

# Schwerpunkt

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## Celibate Women, the Construction of Identity, Karama (Dignity), and the “Arab Spring”

### Zusammenfassung

Zölibatär lebende Frauen, die Konstruktion von Identität, *Karama* (Würde) und der „Arabische Frühling“

Untersuchungen über den „Arabischen Frühling“ tendieren dazu, die wirtschaftlichen und politischen Bedürfnisse Jugendlicher zu fokussieren, adressieren jedoch nicht ihre sozialpsychologischen Bedürfnisse, wie etwa den unerfüllten Heiratswunsch und dessen soziale Konsequenzen. Der Beitrag diskutiert den Fall zölibatär lebender Frauen in Tunesien, für die es aufgrund der hohen Jugendarbeitslosigkeit und daraus folgender Probleme schwierig ist, Übergangsrituale zu durchlaufen, die sie von der Kindheit ins Erwachsenendasein geleiten und ihnen die vollständige Integration in die Gemeinschaft ermöglichen würden. Um in ihrer durch den diktatorischen Staat dominierten Lebenswelt dennoch Selbstkontrolle zu erlangen, haben sie für sich eine Form der asketischen Lebensführung gewählt, indem sie den *hijab* tragen, den Koran lesen, das tägliche Fasten praktizieren und die *hudud* neu verhandeln – also die moralischen und rechtlichen Grenzen, die schon lang Gegenstand breiter Debatten und sozialer Reformen sind; gleichzeitig unterstützen sie die Frauenrechte, so wie sie in Tunesiens Familienrecht verankert sind. Der Beitrag widmet sich besonders dem hierauf bezogenen politischen Diskurs im ‚Arabischen Frühling‘ seit 2011 und dem Bemühen, eine „moralische Persönlichkeit“ zu entwickeln.

### Schlüsselwörter

Tunesien, enthaltsame Frauen, Rituale, „Arabischer Frühling“, Nahdha

### Summary

Studies of the “Arab Spring” have tended to focus on the economic and political needs of youth, but have not addressed socio-psychological needs such as an unfulfilled desire for marriage and its social consequences. This article discusses the case of celibate women in Tunisia who, because of the high rate of youth unemployment and its social consequences, find it difficult to accomplish the rites of passage that would take them from childhood to adulthood and allow full integration into the community. In order to gain control over the self in a social context that was dominated by a dictatorial state, they have chosen a form of asceticism, wearing the *hijab*, reading the Qur’an, practicing daily fasting, and re-negotiating *hudud* – that is moral boundaries and legal limits that have long been a subject of wide debate and of social reforms; at the same time, they support women’s rights as expressed in Tunisia’s Personal Status Code. Particular attention is paid in this article to the political discourse after 2011 and efforts to construct a “moral personality.”

### Keywords

Tunisia, celibate women, rituals, “Arab Spring”, Nahdha

## 1 Introduction

Starting in Tunisia in December 2010 the Arab world began to experience political upheavals that have shaken the entire region and the wider world ever since. In Tunisia, this upheaval, often labeled as “Arab Spring”, was largely led by youth. Numerous analyses have focused on the motives for their rebellion in a country that was cited by the World Bank and the IMF as a model in achieving economic success, and which explained the “revolution” of December 2010/January 2011 that led to the fall of the Ben Ali regime as motivated by political factors such as the totalitarian system, the police state, corruption, etc. Rarely did these analyses take into account the unconscious motives in the youth’s behavior. In this article I want to throw some light on the demands made by youth from an anthropological and psychoanalytic perspective; this may help us understand the significance of the revolution’s slogans such as *Shugul, Hurriya, Karama* (Work, Freedom, Dignity) or *Shughul, Hurriya, Karama Wataniyya* (Work, Freedom, National Dignity) (Ammar 2013).<sup>1</sup>

To contextualize these slogans chanted during the December 2010/January 2011 period, we must keep in mind that the region has experienced very significant transformations over the past decades leading to a renegotiation of gender relations. These transformations include the fact that the population between 15 and 29 years of age has grown by 50 percent and those under 25 years of age constitute between one and two thirds of the population, with one quarter of youth in universities throughout the region. Tunisia, in particular, among other shifts, has also seen an improvement in health indicators, a lowering of maternal and infant mortality, and life expectancy now over 70 years for men and women. On the other hand, the unemployment rate in Tunisia increased from 2.3 percent in 1984 to 3.8 percent in 1994, reaching 10.2 percent in 2004. By 2008, this rate had doubled to 21.8 percent, with women university graduates, especially those living in rural areas, having twice the unemployment rate of men (Institut National de Statistiques 1999, 2005, 2006, 2007, 2008).

Unemployment in the region led to significant emigration of men from rural areas to the coastal cities, and from Tunisia to Libya and the countries north of the Mediterranean. It has also led to the phenomenon of involuntary celibacy – something the region never experienced in the past. The proportion of unmarried women went from 17.7 percent in 2001 to 37.5 percent in 2006, with a 50 percent rate of celibacy among men in similar age groups (Ben Amor 2009). Because of a lack of economic means and an understanding of sexuality conceived within the framework of Islamic ethics, young people are unable to carry out certain rites. A study in a number of Muslim countries carried out by the Pew Research Center (2013) examined views on religion and its im-

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1 This paper uses material from about a dozen unstructured interviews with celibate women from different economic, geographic, educational, and social backgrounds, carried out in Tunis in 2009/2010. These women are now living in urban settings, but maintain contact with their regions of origin. Often they have a sister or brother working abroad, in Europe or in the Gulf countries. The cultural impact of the Gulf countries is visible in the dress worn for family celebrations as well as on other occasions. In addition, this group of women belongs to the generation that grew up with satellite television and regularly follows religious programs coming from the Gulf. Some sections of this paper were written when I was a member of the Visiting Scholars Program at the Council on Middle East Studies, Yale University, 2009/2010.