as "energies". This was the case at the closing of a workshop that took place in the Kerzerho megaliths on 27 March 2016. Stephan, the ritual specialist, asked us to stand in a circle, close our eyes, and give thanks in a low voice to the "spirits of the place" and the stones who accompanied us that day. Instead of whispering words of thanks as the others did, one participant separated from the rest of the group and started walking toward a megalith that was in front of us, approximately two meters away. Then, with his back to us, he raised his hands to touch the stone with his palms. Then he tilted his body slightly forward, pressing his forearms and forehead against the surface of the stone. Finally, he brought his mouth close to the surface of the stone and began to whisper unintelligible words. This interaction lasted barely a minute, during which only a few participants looked at him. Once he was finished, he left the megalith and rejoined the group, engaging in a new activity. At no point was he questioned by others about why he did this. According to data, ritual specialists encourage participants to engage in ostentatious behavior, and when this happens, it does not seem to surprise the others present. From the beginning of practices and throughout their duration, Stephan, among other ritual specialists, often induce this type of behavior by saying "Here, anything can happen," "Don't be afraid to let go", or "Let your body lead you."

At first glance, in these two examples, participants are continuously reacting to their bodily sensations and those of others, as well as to the somatic imaginaries brought by the ritual specialist. However, as Michael Houseman (2016, p. 226) points out, in New Age practices, the injunction given to participants is not to behave in a strictly determined way or to react according to their immediate thoughts and sensations. They must act according to what they "should" think and feel.

### 6.2. *Translating Bodily Sensations into Words*

Practices oscillate between rare moments when participants must exercise rigorous bodily attention, while remaining in silence, and other more frequent moments when they seem to leave this dynamic to reflect on what they just experienced. This reflection also entails the duty to put into words what they "felt" so that they can share it with others. For example, when walking in silence toward the megalith, I noticed a total absence of verbal interactions between participants. On the other hand, when they stand in a circle around the megalith after this walk, many of them took the opportunity to discuss with the others what they had just felt. I have witnessed verbalization on many occasions, such as during the first exercise proposed by Jean at the 5 March 2016, workshop. At the end of practice, he invited us to share with the others what we had felt when touching a megalith. On that occasion, I met two new participants, Yvette and Alexandre, who were both opticians and had travelled to the Carnac megalithic site, attracted by the myths and legends about the stones located in that place. Following Jean's instructions, they talked to each other about what they had just felt. Yvette asked Alexandre "You can really feel the difference of doing these exercises here. Can you feel it? What do you feel? To which he responded, "I feel lighter, especially in my arms, but also in my belly. Also, warmth, like a hot sensation going through my hands". She reassured him by saying, "Absolutely. It's like a heat wave".

For those engaging in practices, access to the "megalith energy" was only supposed to be achieved by paying attention to bodily sensations. Participants generally pay more attention to their senses and sensations than to the correct execution of the bodily techniques. Indeed, they gave greater importance to bodily sensations than to the ideological and



technical framework of practices. Moreover, the somatic experience became “more real” for my interviewees through verbal exchanges. When Yvette and Alexander compared what they felt individually with what others felt, their somatic experiences became even more certain or more factual. This was plausible because “self-reality” and “reality of self-experience” are structured in an experiential reality composed of peers with whom people simultaneously assume a degree of similarity in experience and a shared framework of knowledge. Thus, through others, we become aware of our own experiences (Kapferer 1986, p. 189). The bodily sensations that participants experienced, even if produced in such an intimate setting as that of a body unique and exclusive to each, were attested to and validated by others.

## 7. Conclusions

This article analyzed how practitioners learn to develop their sensing body through visualization and bodily attention in alternative spiritual practices held in Brittany’s megaliths. As exposed, these activities function as learning sites where individuals practice visualization techniques, discover and assimilate a specific sensory language, relate bodily techniques to somatic imagery, and learn how to cultivate and verbalize bodily sensations. The major objective of these learning strategies is to elaborate a meaningful experience of the place and regain a harmonious relationship with human and non-human beings. Although practitioners generally arrive at practices without concrete knowledge of the notions and techniques they will execute in the local megaliths, they leave the sites carrying a theoretical and technical framework that can be transferred to a variety of mind–body techniques, such as Western forms of yoga or alternative rituals such as neo-shamanic retreats or contemporary-Pagan ceremonies.

Although bodily attention is the primary source for experiencing practices, visualization plays an important role in the production, experience, and interpretation of bodily sensations. Participants are encouraged to visualize non-human entities and energies while paying attention to their movements and gestures. This meditative technique serves to stimulate their senses and helps them to “get in tune” with their mind and body before, during, and after touching the megalith. Because of that, practicing visualization is a procedure that partakes in the refinement of bodily attention.

Regarding the applied sensory ethnographic approach, it enabled me to identify what bodily sensations the participants experienced during the practices; what bodily movements provoked them; what the process of learning another sensory language that allows them to develop particular bodily attention was; and what the somatic imaginaries specifically associated with practices were. The use of my own body as a research tool provided me with data to determine different bodily positions and kinesthetic patterns.

In sum, achieving and cultivating a sensing body through visualization and bodily attention is a process that demands, to be accomplished, a total presence on the part of the person. In my case study, this personal investment was reflected by the attention participants paid to their own somatic experiences and those of others. Relating their mind, body, and senses, practitioners experienced themselves and constructed a meaningful and tangible experience for themselves and others.

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**Data Availability Statement:** Study did not report any data.

**Conflicts of Interest:** The author declares no conflict of interest.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Pseudonyms are used for informants to protect their anonymity. Translations by author.

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