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## **Women with shaved heads: Western Buddhist nuns and Haredi Jewish wives**

### **Polysemy, universalism and misinterpretations of hair symbolism in pluralistic societies**

But if a woman has long hair, it is a glory to her (St Paul in 1 Cor. 11:14).

#### **A beautiful woman is walking along the street**

I would be ready to bet that almost every reader, male or female, has just imagined her with long hair. And here comes the power, and the sociological interest of clichés. Clichés are not merely ‘vulgar’, and they are certainly not to be despised: on the contrary, they are very precious as stereotypes, which is to say, as archetypes, to identify the representations relative to a given cultural area: they give direct access to its symbols. And when it comes to hair, long hair seems to be a universal sign of femininity.<sup>1</sup> But femininity itself can be seen as the mask that sublimates and symbolises—just as it is hiding—its ends: the reproductive function of women. This is why a classical attractiveness criteria for a woman (breasts and hips) are linked to fertility. This process, from the social function to the concept of beauty, which is a mask for the message it conveys, can be summarized as follows:

Social message (fertility) → symbol (breasts) → sublimation of the symbol (aesthetic attractiveness)

Yet hair, along with nails, have a hybrid bodily status: a genuine part of one’s body, they nevertheless can be painlessly removed—and in the case of hair, completely so, as if it was an accessory, a natural ‘hat’. Then why this centrality

1 Apart from certain zones where hair can hardly grow, such as in Africa, and thus is not a beauty criterion.

of hair as bearer of an aesthetic message of femininity, that is to say a hidden advertisement for the reproductive feminine function, when it appears like a 'relative limb' that does not serve the reproductive function? I will argue here that the symbolic charge of hair is such that its status does not require the related function. Hair is in perspective a 'pure symbol', a symbol *per se*, the efficiency of which will be examined through the case study of the rite of female headshaving within two specific religious groups.

This argument will be developed through the gender comparison of the absence of hair: the cutting, or the complete removal of hair, seem to affect the message of femininity, whereas it does not affect that of masculinity. In contemporary Western societies, it has become common—if not fashionable—to see men with shaved heads. But the situation seems very different for women: a female shorn head seems to stick in the craw for most observers. The negative representations it provokes have evolved throughout the twentieth century: right after World War II, its main evocation was that of concentration camps and the punishment of the collaborators; around the 1980s it would evoke social rebellion, through the punk or skinhead movements. Nowadays the main image associated with a female shaved head is disease, especially cancer. This is not the case for men, who may shave their heads when they become naturally bald, so that this 'look' is completely normalized—if not fashionable when worn by movie or sports stars.

This article will focus on female hair, or rather the absence of hair: it will compare the symbols attached to shaved heads for Western Buddhist nuns and for Jewish married women from various *Haredi* or 'ultra-orthodox' groups,<sup>2</sup> and the (mainly negative) representations of these in the external, secular society. The idea for this comparison came from a fieldwork research I was undertaking about the 'Jewish-Buddhist' phenomenon: as I was interviewing Western nuns of Jewish origin, it appeared that their shaved heads had been very difficult to cope with for their families, to whom it was a reminder of the Holocaust. It immediately struck me how the same body treatment could

2 *Haredis* (from the word 'to tremble', referring to 'those who shake before God'), are a particularly strict trend within Judaism that started in the eighteenth century as a reaction to the modernist reform of Judaism. They define themselves in opposition to modernity and to the *goyim* (the non-Jews). Several *Haredi* groups have adopted the custom of having their married women's heads shaved: the Satmar sect, founded in the town of Satmar, Hungary, by Rabbi Teitlebaum, which has been mainly established around New York city since the end of World War II; and several groups founded by Rabbi Aharon Roth (also from the town of Satmar), such as the Toldot Aharon ('the descendents of Aharon'), the Toldot Avraham Yitzchak, or the Shomrei Emunim ('the keeper of the faith').

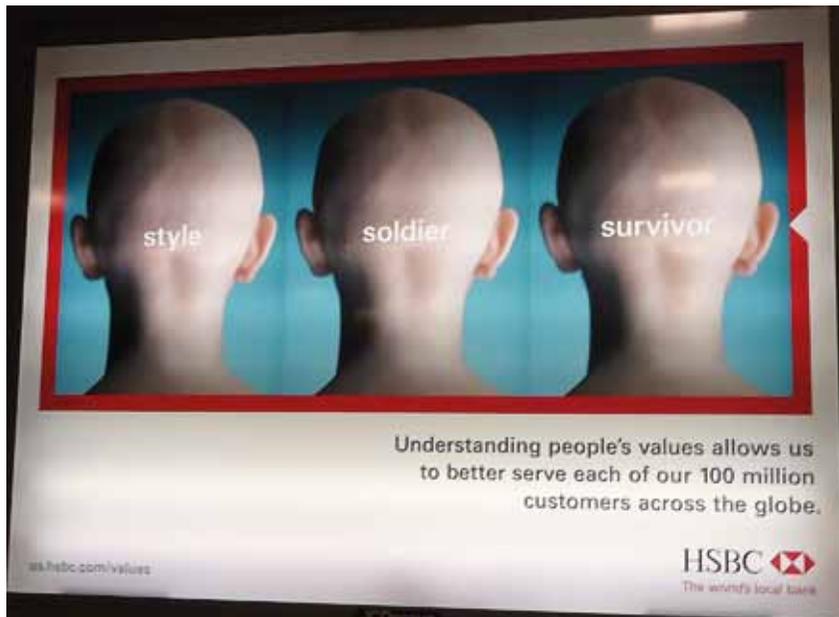
represent, on one side, bliss (for the Buddhist nun for whom it is a symbol of liberation and spiritual engagement), and on the other side, horror (for her family and sometimes, out of a Buddhist context, society). And in the case of those Jewish women, the polysemy of this body treatment is made even more complex by the fact that in their own tradition, some women shave their heads under the hair covering. So the same body treatment could be used to express celibacy for the Buddhist nun, or marriage for the Haredi, or ultra-orthodox woman. Therefore the meaning of head shaving seemed to be fluctuating and contextual: it could mean either religious commitment, or punishment, or disease. This relativity of body symbolism is illustrated through the advertising campaign of an international bank: it shows the three pictures of the back of a shaved head, with three possible interpretations: 'style', 'soldier', 'survivor'. And one cannot tell if the head is that of a man or a woman.

Two questions emerged: How extreme were the head shaving representations when it specifically came to women, if according to context it could mean 'glory' or 'shame'?<sup>3</sup> And considering the variety of (mis)representations of female shaved heads, did we inevitably have to come to the conclusion of a symbolic relativity and contextuality of this body treatment, or could there be an underlying, permanent meaning to it?

Over the past fifty years, anthropologists have been trying to identify the symbolism of hair, to find its definition and universal criteria: what did long, cut, or shaved hair stand for?

In his desire to distinguish the work of the anthropologist from that of the psychoanalyst, which he considered too intuitive to be relevant—even when based on anthropological evidence, Edmund Leach (1958) proposed to discern between public and private symbols (his discipline focusing only on the first).<sup>4</sup> Hence, against the theory of Charles Berg (1951) who assimilated hair to genital organs and their cutting to symbolic castration, he proposed, based on data taken from Hindu and Buddhist societies in India and Ceylon, a typology according to which it would refer not to sexual organs (which would belong to private symbolism), but to sexual activity (as a public message): the degree of sexual freedom would be function of the length of hair, so that:

- 3 To use the expression of Anthony Synnott in the title of his article, 'Shame and Glory' (1987), in reference to St Paul's saying quoted at the beginning of this article.
- 4 Yet intuition is the tool for interpretation. Putting that article in context, one may see it as an attempt to place anthropology on a 'scientific' ground, in order to guarantee its credibility.



An illustration of the polysemy of a shaved head through this advertisement for the HSBC bank.

- Long hair = unrestrained sexuality
- Short hair = restricted sexuality
- Shaved hair = celibacy

A decade later, Richard Hallpike (1969), using examples from the Bible and from contemporary Western society, made a point of demonstrating that this theory was irrelevant: indeed, monks were, unlike shaved soldiers, celibate. The alternative equation he suggested was therefore to leave aside the link between hair and sexuality, focusing instead on social control: the length of hair would be conversely proportional to the degree of integration in society, so that:

- Cut hair = social control
- Long hair = being outside society

But this theory leaves aside, as Hallpike writes: 'anchorites, witches, intellectuals, hippies and women', who 'all have long hair'. Yet he doesn't see common traits to explain that coincidence, if not that 'there is however one character-

istic which is often associated with being outside society. . . this is animality' (Hallpike 1969: 261.) This argument of seeing a common trace of animality in women, witches and intellectuals, doesn't seem like a very convincing argument.

Almost twenty years after those two typologies, Richard Synnott wrote an extensive review of hair treatment in contemporary Western societies. In such a pluralistic context, and with new options of border blurring (gender bending), or of expressions of social contestation (skinheads, punks), he considers the binary alternative proposed by the previous authors as not relevant anymore: to him, a polarization between cut and uncut associated with only one meaning was, in this new pluralistic context, to be replaced by a focus on deviance, since meaning could only come in context (Synnott 1987: 407). Yet he himself also proposes three stable binary propositions (p. 382):

- Opposite sexes have opposite hair.
- Head hair and body hair are opposite.
- Opposite ideologies have opposite hair.

But this last proposition doesn't seem convincing, since as Synnott pointed out himself, a soldier and a punk are both shaved of head, while they embody opposite ideologies (1987: 403).

In this article I would like to focus on the meaning of shaved heads for women. I contend that the symbol is gender differentiated: a shaved head is not necessarily a symbolic gender castration for a man, but it is for a woman.

Through the comparative case study of Western Buddhist nuns and Haredi Jewish wives within a larger secular society, I will focus on identifying this common meaning behind the apparently contrary symbolism of female head shaving according to the context, and on finding the criteria for its semantic variation. The first argument that I will be trying to develop is that symbols are not either exclusively universal (as univocal) nor exclusively polysemic (relative to the context), but that they are complex: they can be both.

My first argument is that behind the apparent polysemy of this body technology lies a common symbol: for all women, shaving the head means the loss of their femininity. My second argument is that there can be a split between femininity and reproduction, as is shown in the case of Haredi women: their shaved heads do not symbolize the amputation of their reproductive function, but of the femininity that, in less strictly religious societies, stands for the symbolic aesthetical advertisement for this final function. Cutting through the roundabout of attractiveness (and avoiding its social conflictual poten-

tial), the compulsory institution of marriage guarantees the social reproductive function of individuals while sparing the troubles of seduction. Moreover, this 'loss' of femininity may be positive if it is chosen—in such an instance it is not lost but given away, renounced—or negative, especially if undergone in contexts of war or disease.

The conclusions G. Obeyesekere draws from his study of the hair of mystic women in Sri Lanka are closer to this work. For him, a shorn head has three levels of meaning (1981: 34):

Primary psychological meaning = castration

Further cultural meaning = chastity

Extended personal message = renunciation

However, first of all, Obeyesekere does not draw conclusions from his fieldwork with women to build a separate gender theory of hair, as is the case here. One cannot build a general theory of hair applicable to both men and women, because the meanings are dramatically different for each of them. Also, where he sees castration, chastity or renunciation, depending on the level of the meaning: psychological, cultural or personal, I do not distinguish them. I argue, on the contrary, that even if there is such a thing as a personal interpretation of symbols, the symbol itself is a monolith: it is a public message borne by the individual. If it was to take on different meanings according to whether it would be placed on a psychological, cultural or personal level, it would lose its efficiency as a message. Or as a message, a symbol needs to be coherent, and transmitted with the same intention as it is received.

The argument I will try to develop in this article is that those three different levels of meaning that can coexist in a female shorn head: castration, celibacy or renunciation, are relative to the context and not to the personal or public degree of the symbol. And that the criterion is choice. Hence, for instance, the shaved head does symbolize celibacy and renunciation for the Buddhist nun, but not castration, as it is freely chosen for a greater liberation. The degree of choice, and therefore of possible castration symbolism, for Haredi women, is harder to determine, as the shaven head is a rule they have to abide by, as their birth determination and personal fate. Moreover, the difficulties that Buddhist nuns and Haredi women are facing are different: this body technique seems to place the Haredi women in a situation of cognitive dissonance, in between the the expectation of modesty and that of having to remain attractive to their husbands. Whereas for the Buddhist nun, the main challenge their embodied choice confronts them with, is external social misunderstanding.

Here lies the main intended contribution of this article: in pluralistic societies, when different meaning systems and therefore symbol definitions co-exist, misunderstandings can occur: hence a Buddhist nun may be seen as a patient undergoing chemotherapy, as it appears from many interviews (June 2010).<sup>5</sup>

Drawing, for the Buddhist part of the analysis, on interviews with Western Buddhist nuns (or former nuns) from several countries (France, the United States and Israel), and for the Haredi part,<sup>6</sup> on the very extensive fieldwork offered by Sima Zalberg (2007) in Jerusalem,<sup>7</sup> this article will try to explicate those issues. The use of tables will help the comparative work to be heuristic by enabling the reader to ‘visualize’ in a summarized way the key points of each issue.

### **Shaving heads: embodying religious commitment for Haredi women and Buddhist nuns**

The dualist principle that Émile Durkheim drew from religion to establish sociology, and that the anthropologists have been using in their definitions of hair symbolism, also appears as the stable criterion to define gender. Even the contestations of gender duality (through gay, transvestite and transsexual cultures) show, by the very fact of their claim of crossing borders, the structural power of the latter. Indeed, the ‘columns of opposites’ that Pierre Bourdieu (1980: 348–9) saw as the structuring principle of every cultural system (such as sacred/profane, pure/impure, hot/cold, dark/light etc.) still seem to work as a fundamental structuring pattern—even if they tend to be contested in secular and pluralist societies. And that pattern would be drawn from the ultimate pairing of the masculine/feminine. This is true especially for Judaism

- 5 In such a polysemic context, body symbolism, which was meant to stand in *lieu* of language (for instance, someone wearing a wedding ring does not need to say they are married), cannot avoid language anymore: the symbol does not ‘talk’ anymore; it has to be verbally explicated.
- 6 In her article (2007), Sima Zalberg equates the Todot Aharon and the Satmar Hassids. But there seems to be a confusion: as we saw in note 2, even if they both originate from the same town, the Satmar Hassids, who are now mainly in America, are an older and larger group; the Toldot Aharon, are a small group mainly established in the neighbourhood of Mea Shearim (the hundred doors) in Jerusalem, where Zalberg conducted her research.
- 7 I consider here the Israeli society as a Western society, because of the European origin of most of its population, and its cultural references, that are mainly Western.

and Hinduism, hence the importance of the purity laws (related to food, sexuality and women) in these religions (but not for Buddhism, which emerged as a reaction to this duality principle, the Buddha wanting to abolish all frontiers in a non dualist system). This explains why, as we shall see, religious Judaism enhances the gender separation, whereas Buddhism, at least in the physical appearance of its monks, abolishes it.

With feminist movements, women have been able to co-opt all men's garments: pants, shoes, short hair, and so forth. But it is not reciprocal for men, who cannot borrow bras or high heels without seriously transgressing their gender definition. Yet this conquest on the part of women has not made them less feminine. On the contrary, it has considerably extended the scope of their femininity. However, even in what I call a 'post feminist' context,<sup>8</sup> the definition seems to remain just that: a woman is a woman in the sense that she does not look like a man. A central attribute of her femininity is hair, the limit being not the length, but the presence or absence of hair: baldness embodies symbolic castration, not of genitals nor sexuality, but of femininity.

Hair technology being also central in the definition of a religious person, as opposed to a lay person (e.g. the turban for the Sikhs, the shaved head for the Buddhist monks and the tonsure for Christian monks, the beard for orthodox Jews and Muslims, the veil for Muslim, Hindu and Sikh women, and Christian nuns, the head covering for Jewish women), hair becomes a privileged means of examining how religious involvement can affect femininity, by opposing it.

### ***Hair defining women as opposed to men***

The first pairing in the 'theory of opposites' proposed by Anthony Synnott was that 'opposite sexes have opposite hair' (1987: 282). Even if this argument leaves aside some cultures such as Native Americans, Sikhs, Kanaks and others, one can say that the classical pattern is that:

Men = short hair / Women = long hair

Therefore, in the symbolic associations, as many researchers have pointed out (Clayson & Maughan 1986, Rich & Cash 1993, cited in Weitz 2001: 672):

8 This context is one in which not only the battle for equality seems to have been mainly won, but also where women seem to have been able to accumulate their own power and that of men, whereas men have only been able to borrow from the classical women's territory (mainly in the field of cosmetics and care) a very small part.

Short hair = masculinity / Long hair = femininity

But why such symbolic pairs? One could say that feminine attributes (such as breasts and a bottom) are 'full of matter', to compensate the absence of phallus—which, from a Freudian perspective is the essence of the definition of a woman. So the principle of fullness to make up for emptiness would explain the curves as an archetype of feminine seduction: the interplay between full and hollow. But another more simple explanation is that most of the time, theory comes from nature: as Synnott observed, the identification of women with their hair is due in large part to a biological fact: they simply do not naturally lose it. Hence, he stresses how the loss of hair due to illness can be corrosive to the sense of one's own femininity: 'When you lose your hair you feel like you have nothing to live for', said a patient undergoing chemotherapy (*New York Times* 18.9.1983, cited in Synnott 1987: 383).

The fact that long hair stands for the feminine gender is attested by some customs, in India and in China, of not cutting the hair of young boys, so that they will look like girls: then the demons of illness and death won't be tempted to take them, because 'girls have no worth'. In Orthodox Judaism, by contrast, this equivalence between long hair and gender can also be seen through the first haircutting ceremony for boys: the hair of infant boys is left untouched until the age of three, and then is ritualistically cut for the first time, as a rite of passage showing their entrance into the world of children, as the physical fusion with the mother comes to an end. For Yoram Bilu (2003, cited in Yafeh 2007), this haircut also symbolizes the separation with the feminine world through cutting long hair and designing a father-like hairstyle (with the sidelocks).

Table 1 illustrates what has been previously said, through showing the difference of hair fashions between men and women, according to whether they are religious or not, in order to see how those social statuses (gender being considered a social status) are being physically symbolized through hair. It appears from this table that men and women are canonically defined in opposition, even in a Western contemporary secular context, where borders can be blurred on both sides (men too can choose their hair style and wear cosmetics and more adjusted clothes). In those cultures, looks have become a matter of aesthetic choice more than conformity or rebellious claim (as it was for the punks or feminists of the 1970s–80s), and there is a much wider range of options for being feminine and masculine. This is why these options can be called post-militant as well as post-feminist individualistic strategies. But even if these self-definitions have been refined and have become more

	Hair in Buddhism		Hair in Judaism	
	Men	Women	Men	Women
Lay/secular	Head: short	Head: traditionally long	Head: both Archetype: short	Head: both Archetype: long
	Face: shaved		Face: both	
	Body: unshaved	Body: shaved	Body: both	Body: both
Monastic/ religious	Head: shaved	Head: shaved	Head: short	Head: short
	Face: shaved		Face: long	
	Body: unshaved	Body: unshaved	Body: unshaved	Body: unshaved

**Table 1. Gender comparison of hair fashion between secular and religious people.**

subjective, the ideal-typical image of a short-haired man and of a long-haired woman, defined as opposites, remains.

Interestingly, that state of duality between men and women according to the secular or religious spheres, is being reversed between Buddhism and Judaism. This can be summarized in Table 2: it appears that in traditional Buddhist societies, lay men and women look different, but become exactly 'similar' in appearance when entering Buddhist monasticism. While Jewish secular people can play with the codes and borrow those of the other gender, religion firmly sets those boundaries back in place. The gender opposition is therefore being enhanced in religious Judaism and annihilated in Buddhism. The reason for this in Judaism is the central command of reproduction in Judaism, since:

Opposition = complementarity = possibility for reproductive sexuality

Such a pattern of functional gender definition and role repartition is completely foreign to monastic Buddhism, which is built on a renunciation of worldly roles and therefore on celibacy.

After having compared the styles of the secular and religious contexts, Table 3 summarizes the link between hair, looks and sexuality in each. The

	Secular sphere	Religious sphere
Men/women in Buddhism	Different	Alike
Men/women in Judaism	'Alike'	Different

**Table 2. Gender relation between Jewish and Buddhist secular and religious spheres.**

	Buddhist monastics		Jewish Haredi individuals	
	Nun	Monk	Wife	Husband
<b>Look</b>				
<b>Hair style</b>	Shaved	Shaved (hair/face)	Shaved (head covered, tight kerchief or hat)	Head: short hair Face: sidelocks/beard (head covered, kipa or hat)
<b>Clothes</b>	Buddhist robe	Buddhist robe	Long dress	Black suit / White shirt
<b>Lifestyle</b>				
<b>Marital status</b>	Celibate	Celibate	Married	Married
<b>Sex life</b>	Renunciation	Renunciation	Destiny (procreation)	Mitzvah (duty) Marriage, procreation
<b>Social life</b>	Community: monastery		Family: household, community	
<b>Conclusion</b>	Men and women alike: degenderisation		Men and women as opposites; modesty: desexualization in the public sphere	

**Table 3. Men's and women's style and lifestyle in Buddhist and Jewish religious contexts.**

stress on gender differentiation in Orthodox Judaism appears in the hairstyle, as well as the very marked clothing differences between men and women. On the other hand Buddhist monastics, who renounce their sexuality, wear the same robes and shaved heads, regardless of their sex. But where do these practices of shaving the heads of women come from?

***From covering to shaving the hair of women in Judaism: men's zealous application of modesty***

From a functional point of view, aesthetics is a message: beauty being pleasant, it renders an object attractive; attraction is necessary for intercourse, which enables reproduction, which is vital for societies. Hence the dramatic social *function* of femininity, that has been evoked in the introduction. From this perspective, femininity is not a 'neutral' attribute. Because it attracts men, it is both necessary and therefore 'dangerous' if not controlled, as presented in the figure of Eve the temptress in the Bible. This is why men and religions have considered the hair of woman as a symbol of sexuality, as many authors have stressed: 'The hair on a woman's head is considered a symbol of sexuality, feminine sensuality and instinctual drive' (Schwartz 1995, cited in Zalberg 2007: 17). This consideration would come directly from the Talmud, according to which 'a woman's hair is a sexual incitement' (Bab Talmud, Brachot 24 a.). This quote has become the foundation for men's requirement for their

spouses to cover their hair (see Yafeh 2007: 530): hair was a site that had to be supervised and controlled. This has become common to the following Abrahamic religions: indeed, according to J. Duncan and M. Derrer (1973: 100), the real reason for the obligation for women in Christianity to cover or shave their heads when acting religiously<sup>9</sup> 'is not submission to God. . . but for women, sexual attractiveness.' The Rabbi Aharon Roth from Satmar, Hungary (hence the name of the group), founder in the 1920s of an ultra-orthodox sect now mainly established in Jerusalem, has extended this rule to shaving in addition to covering. As states the Rule 3 of his regulation:

They must cut off all their hair completely. . . every woman must be extremely careful not to have any hair, God forbid, not even a single one. . . I therefore request that no woman make the slightest extenuation of this rule, or wear a wig or even a hairpiece. (Ratteh 1994, cited in Zalberg 2007: 16.)

This rule is an extended interpretation of the rabbinical prohibition for married women to show their hair to any other man than their husband. There are several ways of explaining this: a common interpretation is to say that even a knot in the hair can nullify the purity of the ritual immersion or *mikveh*<sup>10</sup> that women undertake to purify their bodies before being proper for sexual intercourse with their husbands. Another interpretation, widespread in the Jewish community, says that the custom of shaving women's hair started to spare men from seeing their daughters taken to be raped during the pogroms. This founding narrative also seems to confirm the hypothesis that hair equals femininity, since total removal of hair was meant to annihilate feminine attractiveness.

In any case, this custom, which does not originate from Judaism's sacred texts, but seems to contradict the obligation of being attractive to one's husband, has become, for the women of this group themselves, one of the most central commandments they abide by.

The fact that these women are shaved, but still have a feminine function—or even that they are shaved *because of* this function (the shaving being the pre-marriage *rite de passage*) highlights the distinction between femininity and reproduction: one can consider that the femininity of Haredi married

9 'Women have to be veiled or shaved during prophecy or prayer' (1 Cor. 2:2–16).

10 A ritual bath where women immerse themselves especially after a period of *nida*-impurity (such as menstruation).

women has been cut away with the hair, to leave only, *in abstracto*, the function of the reproductive body, which is their main role.<sup>11</sup> The social function is bringing enough to render attractiveness, which acknowledges the laws of seduction market, superfluous. Like in other holistic societies where marriage is less a free choice of union motivated by love than a social institution often arranged by families, this institution replaces both the freedom and randomness of the seduction market. But how, in this context, compensating for the commonsense lack of attractiveness caused by the absence of hair? One explanation would be that for the Haredi founder, attractiveness is superfluous, since reproduction is a religious command. This is why his rule can be seen as an extensive interpretation of the Talmudic saying that ‘Grace is deceitful and beauty is vain’ (Prov. 31:30). Virtue here comes before aesthetics. But such zeal was also that of the whole rabbinical culture of the first centuries of this era, which was very ambivalent ‘considering sexuality and desire in general, . . . and foreign to the biblical sources’, when ruling for a ‘control of passions, even within a married couple’ (Biale 1997, in Nizard 2006: 281).

***Shaved women in Buddhism: the choice of celibacy and gender neutrality***

The tradition of shaving the head in Buddhism differs in four ways from the Haredi women’s situation: 1) it refers back to the origins of Buddhism: the Buddha was the first to cut his royal locks in a gesture of worldly renunciation; 2) it is mandatory for both men and women who take monastic vows; 3) Whether the nun’s condition is apparently more strict than the situation of married Haredi women, it is more flexible: vows can be momentary, and for a lay ordination do not require head shaving (and in addition to that, now in America a western nun may choose to cut her hair very short instead of shaving her head, if the shaved head is too difficult to be accepted in her family or for her job); and 4) it is, at least for Western nuns, a personal choice.

The first woman to have started the tradition was Maha Pajapati herself, the aunt of the Buddha, who wanted to be one of his disciples, or Bikkshus. He is said to have refused three times—for reasons that have never been explicated, until she shaved herself and the women of her entourage and came to join him.<sup>12</sup> 2500 years later, the choice is even more subjective for a Western woman who decides to enter the Dharma, or the path of liberation from suf-

11 ‘. . . the declared central role of the woman in Toldot Aharon is bearing and raising children’ (Zalcberg 2007: 15).

12 The Buddha had also previously hesitated to teach at all in the first place. This episode is an interesting and rare example of women’s empowerment in religious commitment.

fering offered by the Buddha. This choice involves a conscious and accepted renunciation of worldly desires<sup>13</sup> and the traditional feminine destiny of marriage and procreation—at least during the time of the vow, if temporary, or until the woman disrobes, which is perfectly admissible. But in the meantime, the shaved head, for both men and women, symbolizes this renunciation, whose core is—bringing us back to Leach's typology (1958)—celibacy. This example shows the limited validity of Hallpike's thesis (1969) that the shaved head equals social control: if by doing so the nuns and monks do enter a world of discipline, they do so by exiting the wider world and rejecting its rules. Their obedience is dissidence towards secular society.

Table 4 illustrates in a comparative way the various sources of those two religious *rites d'initiation*, and *sine qua non* prescriptive body treatments for women to be part of each group. But how do women experience the head shaving? Moreover, these groups being integrated into broader societies which are oftentimes ignorant of their values, how do people around them experience those body techniques?

### **The nun, the wife and the victim: polysemy of a body sign in pluralistic societies and ways of overcoming misinterpretations and cognitive dissonance**

The fact that the general perception of head-shaven women in all secular societies remains negative, shows how prejudicial to femininity the symbol is. For Synnott (1987: 403) baldness in general has a poor image in society, as it symbolizes either exclusion (punishment or illness) or self exclusion (rebellious or religious), and it's even worse for women, who 'do not voluntarily choose baldness'. However, this statement may be contested: regarding men, perceptions have changed and are not negative at the beginning of the twenty-first century, and regarding women, the very example of Buddhist nuns shows an example of chosen baldness. But it remains the case that this body treatment is counter-intuitive for a woman especially: a shaved head is considered to be contrary to femininity,<sup>14</sup> and therefore is challenging women more than men. Indeed for this novice American Buddhist nun:

13 Except for the one of helping others in Mahayana altruism and the main school of Buddhism.

14 As illustrates the title of this book: *Fabrice Virgili, La France « virile ». Des femmes tondues à la Libération* (Paris: Payot, 2000).

	Buddhist context	Jewish context
<b>Origin</b>		
<b>Religious written source</b>	<i>Vinaya</i> : Monastic rule written after the Buddha's death	Extensive interpretation of the Talmud ( <i>Guemara</i> )
<b>Traditional source</b>	Buddha's example, Mahapajapati, disciples	Tradition in ancient Palestine/Hungary/Poland
<b>Meaning</b>		
<b>Intiatory rite de passage</b>	From girl to nun	From girl to wife and mother
<b>Formal commitment</b>	Enter religious submission	Pursue religious submission

**Table 4. Origins of the practices of shaving the head in Buddhism and Judaism.**

The shaven head of the Buddhist monastic, in this time and North American culture is much more normal for men and much more radical for women . . . It is a greater renunciation for women, as women often spend so much more time with enhancing their appearance.

This counter-intuitivity of a female shaved head is illustrated by the fact that a shaved head can become erotic, but only in a subversive way, as has been shown in the cinema by Demi Moore, and more recently Natalie Portman:<sup>15</sup> the latter plays a Haredi bride suddenly taking off her wig and uncovering her bald head to an Indian diamond dealer she was doing business with, and whose wife had left to become a Hindu nun. This interesting parallel of opposite religious commitments incarnated in the same ritual and meeting each other by coincidence is further ironically illustrated through a recent scandal in the Jewish community: some wigs bought by orthodox women had been declared *unkosher* (not permitted) by the Rabbinat, because they were made from the hair of Hindu women who were shaved for religious ceremonies (Heilman 2004). The hair was regarded as having served idolatry, which is a central prohibition in Judaism, and made it unsuitable for those religious Jewish women.

15 Respectively in *GI Jane* (Ridley Scott, 1997) and in *New York, I Love You* (multiple directors, 2009).

***The symbolic meaning of shaved hair:  
the symbolic renunciation of femininity as a sign of religious commitment***

Two women with their heads shaved: one is a celibate nun, the other a married woman. The researcher would be tempted to draw conclusions about the polysemy of the symbol of female head shaving, engaging with Victor Turner's 'multi-vocality' of symbols (1967) or Raymond Firth's 'umbrella of meanings' attached to a symbol (1973, both in Synnott 1987: 407). Indeed, this case confirms Synnott's argument that one style can refer to different values, and *vice versa*. Therefore, if we consider the central symbol of those shaved heads in relation to feminine sexuality, we could not but conclude with Synnott that there are only contextual and relative meanings of a body treatment, since in this case study one has, and the other does not have, an active sexuality. However, I contend that the central meaning of this body treatment is femininity, which is not a function, like sexuality, but a symbol.

It seems indeed important to distinguish between the feminine 'sex', which is being defined by her genitals, and the feminine 'gender', which is, as many sociologists stressed, socially constructed, following Simone de Beauvoir's statement that 'one is not born a woman, but becomes one' (1953: 2). And I contend that her gender is being constructed with and through the opposition with the male figure, and that a central criterion is archetypically long hair. Therefore I argue that the absence of hair affects femininity, be it to replace it by a sole reproductive function, as in the case of Haredi women, or by the Buddhist promise of peace of mind through worldly renunciations.

Here, the reduction to the reproductive function, or the suppression of this function, are in the end equivalent: what is being retrieved with the hair is the femininity of the woman as a public message. And because these rituals are chosen (for the nun) or accepted (for the Haredi woman), I prefer talking of renunciation—even at the personal psychological level, rather than of symbolic castration, as stated by Gananath Obeyesekere (1981: 34, 45). Yet this analysis in terms of castration is relevant in cases of self-symbolic rebellious mutilation by borderline women, as is illustrated in the sudden self shaving of her head by the American pop singer Britney Spears in 2007 (Marikar nd).

Buddhist nuns stand in direct contrast to these extreme cases and their personal perception of this body treatment are much more positive than the external perceptions, since their shaved heads are visible. The situation is different for Haredi women, most people not knowing, and in any case not seeing, that they are shaved, since their heads are also covered by a kerchief. But for them, the head shaving, even if accepted, is not a 'choice': they were born with this destiny, and know they incur social exclusion if they refuse to follow it.

**Justifying shaving by sublimating the loss and overcoming cognitive dissonance**

Table 5 summarizes comparatively the way the shaving rule is being perceived and personally justified by the women who undergo it, respectively in the Haredi and in the Buddhist traditions. Two conclusions are to be drawn from this table: 1) the private meanings—renunciation for the nun (which involves modesty) and the religious value of modesty for the wife (which involves renunciation to seduction)—match the institutional aim. 2) The shaving rite is promoted and valued by women, at least in public speech. Indeed, Buddhist and Haredi women, rather than offering solely an *a posteriori* justification of the principle of the shaving, promote its effect, and at two levels: commodity and beauty. Indeed, in addition to the practical advantage of ‘not having to take care’ of one’s hair anymore, which is being advertised as a new acquisition of freedom on both sides, they also seem to have created a new beauty criterion, which would be no more based on aesthetic attractiveness as is commonplace, but on purity.

For Haredi women in particular, modesty becomes the new criterion of femininity. But the extensive interpretation of dressing modestly is being redoubled by an extensive interpretation of modesty as included in the domain of sexuality: ‘the value of modesty, characterized by abstinence and restraint, becomes the cornerstone of Haredi femininity’ (Yafeh 2007: 530).

In this belief system, hair is considered to be a symbolic nakedness (nakedness being here equated to immodesty, which is to say sexual appeal). Hence the bald head is actually a symbolic veil over this symbolic nudity, in a complete reversion between the metaphor and the matter. And the symbolic covering is being redoubled by an actual head covering; the feminine is hence hidden under several layers of physical and behavioural, symbolic and material, modesty. The symbolic transfiguration of baldness becomes a

Feelings involved and a posteriori justifications		
	Buddhist nuns	Haredi wives
Feelings involved when undergone	Freedom/liberation	Joy of ‘becoming a woman’ / Pain of losing hair?
Practical: convenient	Easier	Easier
Hygiene	Cleaner	Cleaner
Aesthetics	Purity	Purity

Table 5. A posteriori justifications of the practices.

way of symbolically covering the head, and therefore equating head covering with saving the reputation of the woman. This was already seen in the early centuries of this era, where a shaved head would, as for the Buddhist nuns today, inspire respect: 'in a custom related by Josephus' (Bell. Jud. 313:14), for a woman who had shaved her head for religious reasons or for a vow, this 'disfigurement' gave her 'importance and prestige' (Duncan & Derret 1973: 101-2), and she, with 'her head shaven or shorn *could* appear with her head uncovered in public, and no doubt she often did so with pride'.

Thus a woman could publicly appear without a head covering: 1) if she was shaved; 2) if she had done it for religious reasons.

And not only was this counter-intuitive body technique reserved, when taking a positive meaning, for pious women, therefore and for those reasons not dishonouring her; she could take pride in it. This anecdote seems to be another proof that head shaving is publicly seen as 'disfigurement', which is to say an annihilation of the femininity, and for that very reason the woman did not need to hide anything anymore (her hair, symbolizing seduction) because she did not have anything to hide.

Hence, the context of shaving hair is essential: a shame when undergone in a war or disease context, the absence of hair becomes a point of pride when chosen for religious reasons. This is why in the Haredi world, norms regarding femininity are reversed: baldness becomes the moral symbolic substitute for physical femininity. This psychological transfer process seems indispensable for Haredi wives, in order to overcome the cognitive dissonance in which the Rule places them, demanding them both to renounce to femininity and to remain attractive to their husbands. Many authors reprovved or stressed the difficulties for women in submitting (or allowing their daughters to be submitted) to this practice,<sup>16</sup> in spite of the heavy conditioning undergone since childhood, and that the use of a whole legitimizing and valourising rhetoric is indispensable. But should one conclude from the similar insistence of Buddhist nuns on promoting the aesthetic and practical effects of the shorn head that there might be, in some cases or sometimes, some counter-intuitivity and maybe cognitive dissonance to overcome too? Many of them insist on the fact that their femininity is not being eroded, whereas this seems to be the purpose of the shaving ritual: to abolish gender differences in the

16 'Shaving a woman's head goes far beyond the issue of modesty; it is an instrument for completely silencing the woman's voice as a spiritual human power in the culture' (Hirschfeld 2000: 53). M. Shiloh showed that many girls threatened to leave the group, to escape this ritual (2001, cited in Zalberg 2007: 18).

Sangha (Buddhist community). Regarding her sexuality, this American former nun explains that it was actually enhanced by her condition: 'Celibacy itself I experienced surprisingly, as being a very sexual definition of my life, as if saying "no" constantly emphasized the point of sexuality inwardly to me.' Would this statement represent a strategy of resistance of one's sexuality against being denied? Or the natural sublimatory effect of spirituality, or the erotic effect of what is forbidden being therefore subversive (as in the example of some female movie characters)? This would belong to the domain of the psychoanalyst, as Leach would say, but one could imagine that it could be all those reasons together. Notwithstanding, internal cognitive dissonance seems to remain a strong challenge specific to Haredi women, because shaving is not an option for them and because of their spouse conditions opposite requirements. But unlike Buddhist nuns, they hardly have to face the misunderstanding of the outer society, firstly because they stay enclosed in their community, where their practice is the rule, but also because nobody sees their baldness, therefore nobody is 'confronted' by it.

***Buddhist women: confronting the misinterpretations of society***

For Buddhist nuns, the situation seems reversed: because they have deliberately taken the vows, knowing and wanting what they imply, the head shaving hardly provokes any cognitive dissonance, nor any double bind, because in their case the shorn head equals celibacy. But in the West, when they are not on retreat or in a monastery, they live in the larger secular society (also because many of them have jobs). And their shaved heads, especially when they are not wearing their Buddhist robes, can be misinterpreted and misperceived. Their very lives embody a genuine clash of cultures and meaning systems within a pluralistic society. To illustrate this situation, Table 6 compares the inner and outer perceptions of female shorn heads. The criterion for positive representations seem to be choice. But this choice needs to be explicated to the outer society, which, in a polysemic symbolic context, sometimes ignores, but sometimes also does not understand such self-renunciation. This former Buddhist nun expresses the shock she experienced when coming back from Asia to America, where, not to mention being shown respect as a nun as in the East, she was not even perceived as a religious person, but as a problematic individual:

wearing lay clothes but with hair still not grown out. . . I could see very clearly by people's facial reactions of fear and pity that what I was being 'seen as' were values and messages that I was not expressing at all:

a convict, a chemotherapy patient, a violent neo-Nazi, or militant lesbian, denying ‘the feminine’, or someone who had been abused in some way.

This testimony summarizes the range of negative representations provoked by the view of a woman with as shorn head. But for Jewish Western women who become Buddhist nuns, the problem gains two additional levels of difficulty: firstly they come from a religious culture that ignores monasticism and where the highest *mitzvah*, as stated previously, is to procreate. But most of all, the vision of a shorn head brings the family and community directly back to representations of the Shoah, especially when the previous generations are direct survivors: ‘a shaved head in my family was associated with the Holocaust’, says an American Zen nun. ‘So it was very difficult for my family to see me with a shaved head. As my mother becomes older, it has become so scary for her that I have grown my hair. With Alzheimer’s she often cannot distinguish between the present and past. So seeing my shaved head would give her flashbacks and nightmares.’

But these associations are also, paradoxically, sometimes applied to the treatment Judaism itself imposes on its women: even in the broader Jewish community, such as this female American Renewal Rabbi, highly disapprove of these practices as bound to be only traumatic:

Opposite representations of a female shaved head	
Secular West	Religious (Jewish/Buddhist)
Social exclusion	Worldly renunciation / Refusal of secular society
Undergone	Chosen/Willing
Sanction/Oppression: prison, collabos, concentration camps	Dedication to the practice
Disease (cancer, aids)	Hygiene/Purity
Rebellion (skinheads, punks)	Submission to the religious rule
Conclusion	
‘Negative’ self exclusion social self exclusion / Belonging to a group: mainly depreciated	‘Positive’ self exclusion separation from the secular world / Belonging to the religious group: mainly prompted
<b>Negative representation</b>	<b>Positive representation</b>

Table 6. Polysemy of shaved heads in secular and religious contexts in the West.

confound and compound that experience with head-shaving that Holocaust victims . . . suffered, and I can only imagine the hidden patterns of trauma that are perpetuated within the culture.

## Conclusion

In this article I have proposed that hair is central to the definition of a woman, since its absence seems to challenge feminine identity, both in the eyes of the woman and in the eyes of others. This inductive conclusion has been illustrated through the comparative case study of Western Buddhist nuns and Haredi Jewish wives. An important point I have been trying to make is that the femininity that is lost here is not sexual, since Haredi women are meant to procreate, but symbolic: it is the gender identity which is being lost with the totality of hair on a woman's head. And this loss can mean a renunciation of gender identity through celibacy for Buddhist nuns, or the replacement of the definition of femininity, from beauty to spiritual merit, for the Haredi wives. I have also tried to show that this common criterion parallels the polysemic dimension of such a body technique: in this case study, the very fact that one shaven-headed woman is a nun, and the other a wife shows the polysemic dimension of a shorn head; this polysemy is being further extended in secular contexts, while taking pejorative meanings, such as rebellion, punishment or illness. This contrast between positive meanings in religious contexts, and negative ones in secular ones, highlights the fact that, to use Durkheim's founding distinction, the religious or sacred sphere is being built in opposition to the profane: the subversive use of head shaving is here to redouble the fact that religious logic does not follow secular values.

The criterion determining the positive or negative connotation of a female shaved head is not necessarily the religious context, but choice (even if it is 'choosing' a rule one has to abide by in any case). But behind this semantic relativity, I have tried to show that a stable symbol underlies female hair shaving, namely the severance of one's femininity. But this argument is not incompatible with the previous analysis of hair symbolism as presented in the introduction: in this case the symbolic function of hair treatment means at the same time restricted sexuality (Leach) *and* social control (Hallpike). The only particularity of the notion of social control here is that those 'docile bodies' (Foucault 1975: 137–143) incarnate at the same time a *de facto* dissidence against the broader secular society. Indeed, shaving hair to women contradicts the 'common sense' of what a woman is and has to be. But it seems

from the interviews that it is also counter-intuitive for those concerned themselves—which has the positive effect of enhancing the dimension of will and of religious commitment, and reinforces cohesion with the group. In both cases, renunciation of hair/femininity, which is the initiatory rite symbolizing their entry into the community, is seen as a process of purification—but with a different end:

For Buddhist nuns:

Renunciation of sexuality: choice → purification-liberation

For Haredi wives:

Renunciation of seduction: submission → purification-conformity

But again, even if the nun's commitment seems to be more of an impoverishment, since they renounce sexuality, it is actually more flexible: the vows can be temporary, lay, or removed. Western Buddhist nuns and Haredi wives indeed embody two distinct paradigms of religious commitment: conversion for the first and religious heritage for the latter, for which the dimension of freedom in the obedience to the rule is nearly non-existent. However, one should not conclude that as opposed to the Jewish women's situation, the aesthetic choices of a secular women are totally 'free': even if in contemporary Western societies the body can be seen as an affirmation of the independence of the self against social pressure (see Turner 1984), even if the scope for expressing one's femininity and masculinity has extended, and that one has access to a broader set of aesthetic references, it is also a fact that simultaneously, one has never been so much alienated as by the fashion non-coercive *diktats*.

The main argument I have been trying to express is that in a pluralistic society, where different meaning-systems can be embodied through similar body treatments, the body symbol in itself is no more useful to carry its message: where body signs were meant to avoid using language, misinterpretations become common. For instance, a hat or a kerchief on a Jewish woman says she is married, but an outsider could think she just 'felt' like wearing this hat or kerchief today. As in their eyes the items would have no meaning, this would not be a symbol for a particular status, especially if they ignore the existence of such a symbol. Then it becomes *necessary* to verbally *explain* the body symbol, which previously stood for language, as if we were in a new Babel, where language stands as translation for those symbols which were meant to replace it 'universally'.

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