

Hi workshoppers,

The paper in front of you is not the one that I initially set out to write. It began as an attempt to explain the wave of self-immolations that occurred during the Arab Spring, which started with Bouazizi's suicide in Tunisia and then spread to Algeria, Egypt, Mauritania, Morocco, Saudi Arabia, Jordan, Yemen, and Iraq involving at least 30 instances of self-immolation or self-immolation attempts (some estimates put the number above 50). While suicide bombing is a well-know form of protest in the Arab world, self-immolation is something relatively new and the Arab Spring appears to have been the first protest cycle that involved multiple instances of self-immolation. As a first instance of this type of protest, it was an obvious focus for an article titled "The Origin of Self-Immolation in the MENA Region".

As I began researching the topic of self-immolation, the scope of the paper began to broaden and eventually came to focus on repertoires of contention that involve breaking taboos such as suicide through self-immolation and hunger strike, public nudity, self-cannibalism, barf-ins, dirty protests, etc. A closer look at these forms of protest revealed that, while they often drew inspiration from ancient cultural practices, they have only entered the repertoire of contentious politics within the past 50-100 years.

As the research agenda expanded, the number of difficult questions multiplied. I now realize that I have bitten off more than I can chew. The paper in it currently form is, therefore, less coherent than I would have wished it to be, and I am therefore asking for your patience as well as your help. While the paper is meant to become a stand-alone article, it should, at this point, be read as an attempt to put together a series of ideas that have not yet fully crystallized in my mind.

I would greatly appreciate if you could help me think about the following questions:

- 1) Is it possible to identify a limited subset of protests that involves the breaking of social taboos?
- 2) If question 1 is answered in the affirmative, what protest forms would you include in this subset?
- 3) Are you aware of taboo-breaking behavior that became modular forms of protest before the 20<sup>th</sup> century? I would date the origin of stripping naked to 1903, the hunger strike to 1909, and self-immolation to 1963, but there may be other forms that predate these.
- 4) Why has taboo-breaking behavior such as suicide through self-immolation and hunger strikes, stripping naked, self-cannibalism, and the use of feces, vomit, and blood recently entered the repertoire of political contention?
- 5) Is a Durkheimian approach, with its emphasis on rituals and emotional energy, a useful tool to look at protests that rely on taboo-breaking behavior?
- 6) How can the issue of emotional energy for the purpose of collective action be addressed methodologically?

Thank you for taking the time to give these questions some consideration.

Best, Jens

# When the Body Does the Protesting: From Acts of Taboo to Acts of Political Contention

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## First Draft – Not For Quotation

*All cultures treat a number of body-related human activities as taboo. A violation of these taboos is seen as repulsive behavior and violators are socially stigmatized. Under certain circumstances, however, the very same activities that are taboo in a society can become powerful acts of protest that movements incorporate into their repertoire of contention. Exploring how stripping naked, hunger strikes, self-immolation, self-cannibalism, and the use of feces, blood, and vomit have become expressions of protest, this article discusses why taboo-breaking behavior have entered the repertoire of contention over the past one hundred years. Based on a Durkheimian approach, the article argues that protests involving the violation of taboos should be seen as ritualized forms of behavior. When people participate in rituals they do not have ready or conscious interpretations of such activities; rather ritualized actions is a way to harness emotional energy for collective action. In this perspective, the violation of a taboo is particular well-suited for generating mass mobilization if the violation takes place in a context where the breaking of the taboo is interpreted as a ritual act. Although many taboo-breaking forms of protest have become modular, they are still unevenly employed across the world due to differences in the cultural rituals surround taboos.*

### **Naked Protesting Bodies**

Modular forms of protest are, according to Charles Tilly, performances that transfer “easily from place to place, issue to issue [and] group to group” (2006, p.54). If we follow this definition it is safe to say that stripping naked has become a modular form of protest. Today, any group of protesters, anywhere in the world, seems willing to drop what they are wearing to direct the public’s attention to a specific cause. Whether it is to stop bull fighting in Spain, reduce vehicle emission in New Zealand, ridicule the political parties’ inability to form a government in Belgium, dispute the fairness of elections in Ukraine, or end the U.S.’ dependency on oil, activists expose their bare bodies as a way of protest. On the exceedingly long list of contentious issues that have sparked naked public protest we even find the right to be naked in public.

A look at global protest numbers over the first decade of the new millennium reveals that 2002 and 2003 was especially rich in protests involving the collective and public display of naked bodies. During this month, thousands of people across the world stripped naked and used their bodies to collectively form symbols, words and slogans such as ☯; NO WAR; PEACE; NO BUSH; and PEACE, MAN to stop the imminent Iraqi war. From

Sussex in England to Cape Town in South Africa and from Byron Bay in Australia to Central Park, New York City people undressed in public to send a coordinated message to the US and other governments. In what appeared to be highly choreographed setups protesters would lie down in the grass, on the beach, or in the snow (depending on their location) so that a camera in an elevated position could take a photo of the event, photos that would later be posted on the Internet and printed in newspapers. The largest of these gatherings took place in Australia where more than 750 women turned out in support of the “Disrobe to Disarm” campaign. Probably due to wintery conditions - a storm dumped five inches of snow on the day of the event - only about 30 women took part in the Central Park protest, a couple of bodies short of spelling Bush with a capital B. They had to settle for NO bUSH.

In light of the ease with which people line up to expose their naked body as form of protest, it is easy to forget that public nudity is a taboo that under other circumstances would be seen as offensive and lead to condemnation and/or arrest. While public nudity, when related to popular protest, is generally accepted today, most Western audiences may even see it as innocent or humorous, that was not always the case. Before several hundred members of a Christian sect called the Doukhobors undressed in 1903, public nudity was an unknown form of political protest (Souweine 2005). The Doukhobors, who had migrated to the Canadian province of Saskatchewan in order to escape persecution in Tsarist Russia, were refusing to send their children to school prompting the local authorities to issue fines in accordance with Canadian law. In response, the Doukhobors protested by burning their earthly possessions, including their clothes, and then staged a protest march wearing nothing but what God had provided for them. Along with arson the naked march would become the favorite form of protest of the Doukhobors until the Canadian government, somewhat belatedly, to criminalize public nudity in 1932 (Susan Wiley Hardwick 1993).

In 1903, this new form of protest did not easily transfer from place to place, issue to issue, and from group to group. In fact over the next decades, the Doukhobors remained alone in performing nude protests. Though related phenomena like the Streakers did occur, the nudity only became a more integrated part of the modern protest repertoire very recently and even though the “Disrobe to Disarmament” campaign clearly illustrates that stripping naked has gained a modular quality over the past one hundred years, there are still parts of the world where no nude protests take place. Despite strong opposition to the Iraqi war in the MENA region, no protesters stripped naked in support of the “Disrobe to Disarm” campaign.

Stripping naked is only one among a number of taboo-breaking forms of protest that have entered the repertoire of political contention over the past one hundred years. Suicide through self-immolation or hunger strikes, self-cannibalism by chopping of a finger an eating, or the use of feces, vomit, and blood are other examples. While such protest forms often originated in places where certain cultural practices had provided exception to the general taboo, the example of stripping naked illustrates that are no simple answers to the questions of when and why activists decide to engage in taboo-breaking behavior to draw attention to their grievances. The year 1903 seems random in light of the fact that the

Christian taboo surrounding public nudity can be traced back to the Book of Genesis, which has been dated to 400 B.C. More than two thousand years went by from the formulation of the taboo in writing to an obscure Russian sect made use of that taboo on a cold winter's day to stage a protest march "in the manner of the first Adam and Eve" (Woodcock and Avakumovic 1968). Even in cases where cultural practices provided exception to the taboo – like the hunger strike in Ireland which was used in situations of personal conflicts over debt – the existence of such practices tells us little with regards to why the hunger strikes entered the repertoire of contention through the suffragette movement around 1909. Given the widespread but uneven use of taboo-breaking forms of protest across the world, the quite recent introduction of these protest forms into the repertoire of contention, and the morally contested status of such protest forms, this article seeks to explain how they have entered the repertoire of contention and gained modularity. It also seeks to answer the more of general question of why the breaking of social taboos related to the body have become a widespread protest strategy within the past hundred years?

Following a Durkheimian approach, the article argues that protests involving the violation of taboos should be seen as a form of ritualized behavior. According to Durkheim, rituals are ways to harness emotional energy for collective action (Durkheim 1995; Collin 1998) and through participation in rituals the individual becomes energetically attached to the symbolic order of a society. These rituals always involve a material object towards which action can be directed and meaning attached. In taboo-breaking forms of protest, such as stripping naked, self-immolation, hunger strikes, and self-cannibalism, the body of the protesters become the object central to ritual. The protest consists of and is expressed through activities that involve doing something *to* the body: setting it on fire, depriving it of food, mutilating and eating it, or exposing its bare skin to an audience. While many societies perceive the natural body as profane and in need of control, the totemic prohibitions surrounding body hair, blood, foreskin, fat, etc. "are sufficient to prove the existence in men of something that keeps the profane at a distance and has religious efficacy" (Durkheim 1995, p. 195). The body "conceals in its depth a sacred principle that erupts onto the surface a particular circumstances" (Ibid, p. 138) and affirms that the individual belongs to a moral whole (Shilling 2005, p. 214). This affirmation can happen via ritualized actions whereby the body undergoes a symbolic transformation that provides new meaning to it and its relation to social life.

All repertoires of contention can be seen as scripted and performance-like action, that is why they are referred to as repertoires, yet when activists engage in taboo-breaking behavior involving the body, they move beyond simple theater and tap into a symbolic world where the act is both profane and appeal to a higher sense of justice. The ritualized violations of taboo as a form of protest may find inspiration in cultural practices - like the suttee or widow burning - that constitute exceptions to the general enforced taboo of suicide. By imitating this practice, which is seen as an act of self-sacrifice, the protesting self-immolator engages in a ritual that provide symbolic meaning to their body-directed actions, a meaning that stretches beyond the mere meaning of suicide protest. Sometimes cultural norms, myths, and religious beliefs enable a interpretation of these acts of taboo breaking as justifiable - such as the legend of Lady Godiva who rode naked through the

streets of Coventry to protest taxation. For Durkheim, however, rituals are forms of behavior that escape this kind of ready and conscious interpretation. The true meaning of a ritual never presents itself to the participant before the act in the form of beliefs that protesters adhere to; rather, it is the ritual that generates meaning, not the other way round (Durkheim 1995).

If we study the messages and statements left behind by the more than 30 self-immolators during the Arab Spring, most of them provided explicit explanations of what they were protesting against – brutality by the secret police, the reduction in food subsidies, or being dropped from the local housing waitlist. In contrast to the quite detailed accounts of the grievances that protesters gave as the reason for their self-immolation, the act of self-immolation in itself was never explained. The messages and statements offered no references to religious beliefs, customs, or cultural practices that revealed any clues as to why they chose to give voice to their grievances a manner that would have such grave personal consequences. It is as if the act of self-immolation was self-explanatory. Or perhaps it is more correct to say that the form of protest appeared to be beyond explanation. The self-immolators were engaging in a ritual.

Based on the observation that taboo-breaking forms of protests should be seen as ritualistic behavior, and following Durkheim's argument that rituals are ways to harness emotional energy for collective action, the article argues that stripping naked, self-immolation, hunger strikes, and self-cannibalism may become particular powerful ways to promote mass mobilization exactly because the protests rely on ritualistic behavior. In contrast to other modular forms of contention such as for example the petition, the boycott, the blockade, the demonstration, or the strike, where it is the grievances that animate protesters, the taboo-breaking behavior seeks to generate emotional energy for protest through the choice of repertoire. Given that different cultures treat various forms of taboo in different ways, it is never clear that a particular form of protests will generate enough emotional energy to initiate and sustain collective action. Only if it does will a particular form of taboo-breaking protest become modular.

The next section takes a closer look at the concept of repertoires of contention and discusses why protesters choose to engage in certain forms of protests. The subsequent section focuses on the taboo-breaking protests and how taboo relates to power and control. The forms of protest that seek to violate taboos shares many similarities with civil disobedience but whereas most forms of civil disobedience violates the rules created by political institutions, the taboo breaking behavior is meant to challenge the social rules that control and regulate a society. The article moves on to give examples of how different forms of taboo breaking behavior were introduced into the repertoire of contention in specific contexts. The article concludes with a discussion of the similarities and differences in the way that suicide through self-immolation or hunger strikes, self-cannibalism by chopping of a finger or eating, or the use of feces, vomit, and blood have been used as acts of protest.

### **Repertoires, Modularity, and Taboo-Breaking Protest**

In early attempt to define the concept of repertoire of contention, Charles Tilly described it as “the whole set of means [a group] has for making claims of different kind on different individuals or groups” (Tilly 1986, p.4). By “the whole set of means” he meant all the various acts people could choose to do when they engage in public claim making. In theory, there was an infinite number of ways to express dissatisfaction, but from studying protest behavior, especially in Britain and France, Tilly found that acts of protest and clam-making clustered into a rather limited set of activities that shared a great deal of similarities. Even when people did improvise they usually came up with variations of protest that were based on the same general forms of behavior. By choosing the word ‘repertoire’ he intended to capture the performance-oriented elements of contentious action. In much the same way as actors acting out a play on a theater stage, protesters were following a ‘manuscript’ that enabled the coordination of the collective behavior by instructing the individual protester how to behave.

Tilly made another interesting discovery based on the Great Britain protest data. From the 1760s onwards, a gradual shift in the repertoire had occurred whereby contention involving protest forms such as rough music, festivals, field invasions, grain seizure, charivari, pulling down houses, and forced illumination had been transformed and replaced by new forms of collective action relying on the protest march, demonstrations, and public meetings. Whereas the older repertoire had been parochial and particular in the sense that contention most often addressed the specific issues and interests of a community, and “varied greatly from group to group, issue to issue, locality to locality”, the new repertoire was, in contrast, cosmopolitan, modular, and autonomous (Tilly 1995, p.45). Cosmopolitan because it addressed issues that were of interest to many localities and often targeted political institutions with power and authority stretching across many communities; modular because the repertoire could be applied in various settings and political contexts; and autonomous because it could be activated on the claimants’ own initiative without support from local power-holders (Ibid.).

There were several reasons why the modern repertoire of contention emerged in Great Britain towards the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> century: among the most important were parliamentarization and state centralization, capitalization and proletarianization, industrialization, urbanization, and the revolution in print technology (Tilly 1995; Rudé 1962; Tarrow 2011). These large-scale historical processes, which summed up much of early modern British history, altered the institutions, identity, and interests of both holders of power and claim-makers. From the changes in political and economic power emerged new types of conflict that gave rise to new forms of contentious interaction. As processes of modernization spread to other parts of the world, the new forms of protest followed suit; that is, they became modular. Sometimes the diffusion from the West to the rest involved social networks or media, and sometimes new forms of protest invented outside the Western world were taken up by protesters in the West; whatever direction of the diffusion took, it led to a transformation of the repertoire of contention across the world that entailed a high degree of uniformity (Tilly 2008; Beissinger 2007; Taugott 1995; Tarrow 1998; McAdam 1995; McAdam and Rucht 1993; Biggs 2005; Andrews and Biggs 2006; Chabot and Duyvendak 2002).

As the concept of repertoires and modularity gain credence among scholars, focus turned to the role that culture plays in shaping the way that people protest. While the processes of political and economic modernization combined with diffusion could explain the similarities in the repertoire across the world, they were less useful when it came to the new forms of protest that evolved with transition from the industrial to the post-industrial society in the 1970s or the everyday forms of resistance in a rural community (Scott 1987). Arthur Stinchcombe was among the first to point out that, “[t]he elements of the repertoire are...simultaneously the skills of the population and the cultural forms of the population (Stinchcombe 1987, p.1248). By underlining that protests were inseparable from ordinary people’s lives and that the repertoire drew inspiration from cultural practices and historical learning (Taugott 1995), the understanding of why forms of protest developed a modular quality was added another layer of complexity. In order to understand the particularity of popular protests in specific contexts, attention had to be given to “the culturally encoded ways in which people interact in contentious politics. (McAdam, Tarrow, and Tilly 2001, p.49). The emphasis on the role on cultural codes and practices led to a surge in the study of how cultural expressions such as myth (Armony and Armony 2005; Ram and Sabar-Friedman 1996), cults (Sweeny 1993), symbolism (Esherik and Wasserstrom 1990, Pfaff and Yang 2001), collective identity (Poletta and Jasper 2005; Taylor & Van Dyke 2004; Taylor et al. 2009), and rituals (Staggenborg and Lang 2007) influenced the organization and repertoires of the social movements and protest behavior.

Among the many types of contentious politics that were analyzed through a cultural lens were a number of protests that involved the violations of taboo such as stripping naked (Souweine 2005), suicide through self-immolation (Biggs 2005) and hunger strikes (Sweeny 1993), self-cannibalism (?), and the use of feces, vomit, and blood (Aretxaga 1995, Jasper 1999). These protest forms had entered the repertoire of in the 20<sup>th</sup> century and spread to many parts of the world, although the diffusion had been uneven. The origin of taboo-breaking behavior often could be traced to countries where pre-existing cultural practices and social norms made such protests intelligible. The first instances of self-immolation, for example, took place in Vietnam, 1963, when the monk Thich Quang Duc burned himself to death to protest the persecution of Buddhists under the Catholic regime of President Ngo Dinh Diem. Over the next few months, an additional eight monks set themselves of fire. In 1965, self-immolation had entered the repertoire in the U.S. when Alice Herz, an 82-year-old Quaker, set herself on fire. She told a friend that she had exhausted all acceptable methods of protest including marching and petitioning and she wondered what else she could do; she had seen the Buddhist monks and nuns in the news and decided to follow their example. Eight months after Hertz’ self-immolation, another two incidences occurred in the U.S. when Norman Morrison, also a Quaker, set himself afire in front of the window of the Secretary of Defense at the Pentagon in Washington, D.C. and Roger Allen LaPorte, a member of the Catholic Worker Movement, burned himself in front of the United Nations building in New York City (Crosby, Rhee, and Holland 1977).

As self-immolation diffused across national borders, it was adopted and adapted across a wide range of conflicts and sites of contention by a broad range of actors. Indian students self-immolated to protest an educational quota policy that would reserve university spots for low-caste individuals; Lithuanians self-immolated in the name of national independence; French youths self-immolated to protest war and famine in Africa; and Falun Gong practitioners self-immolated in China to protest religious oppression (Coleman 2004, p.54-56). Despite its modular nature, the vast majority of self-immolations have been concentrated in three countries: India, Vietnam and South Korea. This has led to a search for the specific cultural codes within these regions that could explain why protesters here were especially prone to undertake this form of protest.

Both Buddhism and Hinduism have long traditions of self-sacrifice, often with fire stretching back to 455 AD when “the first self-burning by a Buddhist monk in the area of present Vietnam is cited” (King 2000) and until very recently, all Chinese and Korean monks and nuns were burned at ordination to symbolically seal their vow (Benn 1998). Eastern religions have also “... ascribed to fire [a] sacred quality and transformational power and to heat a generative potential” (Andriolo 2006). In India, Jauhur was a historical practice undertaken by Rajput women, who would kill themselves en masse to avoid capture by invading Muslim armies (Venkoba Rao 1983; Singh 1998). And many Hindu Puranas, or teach stories, tell of the karmic benefits one may receive by committing suicide in a place of pilgrimage (Dubly 1987; Thakur 1963). Poeschia and Combs relate the story of the Charans, a caste in northern India, who “perform self-sacrifice when demands of honor are unmet; believing that by doing so they bring down the vengeance of heaven on the offender whose obstinacy necessitated the sacrifice”.

The most well-known ritual involving self-immolation is the Suttee, or widow burning. It is not unique to India, but the admiration for women who undertake this ritual is more pronounced in India than in other cultures. Named after Sita, the wife of Shiva, who set herself on fire to save her husband from dishonor, the practice is believed to guarantee the widow access to heaven along with her husband and seven generations of her family. The power of the ritual in contemporary India was illustrated on 30 August 1980 when a woman committed Suttee; within two weeks of her self-immolation, hundreds of thousands of pilgrims had visited her village (Vijavakumar 2004). Another woman, Roop Kamwar, performed Suttee in 1987. Her funeral pyre was visited by more than 700,000 people (Sippie 2011). As a result of these and similar incidents, the Indian government began closing or destroying Sita temples and shrines in the 1980s in an attempt to dissuade its practice (van den Bosch 1993). Despite the government to stop the practice estimates put the number of suttee around 1,500 a year.

Like the act of self-immolation, the hunger strike also has deep cultural roots. As a means of personal protest, it was encoded in civil law during Ireland’s pre-Christian era. Under the Brehon code, people were allowed to make claims against another individuals by standing on the doorstep of the person whom they accused of committing an injustice. Standing there they would refuse themselves food until a settlement could be reached. “If the defendant allowed the plaintiff to die of starvation near his dwelling he would not only have to compensate the plaintiff’s kin but he would also be in a polluted state and



would be fearful of the magical consequences that might result from the protesters' death" (Sweeny 1993). Like Ireland, India has a long history of hunger strikes to settle personal debt. In addition, we find the ritual of Santhara or Sallenkhana – fasting until death - within Jainism. This ritual is undertaken by the Jain when the body is no longer able to serve the spiritual enlightenment of the mind or when death is imminent and inevitable. By giving up all material aspects of human life, even food and water, focus can be directed exclusively toward the spiritual. This ritual became an important inspiration for Gandhi's many hunger strikes during the struggle for India's national independence (Mahla 1992). It also has influenced that Tamil Tigers struggle for independence in Sri Lanka. During a wave of hunger strikes among Tamil asylum seekers in Britain in 2009, David Parajasingham, a spokesperson for the British Tamils' Forum said, "In our culture, people go on hunger strike. There are at least three students around the world also on hunger strike at this time, over this issue. In our culture, when people do this, they follow it through. They are not afraid to die." (The Guardian, April 11, 2009).

The religious and spiritual connotations of self-immolation and hunger strikes suggest that when protesters rely on such behavior their protest could be seen as rituals. Rituals used for protest display the same scripted and performance-like features of other form of protests but contrary to the strike, the boycott, the blockade, the march, or the petition, the self-immolation and hunger strike enable protesters to draw on a symbolic world that is not available to protesters who engage in non-ritualistic behavior. In her discussion of ritual symbolism, Mary Douglas argues that, "the more the symbol is drawn from the common fund of human experience, the more wide and certain its reception" (1984:114); it therefore comes as no surprise that self-immolation is particular widespread in Vietnam, India and South Korea. Surely, all protesters engage in framing activities, that is the "conscious strategic efforts by groups of people to fashion shared understandings of the world and of themselves that legitimate and motive collective action" (Snow), but what sets taboo-breaking behavior like stripping naked, hunger strikes, self-immolation, self-cannibalism, and the use of feces, blood, and vomit apart from other forms of protest is that they fashion a shared understanding from the point of the repertoire rather than from the issues the protest seeks to address.

Whether they present themselves through myth, religious doctrine, witchcraft, folklore, custom and ceremonial tradition, or rites of passage most, if not all, cultures have a set of codified practices that enable the transformation of the body from one state to another. This transformation may lead a person from a position of outsider to one of membership, from sinfulness to virtuousness, from dirty to clean, from evil to good, or from a state of compliance to a state of defiance (van Gennep 2004). Many cultures also described a set of ritual practices whereby the body of the individual is sacrificed for the sake of the well-being of the community. It is through the repeated ritualized sacrifice of the human body (or a substitute for the human body such as a goat or chicken) that a society can return to a state of equilibrium (Girard 1977). It is due to the existence of such ritualized practices of bodily transformation and sacrifice that activists across highly diverse cultural settings may find that self-immolation by fire and hunger strikes, as forms of protest, will generate emotional energy that can trigger mobilization on a massive scale.

But while existing cultural practices like the suttee and the hunger strike may explain why they have become modular forms of political contention, they tell us very little about why this transformation from cultural practices to political protest occurred at a specific point in time. The suttee was described in the Ramayana, written in the 4<sup>th</sup> century B.C., yet self-immolation as a form of political protest only emerged in 1963 (Biggs 2005). It also tells us very little about why this form of protest can diffuse into areas where there is no tradition for self-immolation. Alice Herz made clear reference to Thich Quang Duc before she self-immolated but the symbolism of her act had to be interpreted in a U.S. context where it most likely could not harness the same emotional energy for collective action as in Vietnam because it had little cultural resonance. To reach a better understanding of the circumstances under which taboos are broken for the sake of protests and why such rituals may or may not harness emotional energy for collective action, the next section discusses the role of taboo in social control and why the escape the self-imposed control that arise from taboo through bodily protest have become a modern protest strategy.

### **The Body, Taboos, and Social Control**

Two examples, one from Kenya and one from New York City, provide an illustrative example of how cultural practices and taboos about the body both shape and confines the use of public nudity as a form of protest.

Example no.1: In 1992, during a wave of popular mobilization to promote democracy, a group of several hundred women began a hunger strike in downtown Nairobi. Led by the human rights activist Wangari Maathai and other prominent female leaders, the women were protesting the detention of 52 political prisoners (Toronto Star, March 4, 1992). Many of the prisoners had been among the more than 600 university students who had been incarcerated as part of the crackdown that followed the failed coup against President Moi in 1982. After five days of protest, which generated significant international media attention, riot police was ordered to break up and put an end to the hunger strike. With little respect for the safety of the protesters teargas was fired into the crowd, then police began beating the women with service batons knocking three of them unconscious including Maathai (New York Times, March 4, 1992). In response to the brutality some women started to strip naked and exposed their genitals. This ritual act, known as Guturama, drew inspiration from a Kenyan myth and had been used as a form of protest during the 1922 Harry Thuku uprising and in the 1956-63 Mau Mau Rebellion. According to the myth, this ritual would bring down a curse upon the abuser. The Guturama was, therefore, also known as the curse of the naked old woman (Katherine Fallon 2007; Turner and Brownhill 2004; Rosberg and Nottingham 1966). The following day, when photos of stripping old women hit the front page of all the major newspapers, riots broke out in many parts of Nairobi (Hagerud 1995).

Example no.2: On 9 August 2005, the Syrian artist Hala Faisal stripped naked in Washington Square Park in New York City to protest the Iraqi war and the occupation of Palestine. With the words Stop The War painted in red on her back, her legs, and across her breasts, she managed to step into the park's fountain before she was arrested by the police. When news of the nude protest broke on the Dubai-based AlArabiya News

Network, it was condemned across the Arab World. Many commentators expressed their anger and disgust and accused Faisal of having brought shame on Arabs and Muslims. Even the more sympathetic reporters felt that she could have found a different way to express her grievances. A few observers “complimented the purity of her body in reflecting the naked truth” about Iraq and Palestine but they “all agreed that she could not do what she did if she was in an Arab or Muslim country” (Eljundi, 24 August 2005).

If we contrast the two examples through a Durkheimian lens, the Kenyan example illustrates how the violation of the taboo of public nudity, by tapping in the ritual of the Gukurama, could harness emotional energy for mobilization of a massive scale. The same act by Hala Faisal’s led to condemnation across the Arab world. With no cultural practices to transform her taboo-breaking behavior into an act of ritual, her protest was seen as nothing but a violation of a taboo, with the social stigma that follows from such a violation.

Dear reader,

The two examples set up a discussion of bodies, taboos, and social control that draws from Durkheim and Mary Douglas. The rest of this section is, at this point, unfortunately still too fragmented to be included here.

### **The Arab Spring and the Ambiguity of Self-Immolation in the MENA Region**

The wave of self-immolations that occurred during the Arab Spring constitutes a unique opportunity to study how a taboo-breaking form of protest is introduced into a region and how it becomes modular. According to a study by Biggs covering the period 1963 to 2002, English-language newspapers reported 533 incidents of self-immolation, none of which occurred in Northern Africa or the Middle East (2005). Self-immolation had been performed with some frequency by women in Afghanistan as a means to escape social repression or marital abuse but these were instances of personal despair or grievances against individuals and not explicit claims made against the state. So when Muhammad Bouazizi, on 17 December 2010 doused himself with gasoline and set himself on fire in front of a government building the Tunisian city of Sidi Bouzid after police had confiscated and destroyed his unlicensed fruit and vegetable cart, he was by all accounts introducing a new form of protest into the region.

Despite the unfamiliarity of the repertoire, it quickly spread across the region. Yacoub Ould Dahoud self-immolated in front of a government building in Nouakchott, Mauritania. His final message on Facebook roughly translates to: “My life is so cheap to sacrifice for justice to prevail, in for democracy to be real in my country. If I fail, youth leaders will succeed in taking the lead behind me”. In Egypt, a man set himself on fire in front of the Parliament building in Cairo after shouting “Security service, my rights are lost in this country”. Another Egyptian, a 48-year-old restaurant owner set himself on fire in front of the Parliament to protest his inability to purchase subsidized bread. In Algeria, where Bouazizi’s death had a strong resonance, there may have been as many as 60

attempts of self-immolation (Mena Associates 2011), the 26-year old Mohamed Aouichia set himself on fire after failing to persuade local officials to place him on the social housing list. Another man, Mohsen Bouterfif, also set himself on fire in front of the town hall during a protest over housing and employment issues.

Taken together there were at least 30 officially reported cases of people setting themselves on fire in Algeria, Egypt, Mauritania, Morocco, Saudi Arabia, Jordan, Tunisia, Yemen, and Iraq. As the phenomenon of self-immolation spread, it sparked a debate between Islamic legal scholars and political activists. Cairo's Al-Azhar University, the seat of religious learning in the Sunni Muslim world, issued a statement on January 18, 2011 saying that sharia prohibits suicide as a form of protest. Egypt's Religious Endowments Ministry also instructed the imams of all mosques across the country to warn about the prohibition of suicide in Islam in their Friday sermons. Not all religious scholars were willing to condemn self-immolation. Sheik Yousuf Al-Qaradhawi, a celebrity cleric and commentator on the Al-Jazeera "Shariah and Life" program, called Bouazizi a victim of Tunisia's repressive rule. "This young man and others like him acted under mitigating circumstances," Al-Qaradhawi said and continued, "These [rulers] have brought the people to a state of psychological crisis. As I see it, he was not free when he made his decision. He was seething from within". Al-Qaradhawi was challenged by another Islamic scholar, Abd Al-Fattah Idris, who said no one had forced Bouazizi to commit suicide. "The fact that he chose to take his life in such a manner means that he wasn't deprived of his free will" (Rosenberg, 25 January 2011). The issue of free will is central to the legitimacy of suicide in Islam. Suicide is "intimately connected with sin because [Allah] denies the individual the right to terminate his own earthly identity. In the matter of his/her life, the individual creature has no sovereignty. Suicide is a sin because it is a unique act of freedom, a right that neither the religious authorities nor the nation state allow" (Lester 2006). It is believed that those who disobey the will of Allah will be banished to hell, which is made of fire. "Indeed, whoever (intentionally) kill himself, then certainly he will be punished in the Fire of Hell, wherein he shall dwell forever (Hadiths: Bukhari #5778 and Muslim #109 and 110).

While Islamic scholars were debating the sinfulness of self-immolation, protesters were seeking to find support for this repertoire of contention in existing cultural practices and social norms. Bouazizi's response to his encounter with the police clearly resonated deeply with people's feelings against the authoritarian regime but he had broken a social taboo by violating the religious proscription against suicide and, like Hala Faisahl, he could easily have suffered socially stigmatization. To overcome this risk, protesters sought to frame Bouazizi's self-immolation as an act of martyrdom undertaken for the sake of the collective good. One protester, for example, said that "[Bouaziz] sacrificed himself for his right and the rights of other". Another protesters, referring to Bouazizi, said that, "... as a martyr he set free the whole country".

There were several problems involved in creating the image of Bouazizi as a martyr. For one, although he had set himself on fire in front of a government building he had made no claims or expressed any political views in the way that later self-immolators would justify their protest. To cast Bouazizi's actions as politically motivated, protesters

therefore had to tie his self-immolation to the story of how he had been humiliated by the police, even a female police officer, on the very same day that he set himself on fire. By portraying the self-immolation as a reaction to police repression, protesters could frame his suicide as an act of political struggle and thereby an act of martyrdom. This made Bouazizi's self-immolation socially acceptable, even heroic.

Aside from framing the self-immolation as a response to police repression, there seem to have been two reasons why protesters could successfully cast Bouazizi's action in the light of martyrdom. One was the rather fluid concept of martyrdom within Islam, the other was the existence of the cultural practices of suicide bombing. With respect to the definition of martyrdom, one of the difficulties of studying martyrdom in Islam is that, "there is no agreement on when the holy Quran actually uses the term martyr. This is because the word for witness and martyr both come from the Arabic root sha-ha-da and the actual word, shu-ha-da, means both witness and martyr, depending on the context" (Kafeyan 2010). At one point, martyrdom could only be attained during war but between the 15<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> centuries the qualifications began to change in a way that opened the door to self-immolation. In his book *The Gates of Happiness Concerning the Circumstances of Martyrdom*, Jalal al-Din al-Suyuti lists "one who dies in a fire" as one of the seven categories of martyrdom. Jaffur Shureef, in his 1832 book, *Qanoon-E-Islam* has a list of 20 categories, the 16<sup>th</sup> of which is "if burnt to death". Thus by the 19<sup>th</sup> century it was "obvious that the Muslim concept of martyrdom had strayed significantly from the original teachings of the Messenger of Allah, and was ripe for a reinterpretation and revival (Kafeyan 2010). It was, however, only in the 1960s and 1970s that Islamic law and theology was reinterpreted in such a way that performers of suicide terrorist acts could be considered martyrs.

Many suicide terrorists reject the notion that their actions should be labeled 'suicide' stressing instead that it is more properly considered *ishtish'had* or martyrdom. The act of martyrdom, as defined by Silke (2006) involves 'defending one's homeland by inflicting losses upon the enemy, the aggressor, and killing him. The person doing this act makes sure that he is going to die'. In order to kill the enemy, suicide martyrdom has usually involved blowing yourself. From its origin as a modern form of political protest the suicide bombing have been highly ritualized (More on the ritual of suicide bombing).

## **Conclusion**

Dear Reader,

I am afraid that this paper still has some distance to go in terms of analysis and structure. Your comments on the above written are highly appreciated.

Best,  
Jens