



 Scheduled maintenance: Wednesday 25th January 23:00 – Thursday 26th January 03:00, GMT. Taylor & Francis Online will be unavailable during this period.

Journal

Politics, Groups, and Identities >

Latest Articles



Full access

0 | 0 | 0
Views | CrossRef citations | Altmetric

RESEARCH ARTICLE

Naked transgressions: gendered symbolism in Ugandan land protests

Florence Ebila & Aili Mari Tripp 

Pages 1-21 | Received 06 May 2016, Accepted 12 Dec 2016, Published online: 24 Jan 2017

 Download citation  <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/21565503.2016.1273122>  Crossmark

Abstract

Studies of women's protest have adopted various social movement approaches that look at the mobilization of resources, the facilitating and constraining role of opportunity structures, and questions of framing and culture. This study looks at the role of symbolic resonance, a theme which is mostly absent from both feminist scholarship on women's movements, but also from social movement theory. This paper explores the symbolic meanings behind the public displays of the female naked body in the face of repressive authority in contemporary protest movements for peace, human rights and democracy in Africa, with a focus on the 2015 protests in Amuru District in Northern Uganda.

KEYWORDS: Gender, women, Uganda, Africa, protest, symbolism, motherhood

I told them to leave us on our land but they were adamant and refused. I was overcome by anger and took off my clothes. I told them the first time you came, you assaulted my child, you undressed others and blindfolded them, you wanted to shoot them while they were naked ... So now I am taking off my clothes so that you can shoot and kill me while I am naked. (Anek Karmella, Akaa, Uganda)

Studies of women's protest have adopted various social movement approaches that look at the mobilization of resources, the facilitating and constraining role of opportunity structures, and questions of framing and culture. This study looks at the role of symbolic resonance, a theme which is mostly absent from both feminist scholarship on women's movements, but also from social movement theory. This paper explores the symbolic meanings behind the public displays of the female naked body in the face of repressive authority in contemporary protest movements for peace, human rights and democracy in Africa, with a focus on the 2015 protests in Amuru District in Northern Uganda. It

shows how the body symbolism of motherhood was successfully used as a resource for collective struggle to protect land rights, with broader implications for other African contexts, where female nakedness in protest is relatively common

across Africa south of the Sahara.

In 2012 soldiers, police and the Uganda Wildlife Authority guards had evicted 6000 people from their homes in Apaa. The land had been sold to a South African investor who intended to turn the area into wildlife hunting grounds. When another team of surveyors appeared in 2015, local residents demonstrated, resulting in the injury of 82 demonstrators (Langol [2015](#)). Then on 17 April 2015, Acholi women from Apaa in Amuru District, in northern Uganda launched another protest, undressing before two government ministers who had come to try to pacify the population and assure them that no one was to be displaced from their land. The women, some stark naked, others baring their breasts, wept and threw themselves on the ground, revealing their utter contempt, frustration and anger against the Uganda government's orchestrated evictions of families in Apaa. As the women engaged the government officials naked, other community members, including men, burst into a chorus of wailing, drawing on funereal tropes. Thus, both genders contravened culturally sanctioned gender roles, norms and expectations in their fight against a common enemy. ¹

Daudi Migereko, the Minister of Lands, broke down and was gushing tears, while the late Internal Affairs Minister Gen. Aronda Nyakairima appeared unshaken and stood still, looking in different directions to avoid eye contact with the naked women. He later announced that they had canceled the erection of the boundary mark stones and the demarcation exercise was, in fact, suspended. Later in January 2016 members of parliament Gilbert Olanya (Kilak County), and women's representative Lucy Akello went on their knees at a community event and Major General Julius Oketta (army representative to parliament) apologized. They said they regretted the evictions and said they must never occur again. However, not all were convinced that the problem was over and residents remained justifiably cautious about whether to trust these promises (Owich [2016](#)).

The naked protests that took place in Apaa were as much symbolic as they were political, drawing on culturally resonant understandings of motherhood. Nakedness in Acholi culture is related to shame, but it has been one of the traditional means that Acholi women and men have used to express their anger. In our case study it is adopted as a political weapon women have used to express their deep seated anger against the government of Uganda for what it did to their sons and was now doing to the broader community. The female body, or more specifically the body of the mother, now stands at the center of political contestation over land. Rather than being a symbol of passivity and vulnerability, as some have portrayed motherhood in other parts of the world, the woman in this context is powerful and agentic because of her symbolic role as a mother and the vehemence of the mother's naked curse. Because the female is symbolically associated with the land, which receives the seed necessary for reproduction, protest by women around land rights is seen as all the more powerful. The paper points to the importance of understanding this women's protest not only in its literal dimension of a protest by women against political and economic marginalization and land grabbing, but it also speaks to the need to look at the deeper symbolic uses of the mother archetype that cannot be reduced to simply mothers protesting in the more literal sense that it is understood in most of the literature.

Women have used nakedness as a form of protest historically up to this day and they continue to do so worldwide, perhaps most famously in recent years by the Ukrainian organization FEMEN. One of the earliest well-documented accounts of such protest was that of Lady Godiva of Coventry in England, who loosened her hair and rode naked on a horse through the town of Coventry to free the city of servitude and taxation from her husband Earl Leofric on behalf of the Danish king in the mid-eleventh century (Davidson [1969](#)). In Africa, these forms of protest go back to pre-colonial times and were marshaled in the struggle against colonialism in countries as diverse as Zambia (Geisler [2004](#)), Guinea, (Schmidt [2005](#)), Nigeria (Eames [1992](#)) and Cameroon (Diduk [1989](#); Terretta [2007](#)). Some of these protests have continued to this day in new contexts, from the democracy and human rights movement in Kenya in the 1990s (Maathai [2007](#); Tibbetts [1994](#)), to protests around land rights among the Maasai in Tanzania, demonstrations against

environmental degradation caused by oil companies in the Delta Region of Nigeria in the early 2000s (Anugwom and Anugwom 2009; Ikelegbe 2005; Laine 2015; Sokari 2009; Turner and Brownhill 2002), protests against housing evictions in South Africa in the 1990s, and struggles of Liberia's peace movement in the early 2000s (Gbowee and Lynn Mithers 2011).

Novelist Nuruddin Farah (1996) describes such a protest by women in the coastal city of Kismayo two years before Somalia collapsed into civil war. His account is eerily evocative of the Apaa protest:

A few dozen women, defying the conviction that enjoins female sartorial modesty, bared their breasts in public in front of a crowd of men. Fists raised, voices harsh, they shouted "Rise, Rise!" challenging the men to action, reproaching them for their failure to confront the excesses of the dictatorship. By challenging the men in this manner, the women implied that they would not from then on defer to them as husbands, fathers, or figures of authority. There was a sense of public unease in Kismayo after this event, the haruspices interpreting the women's action as a transgression, a sign of worse things to come, a countdown to the total collapse of a centuries-old status quo. These harbingers of folly spoke of women preparing to take over the opposition, of the spread of AIDS, of families fragmenting. At stake was Somali culture itself, the death of which was now thought to be imminent. The discord at the hearth was seen as symbolic of discord at the national level. At the height of an autocrat's rule, especially towards the end of his reign, such people argued, the difference between the sexes is authority. Men become women, women men, the terms defining either rendered provisional. Thus the women gave politics a more intimate profile, bringing to the fore questions about the national crisis. It was the women, ironically, who took politics, confined by dictatorship to the privacy of the home, back into the public domain. (18)

Such naked protests have been used in other parts of the world, but with less frequency than one finds in parts of Africa today. In Imphal, Manipur in northeast India, in 2004 a group of Meitei women staged a naked demonstration, protesting the torture, rape and murder of Thangjam Manorama, who had been in the custody of the Indian Army Assam Rifles Battalion. Although this form of protest is at odds with everyday norms of female modesty, it is rooted in a coherent repertoire of representation regarding women's nakedness found in theatre and in protest (Misri 2011). And although such naked protests have varied cultural meanings and resonance in different parts of the world, in general women have used such acts as a vehement curse or expression of revulsion against authorities and their actions, often as a last recourse. While we do not want to claim that the gender norms, values and expectations of Acholi or Ugandan women are the same for all African women, in general, one finds that norms regarding nakedness in Africa reflect a view that women's bodies are respected and their private parts are expected to be covered from the public gaze most of the time unless they are nursing or unless there is a deliberate ritual or ceremony that calls for removal of one's clothing. For example, among the neighboring Langi people, before Christianity took root, the clan held a ceremony where the newly married bride was stripped naked and rituals were performed in order to welcome her into her marital home. This ritual had a deeper liminal meaning of symbolic rebirth, ritually transforming a girl into a woman, of welcoming her into the husband's clan by stripping her of her natal clan identity, and of ensuring her fertility. Many such practices have fallen by the wayside, but the norm of modesty for women remains.

This paper explores the gendered nature of the protests as a product of marginalization of the poor and an effort to reclaim power. While it situates the study in the context of Uganda, it addresses broader questions about how and why women resort to nakedness in protest more generally. We begin with a discussion of the symbolic protest in the literature and the perceived limits of such forms of protest. We discuss the implications of the gendered symbolism of this form of social protest and what it means for women's mobilization more generally. We contextualize the event by

showing how the women and men from Apaa used their bodies as symbolic tools of protest and continue with a discussion about the meaning of the body symbolism in this context. This paper builds on several literatures, which are brought together in exploring the relationship between the body and resistance. It draws on an interest in a part of the social movement literature on the use of political symbols in protest, but also on the anthropological insights of the relationship between the body and society, and finally, on the feminist literature on the social and cultural construction and meaning of the body.

The paper asks why did the women of Apaa resort to stripping naked before the government officials? What was the cultural and political imaginary from which this stripping emerged? How did the Acholi and the broader Ugandan citizenry interpret this transgression of the private into the public sphere? Did it resonate and how successful were these kinds of protests in advancing the cause of the women and the community of Apaa?

Social movements and symbolic protest

Some of the earliest work on social movements looked at the relationship between emotion and protest. For example, Gustave Le Bon's 1895 work on *The Crowd: A Study of the Popular Mind* argued that people fell into a near hypnotic state if they found themselves in a crowd, which could be characterized by "impulsiveness, irritability, incapacity to reason" among other states (cited in van Ginneken [2019](#)). In the 1960s and 1970s sociologists and political scientists explained revolt by focusing on gaps between expectations and gratification and strains on the system and rapid socio-economic change led to "systemic frustration," which in turn brought about political violence (Feierabend and Feierabend [1972](#)).

The literature on revolution that emerged partly in response to some of these studies, focused instead on states and structural change. Meanwhile, the social movement theories that replaced these earlier approaches in the global north veered in a completely different direction, focusing on theories of resource mobilization (including material, organizational and personnel resources), changes in political opportunity structures (such as elite configurations or alliances, state capacity, economic conditions), and frames or the extent to which social movement demands resonate with the public, media, elites and others.

More recently, a fourth area of concern, especially among those working on new social movements, has been a return to the role of emotions, moral protest and changing consciousness in the formation of social movements. James Jasper looked at post citizenship movements that included movements around animal rights, the environment, nuclear energy, peace, life style protections and alternative healing. As Polletta and Jasper ([2001](#)) argue, collective identity is a person's cognitive, moral and emotional connection with the community, or institution. It is a perception of a shared status formulation. A collective identity can be expressed through "names, narratives, symbols, virtual styles, rituals, clothing and so on" (Polletta and Jasper [2001](#), 285). Their interest is primarily in what collective identity is and how collective identities matter to social movements. Polletta and Jasper are interested in the interplay between individual and collective identity and they argue that collective identities are not the aggregate of individual identities. As useful as we find this approach, it is missing the symbolic view of the collective as a reflection of the self (in our case, represented as the body) and vice versa.

In fact, most theories of social movements and social protest do not look at symbolic action, mainly because the theories have been developed in the global north, where the symbolic element of protest has not been as pronounced or appreciated. This paper is interested not so much in the question of collective identity as it is in how people mobilize and draw on preexisting symbolic systems to give meaning to their protest. In that sense we agree with James Jasper that

protest is a place where symbols are revived and reenacted, giving meaning to rights that have been violated, resources that have been misappropriated, and dignity that has been trampled on.

Political symbols

The literature on political symbols has been influenced by anthropologists like Clifford Geertz, who argued that political symbols can serve as an expression of solidarity and common feelings of identification. This could be with a particular event like a ceremony commemorating the death of a leader; or raising awareness around a particular issue (e.g., rubber bracelets for AIDS or cancer awareness); or it can mark a nationalistic identity (e.g., independence day celebration), or it can provide a cognitive roadmap or orientation with which to make sense of the world (Geertz [1973](#)).

Symbols can legitimize the distribution of power. Rituals like elections, especially in authoritarian countries, can give the impression that those in power have legitimate claims to power. Thus symbols and their enactment can also be a means of domination and creating further divisions in society (Lukes [1975](#)).

Some have seen symbols as expressions of the irrational workings of the mind and as disguised representations of the

[Full Article](#) [Figures & data](#) [References](#) [Citations](#) [Metrics](#) [Reprints & Permissions](#) [PDF](#)

desire of the unconscious. Similarly, political symbols can be a release for a social and psychic anxiety. Klatch ([1988](#)) gives the example of Martin Luther King as a symbolic leader as evoking hope and confidence for changing the status quo.

Harold Lasswell and Murray Edelman saw symbols as a way through which political elites defend their own interests and a way for the mass public to release anxiety. Symbols can reassure people and thus discourage resistance (Klatch [1988](#)). They can also be way of unifying society and providing a way to mobilize people around a particular set of moral and psychological appeals. But they can also be used in divisive ways as the swastika was used by Nazis. For anthropologist Victor Turner ([1982](#)), symbols both reinforce structure but can also serve antistructural purposes and threaten social order by challenging the status quo.

Thus, symbols are seen as both giving meaning to politics, as an expression of political preferences, but also as a means of mobilizing interests. They are used by both the elite to maintain the status quo (Edelman [1967](#)), but also by marginalized people to change society (Kowalewski [1980](#)). They are not simply an ideational phenomenon and can represent real interests (Klatch [1988](#)).

Body symbolism

Ultimately we are interested in this paper in body symbolism in the context of protest. Here we draw on two strands of research on the body. Numerous authors from Bordo ([1993](#)) to Crawford ([1984](#)) have depicted the body as conveying core social values as they relate to beauty, weight, eating disorders and other such phenomena. Another body of literature looks at the way that the body is agentic in the social world and acts on the world or what is referred to in

the literature as “embodiment.” In the political context, the body is not only a symbolic field for reproducing dominant values but also “a site for resistance to and transformation of those systems of meaning” (Crawford [1984](#), 95).

In this paper we also draw on work by Oldfield, Salo, and Schlyter (2009) for whom the body politics is conceptualized from a sociological and political point of view to explain how women and men use their bodies as tools of resistance. To Oldfield, Salo and Schlyter, body politics represents the negotiation of power via the body whether directly or through representation. As they explain: "We conceptualise 'body politics' as the negotiation of power via the body; processes that operate sometimes directly (for instance, violently), but also processes that work at a symbolic and representational scale" (2009, 3). It is this latter symbolic aspect we are especially interested in, which in general terms is akin to Carl Jung's notion of "collective unconscious." Once one looks at the gendered dimensions of protest in its symbolic context, the importance of the protest is not simply about individual women and men or groups of women and men protesting injustice, but rather, it is about what they represent in a deeper sense of the collective psyche. This then is less about women as literal mothers to the exclusion of women who are not mothers, and more about the mother archetype and harnessing it to curse those who have stolen land from local residents. The literal sense in which many social scientists try to read these protests profoundly misses their social significance, which is a form of communication at a symbolic level.

In this article

[Full Article](#) [Figures & data](#) [References](#) [Citations](#) [Metrics](#) [Reprints & Permissions](#) [PDF](#)

colonial project, but it also was a site of contestation as well. There is a large literature that looks at these contestations in Africa over clothing in colonial Lesotho (Comaroff and Comaroff 1992), forcible fattening of girls among Azawagh Arabs in Niger (Popenoe 2004), female genital mutilation in Sudan, Kenya and Egypt during colonialism, and other such contested practices.

We build on the early recognition by Mary Douglas in her book *Natural Symbols* (1970) of the symbolic significance of the body. She argued that bodily symbols reflected the social and replicated the social situation and that the body symbolizes the social world. Bodies can reveal core values of a society. In the case of the Amuru women, there are lines that can't be crossed and when they are crossed by the government, as in this case, the female body becomes one of the most powerful sources of resistance in society in general. The men play a role in weeping along with other women, but their role is secondary and it is a supporting role.

Judith Butler (1990) captures this dual role of body symbolism as both a reflection of society and its agency, arguing that various acts or series of repeated performances of gender create gender. Building on these ideas of Butler and Douglas, several scholars have looked at the connection between women's bodies and their position in society and the ways in which body based functions of women in bearing and nursing children are used to justify a social artifice which becomes the unchangeable order of things (Devisch 1985; Reischer and Koo 2004).

However, in our story, the same connections between women's bodies and their position in society become *the basis for resistance*, political action and agency in the public realm. Women's social roles are inscribed on their body, but not in a way that locks them into simply being birthing, nursing or nurturing mothers in a physical or literal sense. It is a source of authority that gives women, regardless of whether or not they have children, agency in the public realm. In using their bodies as a curse, women claim the ultimate moral authority that none can surpass in the societies in question. Everyone is born and everyone dies and so the symbolism of the woman's body as the creator of life, but also as one who can symbolically negate that life has a powerful resonance in Acholi and many other societies.

Limitations of naked protest

For all the power embedded in naked protest, there are also limits to this type of protest. Perhaps the most obvious failure is where there is a lack of resonance with the local culture. While nakedness is often associated with shame in most cultures, the subversive use of nakedness does not have the same resonance everywhere as means of shifting the shame from the protestor subject to the object of the protest. This was spectacularly evident in the 2013 FEMEN protests in Tunisia, which many Tunisian and other North African feminists eschewed, believing that this protest was culturally insensitive and inappropriate. Tunisian FEMEN activist Amina Sboui Tyler created a scandal in Tunisia when she posted topless pictures online in March 2013 in which she wrote “my body is my own and not your honour,” on herself. She was charged and then acquitted for contempt and defamation for these actions but was also charged and jailed for desecrating a cemetery. Two French and a German member of FEMEN protested her arrest in Tunisia by exposing their breasts and were charged with public indecency and eventually released. FEMEN is a movement started in Ukraine and is based in Paris with the goal of protesting patriarchy using breasts as a weapon. Female nakedness is their symbolic response to the alienation of women from their bodies: As their website explains: “All functions of the female body are harshly controlled and regulated by patriarchy. Separated from the woman, her body is an object of monstrous

In this article

[Full Article](#) [Figures & data](#) [References](#) [Citations](#) [Metrics](#) [Reprints & Permissions](#) [PDF](#)

gauging the success of such protests.

Another consideration is how the protest is framed. Some of these protests are framed within what Iris Marion Young called the “logic of masculinist protection.” Misri recounts the protest of 22-year-old Pooja Chauhan in 2007 who walked in her underwear through the streets of Rajkot in India to protest emotional and physical abuse from her husband and in-laws over the payment of dowry by her family and her inability to produce a male child, as well as the lack of police response to her complaints. Out of desperation she launched her protest with a bunch of bangles and a red rose in one hand, and a baseball bat in the other. The baseball bat signified her need to take matters into her own hands and the bangles signified emasculation, that is, the failure of men to protect her as proof of their lack of manliness. The danger here, as Misri argues, is that such a protest can reinforce a form of idealized gender norms in which men are the protectors and women are vulnerable and in need of protection.

Judith Butler raises yet a third limitation, which has to do with the appropriation of the language and symbols of oppression by those who are oppressed by them. She refers to the term “queer” that has been transformed from a term that is a demeaning insult to one that is a positive self-affirmation. Naked protest might also fall into this same category of having the same kind of subversive effect, although one might argue that the female naked body does not categorically signify oppression in the same way that the term “queer” has signified. But Butler does raise an important question about the limits of such protest using these symbols and at what point do they resignify their opposite meaning, which is probably what happened with the FEMEN protests in Tunisia (Butler [1993](#)).

Finally, a fourth limitation may be the focus on women as mothers. In the naked protests, but also in other protests, women take what is private about motherhood and place it in the public realm. Taylor ([1994](#)) shows this in her analysis of the Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo, who protested the disappearance of their children by the Argentinian junta starting in 1977 up to 2006. The women protestors redefined motherhood, the family and home in a patriarchal society, where the public roles of women were extremely limited and were reduced to the prostitute or madwoman and even nonmothers or antimothers. The mother in Argentinian society was one who stayed home with the children and was invisible. They modeled themselves on the Virgin Mary who transcended the public-private divide and marched as if they

were in a religious procession with their heads covered and eyes looking upward, highlighting the acceptable feminine qualities of self-sacrifice, suffering and even irrationality as they demanded the return of their dead children. They took the symbols of the private realm and of childhood innocence and motherhood, (e.g., their white scarves, the baby shawl, the baby toy) and placed them in the public sphere of the repressive state, affirming life over death. One of their leaders, Hebé de Bonafini, even wore her bedroom slippers in demonstrations.

But some argue that this affirmed their passivity and powerlessness. Judith Butler would see this use of motherhood as separating the person I have been with the one who is performing motherhood, affirming the impossibility of stretching the role of motherhood, which is embedded with patriarchy (Butler 1993). However, Diana Taylor (Taylor 1994) argues that the Mothers of Plaza de Mayo were, in fact, able to successfully redefine and politicize motherhood and were successful in influencing the way women were perceived as political actors in years to come. This was the precursor to many changes on the legislative front for women.

It seems that many of the critiques of the use of the motherhood trope come out of a particularly Western understanding of motherhood that sees only its limitations and sees it only as a source of weakness and vulnerability. Not all cultures

In this article

[Full Article](#) [Figures & data](#) [References](#) [Citations](#) [Metrics](#) [Reprints & Permissions](#) [PDF](#)

showing that women should be seen as more than mothers and wives. Moreover, in societies where women's roles are more limited, women out of necessity must find ways of expressing opposition within culturally comprehensible means. Thus, in the context of the Amuru protests, the form they took was extremely powerful.

In the Amuru case, women saw themselves as protesting the government officials, soldiers and others whom Apaa residents believed were behind the grabbing of their land. But at the same time, it was a very powerful collective appeal by women supported by men, who wailed as protest, but also because of men's perceived collective failure of leadership and inability to address the community concerns. The naked protest thus arises out of a patriarchal frame in which the roles ascribed to men are those of protector. This is clearly not a feminist inspired protest, but it is very much situated in the cultural and symbolic context of northern Uganda where these protests by women constitute a powerful form of collective political action.

These forms have become increasingly frequent in a country like Uganda. In 2014 naked women protested the government effort to grab their lands and give it to Soroti University for development.³ There have been numerous reports of women engaging in naked protests of the land taken over by Chinese investors in Bukedea district in May 2015. These were not just rural protests, they were also carried out in urban areas by educated women. When Ingrid Turinawe, a female opposition political leader was arrested and stripped in 2012, women activists held a protest in Kampala removing their shirts.⁴

The April 2015 protests in Amuru were not the first time the women in northern Uganda used such tactics. In 2012 women in Lakang Amuru sub-county stripped before former Amuru Resident District Commissioner Milton Odong and a group of people who were planning on establishing a sugarcane plantation on their land. Also during the civil war in northern Uganda (1987–2006) over 1500 Acholi women in neighboring Gulu protested the war by baring their breasts. They wore mourning dresses, tied scarves around their heads, and carried baskets as they wept, chanted funeral songs and blew funeral horns (Tripp 2000).

Methods

Florence Ebila carried out a total of 17 in-depth interviews in February 2016 in Apaa village, Labala parish in Amuru District, where the women had staged the naked protest in April 2015. She interviewed in the Acholi language five women who undressed during the protest and four women who protested while dressed. She also interviewed eight men who wailed during the protest. Two focus group discussions were held with 11 children; 6 girls and 5 boys, all of them pupils of Apaa primary school. The interviews were analyzed using a version of the five-step process developed by Grant McCracken for qualitative in-depth interviews (1998).

Four out of five of those who undressed were widows who had lost their husbands either to the Lord's Resistance Army (LRA) war or as a result of the war. Widowhood is very significant to the Acholi and also to other African cultures because widows symbolize people who are in need of help. The widowed bodies were considered much more sacred vehicles to deliver the naked curse because their bodies were considered to have been sanctified by suffering since they had already experienced death of a loved one. Their bodies were beyond shame since there would be no husband to complain about them having exposed what is considered private to their men only, that is, their naked bodies. In terms of seniority, these

In this article

[Full Article](#) [Figures & data](#) [References](#) [Citations](#) [Metrics](#) [Reprints & Permissions](#) [PDF](#)

In terms of age, two of the women interviewed were in their early thirties, three in their forties, one in her fifties, one in her sixties and the last one in her nineties. The oldest respondent, who was in her nineties, was a traditional healer who had invaluable insights into Acholi culture. In terms of responsibilities held in the community, two of the women were leaders within the community with one serving as Local Council one Chairperson in charge of women affairs and the other was the head teacher of Apaa Primary school, while one was a nurse. The fact that women of such high status in a rural community would have participated in such a protest, is quite remarkable, suggesting once again how the government actions had pushed women to the brink. One of the women had become very active in the politics of her village and was campaigning for the position of Chairperson of the Local Council 1 besides being the campaign agent of one of the candidates who stood for the position of Member of Parliament for Kilak North. The fifth and youngest among those who undressed, is a widowed businesswoman who sells produce and also sells food in a small eatery in Apaa trading center.

Out of the four women who were interviewed and who did not undress, two were present at the scene of the protest. One sat among the people who wailed and another was among those who were praying. The 90-year-old woman who was interviewed was not present at the scene of protest because she had gone to the hospital. The fourth woman, who had become disabled from the brutal beatings of the soldiers at earlier protests, did not go to the junction on that day.

According to her, those who were sickly like her had been advised the day before to remain at home.

All the nine men who were interviewed were at the scene of the protest. While six were among the group who wailed, one prayed and the other two combined their crying with providing leadership and guidance to the protestors. Three of the men were interviewed in their capacities as leaders within the Apaa community. These were politicians, including the then aspiring Member of Parliament Kilak North, Anthony Akol (who won the seat and is now representing Kilak North in Parliament), the Local Council 1 leader from Apaa, Abola Maryan, and Lony Francis Ojok, Local Council 3 candidate for

Pabbo. Two elders were interviewed who were authorities in Acholi oral history and culture. One represented the category of the religious leadership in Apaa.

The case of Apaa: origins of conflict

What then happened in Apaa to lead to the mass protests that included transgressing moralities and gendered expectations? What was the cultural and political imaginary from which the stripping emerged? In order to understand what happened in Apaa, there is a need to historicize the events that led to the protest to help contextualize the political contestations that have been at play in this land crisis of Apaa.

Most of the respondents trace the origin of the conflict between the government of Uganda and the people of Apaa to the year 2007 and the end of the more than 20-year-old war between the government and the LRA. When the people of Apaa returned to their homes from the camps where the government had resettled them temporarily to protect them from the LRA war, they were ordered to move away from Apaa because they were told it was a game reserve. The land was said to belong to the East Madi reserve and workers from Uganda Wildlife Authority were sent to Apaa to evict the villagers out of the place in 2010.

In this article

[Full Article](#)
[Figures & data](#)
[References](#)
[Citations](#)
[Metrics](#)
[Reprints & Permissions](#)
[PDF](#)

bordering two groups, the Madi and the Acholi. In 1926 there was a big conflict between the Madi and the Acholi and one local chief called Doli was killed during one of the fights. After he was killed in 1927, a meeting was held in Gondokoro in Nimule in present day South Sudan. That was the headquarters of the British where the local court could take place. That is where the conflict was resolved and thereafter the Acholi and Madi began to live in harmony. At that time the British decided that the boundary between the Madi and the Acholi should be the river between the two ethnic groups and it was named *Juka*, which in Acholi means "stop the conflict" and which the Madi apparently call *Zoka*. This is one version of the story as reported by the Acholi whom we interviewed for this research.

Some Acholi claim that in actual fact, their land extended beyond Juka into Tirikwa. Tirikwa is a corruption of two Acholi words *Teri Kwar*, which literally translates as "your red arse." In Acholi, reference to the opponent's private parts is meant to be an insult. The naming of the village Tirikwa, was to the Acholi therefore meant to be a permanent symbolic gesture of abuse to their neighbors, which ended when the British signed the 1927 agreement in Gondokoro that established the ethnic boundaries. According to Nancy Rydberg,⁵ such naming of places is not uncommon. The Acholi have similarly descriptive and sometimes offensive names for other places: *Olayilong Junction* is the junction where one urinates in his pants, *Lakwat Omee* is where the pastor got drunk and *Cet Kana* is donkey shit. The symbolic insult through reference to the private parts of the body became a permanent marker of place and memory for the Acholi. It was the place they had to give up for the sake of peace during the colonial era.

After independence from the British in 1962, the currently disputed land of Apaa was deserted because of an attack of tsetse flies that caused sleeping sickness among the occupants. It was in fact during the Idi Amin regime in the 1970s that the Acholi were encouraged by Amin to go back and settle on the disputed land. The people occupied the land until they moved to or were placed in government-run camps for the internally displaced around the mid-1990s because of the LRA war. The land boundary question resurfaced again after the Acholi went back to settle on the land after the end of the LRA war in 2007. So when officials from the Uganda Wildlife Authority came and ordered the residents of Apaa to move

away from the area because it was gazetted as a game reserve, Apaa residents disputed their claim and referred the rangers back to history: to the living waters of Iuka that had been used to separate the Acholi from the Madi.

It is unclear what designs the government had for the land because they were not transparent. It also appeared that the government and military were being used to advance private interests of various kinds. Beyond the swirl of rumors, observers who had investigated the situation carefully noted that there appeared to be foul play on the part of the government. Divinity Union Ltd., a company owned by the president's brother, Gen. Salim Saleh, produced a report in 1998/1999 that revealed that it was interested in transforming Acholiland into a breadbasket for Africa by uprooting the Acholi from land ownership and having them work as cheap labor on commercial farms under the Ministry of Defense. The plan was debated by the sixth parliament and was rejected by the Inter-faith groups and by the member of parliament from Gulu, Norbert Mao (also Democratic Party president). It later came to light that the report had deliberately hidden the fact that Amuru district is the location of large oil deposits. Meanwhile the government earmarked 40,000 hectares of Amuru land for the Madhvani sugar cane plantation while part of the land was to be used to create a wildlife preserve owned by a white South African businessman (Refugee Law Project [2012](#); Serwajja [2009](#)). When Apaa women decided to protest naked on 17 April 2015, it was a well-planned response that emanated from the deep rooted feeling of helplessness in the face of what appeared to be several land grabbing schemes carried out by the state. In pushing them off their land, the state was violently trampling their livelihood, their bodies and

In this article

[Full Article](#) [Figures & data](#) [References](#) [Citations](#) [Metrics](#) [Reprints & Permissions](#) [PDF](#)

the problem of ownership amicably. They continue to question and reject the use of stones to demarcate their land. They argue that no other district in Uganda has been demarcated using such stones and therefore there is no need for this to be done in Apaa. They have demand that the government stop relocating them to Adjumani since their ancestors have always lived in the area and had been part of Acholiland for generations. They have rejected the government's plan to evict them to bring "development" to the area and have asked whether wildlife is more important than people. They have demanded the right to have a say regarding their land.

Symbolism of naked protest by women

The symbolic act of undressing and mourning is interpreted in many different but related ways by the Apaa residents. There had been several protests prior to the one of 17 April 2015.

During such protests the women and men of Apaa had sat in the sun and protested peacefully against the impending eviction. According to respondents, the soldiers would come and burn their huts, beat them up and force them to move, but they refused to move. The particular action that sparked rage was when the soldiers came and arrested some young men from the community, undressed and blindfolded them, and tortured them naked. As one of the women protestors explained:

During this conflict over land, the army has been arresting the young men and taking them to Madi (Adjumani), and while on their way, they are tortured. They are made to lie on the ground and then the army men walk all over them, stepping on their bodies, right from the top of their heads to their feet. One of the young men's testicles was crushed like that and now he is unable to have children. Even the young men who were arrested recently when they came and fired tear gas at us, suffered the same torture. This had been a big problem. They have also mutilated the hands of two young men. They cut their hands off.

The above brutality angered the mothers, who regarded the state to be a monster that was out to destroy their children and emasculate their men. They asked the questions: "Why were our sons tortured naked?" "Is it the habit of government

to kill people while they are naked?" They explained to us that, "The naked torture was one of the motivations for the naked protest by the women of Apaa." This has parallels with the use of rape of men during the war as another form of emasculation. An ACORD report (B 2001) cited a medical superintendent at the Lacor hospital as saying that male rape was "Used by the government soldiers as a weapon. The anger goes very deep. It is the women who bring it up. Male rape is a major cause of people's anger at the army." The same ACORD report cites one of the workshop participants who talked about how "when a man is raped, it takes away his manhood and he fails to act to bring change." In the Apaa protest, this emasculation and feeling of powerlessness by the men caused a role reversal and women took up the "masculine" role of protecting the place after men had been diminished in this way. According to the women who protested naked, they wanted to make it easier for the soldiers by undressing ahead of time as they awaited their murders. The naked protesters were ready to die naked, while mocking the state.

However, the naked protest was also a tool used by the residents of Apaa to curse and wish their enemies the worst fate possible. According to one of the widows who protested naked, undressing is a curse that can lead to the death of the person with whom one is angry, especially if the one who is undressing is wronged and undresses deliberately to prove her point. In order to avert the ill-fated consequences of the curse, the one who did wrong has to sacrifice to the

In this article

[Full Article](#)
[Figures & data](#)
[References](#)
[Citations](#)
[Metrics](#)
[Reprints & Permissions](#)
[PDF](#)

men from their community, to tell them that they had failed in their roles as protectors of women and children. The second message was to curse the government officials, soldiers and all the other people whom Apaa residents suspected were behind the grabbing of their land.

To fully appreciate the meaning behind the use of nakedness as a form of protest, one has to refer back to Acholi culture and understand the meaning behind the act. What does protesting naked mean in Acholi culture? How has it been used in the past? According to the respondents who were interviewed for this research, when someone undresses it means they are very angry. It means that there has been great provocation from the other party and the one who undresses has borne it for too long and can no longer bear it. It also means that the one who undresses is innocent or has not done anything wrong to deserve such provocation. Because of the constant provocation, the one who undresses expresses their frustration and anger through the act of undressing. This is where the body becomes a tool of communication. It fulfills what Wendy Harcourt (B 2009) refers to in her analysis of body politics as counterculture by making visible what had not been visible in the relationship between the two factions. The body becomes an "important way of knowing," because it succeeds in defining the parameters of the disagreement.

Naked exposure was also used as a tool for cursing. It was one thing to undress and remain naked, but it was another to somersault and expose the birth canal in the process of protesting. It was also terrible for a woman to slap her vagina while cursing. A woman's nakedness symbolized a return to the origin, a rebirth. The body of a woman is considered sacred in Acholi culture and cannot be exposed in any way. It is believed that a woman's private parts symbolize the source of life. A child is expected to respect and revere this place which is responsible for its own creation and existence. One could not, out of respect for motherhood, see his or her mother's vagina because that would be the most abominable thing to do. If a mother got angry and undressed before her child, that was a curse that could kill the child or bring bad luck to the child forever.

Symbolically, the vagina has the power to produce life and to swallow it back if it is not happy. Conception is done during happy moments as part of the union between man and woman that produces life. Culturally, even the process of

conception among the Acholi involves sexual intercourse, which is supposed to be done in the dark when the man did not see the wife's nakedness. One of the male respondents explained the privacy surrounding sex in this manner:

Acholi culture is not like other cultures where people bare themselves often in public [*kimasulo*⁶]. Even speaking about sex openly is taboo. In fact, while growing up you do not know some of the names of your body parts, they are not even spoken out loud. So by the time that happens [referring to the naked protests] you must know that every solution has failed and if you relate it to what happened in this case, everything has failed, the leaders have failed, the elders have failed, the religious leaders tried and they all failed so that was the only option and that actually helped because from that point we started having dialogue to see how best this thing could be resolved.

In other words, the widowed protestors symbolically represented the source of life and their protest was a curse that threatened social death to the authorities. The nakedness symbolized the pain of birth a woman goes through before she produces a child. This was the pain that the women felt for their land as mothers of the community. According to another male respondent:

In this article

Full Article Figures & data References Citations Metrics Reprints & Permissions PDF

... when one is sorrowful, it should only be seen at a time of joy. We believe that that part of her body responds to her sorrow towards you to cause you to suffer a misfortune or some form of curse. To avert the curse, the offender must come and apologise and ask for the forgiveness of the aggrieved party.

To re-enact that pain of loss for the sake of their land, the naked protestors meant to show that their land was very important to them and any attempt to grab it brought to them such pain like that one which a woman experiences during child labor. This is implied in the rhetorical question that respondents asked over and again: "These people are chasing us away from our land; where do they expect us to go?" And that is a question that the government failed to answer. Faced with nakedness, the government officials folded their files, averted their eyes from the shame and left Apaa at least for a while.

The Apaa protests drew on traditional Acholi means of bodily expression for women. If a mother had a son or daughter who constantly offended her, she would try all means to solve all the problems with them. If, for example, the son was an alcoholic who came back home and abused his mother, she could decide to first take the case to the clan. If the son did not listen to the clan, then they would call his uncles and discuss the problem with them. If he still continued misbehaving and abusing the mother, then she could undress to express her deepest regret and frustration. It was only a mother's nakedness that could curse because mothers are very important in Acholi society. Mothers are the source of life and it is believed that they can either give life or take it away by virtue of the sacredness of their bodies.

There are, however, rules about who and when one can use nakedness as a means of protest. Undressing is regarded as the last option, when all other options of protest have failed. It is also considered a tactic for those who have no other recourse. In April 2016, Dr. Stella Nyanzi, a female researcher at Makerere Institute of Social Research at Makerere University, stripped to her underwear to protest against being locked out of her office in a dispute over her employment contract.⁷ Nyanzi's naked protest, unlike the Apaa protest, sparked a debate on radio, newspapers and social media especially around the question of agency. Many questioned whether a woman of her status did not have other avenues at her disposal, without having to resort to what others have labeled a "weapon of the weak." Nyanzi, who had her defenders, argued that she was indeed using a "weapon of the weak" because she felt that she was fighting a battle that was too big for her.

Nyanzi's actions revealed some of the boundaries of what many Ugandans consider acceptable when it comes to using this form of protest both in terms of who can legitimately use this mode of protest and in what context.

Other ways of protesting include using the breast as a means of cursing. A woman can lift up her naked breasts, even if she has not undressed completely and pronounce a curse upon a stubborn child saying, for example; "You who do not listen to me, did I not feed you from my breast? If not, you can continue to ignore my advice." Such a pronunciation brings a curse upon that child.

In order to avert the curse, sacrifices have to be made otherwise the child can become mad or "redundant." It is very difficult to undo a curse. A mother can also hit her vagina while cursing. Another way of cursing is when one raises one's foot and hits the sole of the foot on the ground while lamenting and saying: "It is these feet that took care of you. I dug and fed you. Why do you not listen when I talk? If you know that I did these things for you then you should listen." Such a pronouncement is a curse in itself to the child to whom it is targeted.

If a husband and a wife quarrel and disagree, the wife will first use other options to express her anger before using the

In this article

[Full Article](#) [Figures & data](#) [References](#) [Citations](#) [Metrics](#) [Reprints & Permissions](#) [PDF](#)

and does not change, the wife can deny him sex. This had treacherous consequences because ritual sacrifices have to be made before the two can engage in sexual relations together again. If they ignore the curse and go back to having sex without performing the required ritual, it is believed that one of them can die. Thus, the body has been used in several ways culturally as a means of protest, as a means of expressing happiness or anger depending on the circumstance among the Acholi and it provides the context for the protests we have witnessed in the region.

Symbolism of male wailing

As mentioned earlier, men wailed throughout the protest and, the tears symbolized helplessness in the face of an adversary. Traditionally, Acholi people were warriors who would fight to defend their honor against invasion. The Lamogi rebellion of 1911 took place within the current Amuru district. The Acholi took up arms and fought the British invaders, killing three British soldiers. Many Acholi fighters died of gas suffocation and currently the site of the war has been turned into a tourist site in memory of the gallant fighters who defended their land and the family honor with their blood. Defending the land against foreign invasion with their lives has historically therefore been a male responsibility. For Acholi men of Apaa to sit down and cry in 2015 instead of engaging in a fight to protect their land was indeed a demonstration of a high level of powerlessness not seen in recent memory. They felt that the circumstances had reduced them to being like children. There were therefore a series of responses to explain why men cried together with women and children in Apaa on that day.

Men cry in the most extreme circumstances. If you see a man cry, you know that he is deeply hurt by something. We do not have anything else. All we have is this land to take care of our children, to feed them, we farm and then send our children to school. If they remove us from here and take us to live in a camp like we used to live, we will not have any way to survive and that is what saddens us the most. How will we live?

Another man explained:

The men had to cry, because they were angry and sad but did not have any strength or ability to fight back. The situation called for them to do something obscene. Because if you see your wife helpless and undressing, you feel like you should really do something obscene. But we decided that people should not be violent. We cannot be violent. Imagine that day if some people tried to beat up a soldier or police officer and kill him, how many people would have lost their lives? We said people cannot see our mother's naked and we are just sitting here, so we cried.

A woman also explained:

The reason why men chose to protest by crying ... when you look at this land issue we are faced with, they [meaning government soldiers] have and rely on guns. We do not have guns. So as a man, what tools are you left with? Your tears, you have to cry like a woman. You do not otherwise have a way to fight against someone who has a gun. But when it is your land, your home, you must do something. You must put up a fight. So that even as a woman if you are chased off your land you know your husband struggled for you.

One man explained: "There was nothing I could do otherwise if it was not for the guns they were holding, we would fight

In this article

[Full Article](#) [Figures & data](#) [References](#) [Citations](#) [Metrics](#) [Reprints & Permissions](#) [PDF](#)

These are explanations we got from the residents of Akaa, which represent the community's general perception about the meaning associated with male tears as a sign of protest. Male tears symbolized helplessness and anger because their tormentors had weapons, which left them with no recourse. According to Patrick Otim⁸, male tears were also a reaction by men to the violation of their manhood by the state. The traditional role that men had in the society as protectors of families and communities had been subverted and there was nothing they could do about it except to cry.

Most respondents agreed that male nakedness did not bear a curse in the same way as it did for the women. A man can undress to express his anger but it will not carry a curse like the nakedness of a woman. According to one of our informants, in the past when men went hunting and encountered a fierce buffalo, they would take off their clothes and fight it while naked in order to enhance their power. In the Akaa protest, a man from Fuudyang was among those who undressed and protested naked. He removed his trousers and wore only a green T-shirt during the protest.

If we take the Fuudyang man's undressing and understand it in the context of the responses from the male audience who cried and also in the context of what one of the respondents said about how fighting a wild beast required undressing, the single male naked body during that protest could be interpreted to have represented a war cry. The soldiers and the government officials symbolized the fierce buffalo that had to be fought while naked. This was clearly a different signification from the women's naked protest. However, because the soldiers had guns, the fight between the Acholi men and the soldiers did not take place physically but rather was implied at the symbolic level. One of the respondents reasoned this way: "The way these people have been coming here is not the way you should approach civilians who do not have any weapons and have not done anything wrong. Even when Kony [the Acholi leader of the rebel LRA] was in the bush, they did not come at him with all their military might the way they are doing with us." The men were sending a signal that they were ready to fight to defend that which was theirs if worst came to worst.

During the war with the LRA, Sverker Finnström (2006) and Chris Dolan (2011) describe a prominent elder in Gulu as ritually displaying his penis in condemnation of the LRA rebels while his wife bared her breasts during the war in northern Uganda. The elder said "If these children originate from my penis, I curse them." According to p'Bitek (1971) the naked curse involving pointing one's private parts at someone is the gravest curse. It is as powerful as the blessing for war and cannot easily be retracted. The blessings and the curse are two sides of the same coin. The curse is as if to say,

why are you turning against your parents, who gave you life. Thus, according to Finnström, the reason this curse is considered so powerful is because it symbolically represents kinship and being a mother or father. Finnström and P'Bitek seem to imply therefore that even the naked male body could produce as much of a curse as the female body contrary to what the respondents interviewed in this study thought.

Conclusions

In this confrontation, the state became the aggressor, violating rather than defending the rights of citizens. Their guns become a symbol of power that was seen as emasculating the men by terrorizing and intimidating the citizenry. This resulted in both a physical confrontation between the community and the military, but also a symbolic one in which a reversal of traditional gender roles was used to express the strongest of curses and resistance on the state and military. Women defended their land through their bodies, while men defended it through tears. This is symbolic gender politics informing body politics, which are, as Schlyter puts it “real bodies of flesh and blood that experience hunger and cold,

In this article

[Full Article](#)
[Figures & data](#)
[References](#)
[Citations](#)
[Metrics](#)
[Reprints & Permissions](#)
[PDF](#)

confrontation by the masculinized nation state. The gun, the prime symbol of power, reduces the men to crying and women and children. The protest helps us better appreciate the traditional gender roles and expectations of Acholi men and women, but also to see that these roles are not static and neither are they dominated by discourses of inferiority and superiority attached to the female or male body. The symbolic aspect of the protest transcends such gendered expectations and allows for the types of “transgressions” witnessed in Amuru.

What then are we to make of these types of protests and how do they fit into the broader repertoire of women’s protest and goals of women’s empowerment? On the one hand, they appear to reinforce traditional gender norms and operate very much within the complementarity model of male and female spheres that is commonly found throughout Africa (Tripp [2015](#)). Traditionally in Acholi society, a woman was respected for being a mother and homemaker, a man was expected to provide for the family and protect the honor of his family and these were their respective sources of authority. The charge by the Apaa residents that the state has emasculated men and that women become agentic because the men have failed as protectors seems to reinforce existing gender relations and expectations, as Misri ([2011](#)) would argue.

On the other hand, the protest revealed how Acholi society was at the same time flexible in playing with, manipulating, changing and redefining gender roles and expectations through symbolic means in responding to a provocation. It reveals the ways in which people draw on the repertoire of protest tactics available to them. Apaa women’s nakedness, the men’s tears, and the children’s wails resulted in the state officials’ promise to desist from landgrabbing and it shows just how powerful and resonant such symbolic protests can be. The symbolic association of women with the land made their revolt all the more powerful. The reproductive connotation of motherhood became the basis and justification for political action rather than a symbol of passivity, as it is often regarded in Western societies. This is a dimension of protest that deserves greater scholarly recognition, not just in societies where people are limited in their means of protest by a lack of education, communication and other resources with which to engage the state, but also in post-industrialized societies, where social movements draw on symbols but do not always recognize the powerful role of this

dimension of protest. Such subversions and inversions of the social order are able to accomplish at a symbolic level what does not always seem possible in everyday life, but they point to the possibilities and to the capacity of society to create

new realities, roles and power relations between the genders.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

Notes

1 <http://www.ntv.co.ug/news/local/17/apr/2015/amuru-women-strip-ministers-protest-over-land-5564#sthash.cuM1O3Ub.dpbs> Amuru women strip before ministers in protest over land. NTV. April 17, 2015. Accessed March 25, 2016.

2 <http://femen.org/about-us/> Accessed March 23, 2016.

In this article

[Full Article](#) [Figures & data](#) [References](#) [Citations](#) [Metrics](#) [Reprints & Permissions](#) [PDF](#)

4 <http://www.burmeses.co.uk/uganda-women-protesters-strip-protest-in-iganga-lumwawe-552459>

5 Correspondence with authors by Nancy Rydberg, a doctoral student at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, March 24, 2016.

6 Kimansulo is a kind of nude dancing that has captivated some Ugandan night clubs where women and young girls strip and dance naked for payment. It is the equivalent of strip clubs in the Western world.

7 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CQ6cmz9Azlo>; <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xMjr6GIRznc>. Accessed 7 December 2016.

8 Correspondence between authors and Patrick Otim, 25 March 2016.



Information for

Authors

Editors

Librarians

Societies

Open access

Overview

Open journals

Open Select

Cogent OA

Help and info

Help

FAQs

Press releases

Contact us

Commercial services

Connect with Taylor & Francis



In this article

Full Article

Figures & data

References

Citations

Metrics

Reprints & Permissions

PDF



In this article

-  Full Article
-  Figures & data
-  References
-  Citations
-  Metrics
-  Reprints & Permissions
-  PDF



In this article

-  [Full Article](#)
-  [Figures & data](#)
-  [References](#)
-  [Citations](#)
-  [Metrics](#)
-  [Reprints & Permissions](#)
-  [PDF](#)



In this article

-  Full Article
-  Figures & data
-  References
-  Citations
-  Metrics
-  Reprints & Permissions
-  PDF



In this article

-  Full Article
-  Figures & data
-  References
-  Citations
-  Metrics
-  Reprints & Permissions
-  PDF



In this article



