



France's Battle of the Burkini

" Children of our colonial empires are now coming home to Europe.."
(Bert Hellinger)

"Whatever women wear will always be provocative to someone". (Laurie Penny)

Given that French culture is often associated with elegance, sensuality and eroticism even, and after all their iconic image of " Liberty Leading the People" (1830) is topless. Eugene Delacroix's allegorical figure of Marianne came to symbolizes liberty, after the fall of the French monarchy in 1848. With this image in mind, recent attempts to ban Muslim burkini swimwear affords yet another look into fashion phenomena which has long served as a powerful medium for conveying political ideologies and related social realities as well as values such as nationalism, feminism, class, dissidence, rebellion and social reform.(Fashion and Politics, July-November 7, 2004). A further bit of history offers some context. During the 1850's there was outrage at women daring to wear bloomers at the beach. These garments designed by American women's rights advocate Amelia Bloomer who promoted a clothing style known as "Turkish Dress", inspired by less restrictive harem pants. And then , in 1950's the outcry was at the fleshy revelations of the bikini. (dailybeast, September 3, 2016)

Currently in France, the scandalous garment *du jour* is light weight, fast drying, full body swimwear which resembles a head covering wet suit , deemed provocative

within the current social and political climate within France and other countries with recently burgeoning Muslim populations. Australian - Lebanese designer and self-described "Aussie Chick" Aheda Zanetti, who created the burkini in 2004 strongly objected to her beachwear being denounced as a symbol of the repression of women. In a recent statement, in regards to that issue, she made clear that "I created burkini sport-wear to give Muslim women more freedom, not to take it away". Nevertheless, local French authorities in 15 municipalities, and over 30 coastal resorts, found Zanetti's design objectionable and attempted to issue a ban. This measure was supposedly justified by their argument that beachwear which "ostentatiously" displays religious affiliation is in violation to France's national policy of secularization, which somehow does not apply to Catholic nuns, enjoying a splash in the surf, without divesting their clerical habits.

Objections to the burkini also assert that this full bodied swimwear could risk disrupting public order during a time when France is in the aftermath of ongoing targeted terror attacks, supposedly by "The Islamic State" and currently undergoing a perpetual State of Emergency, and therefore this swimsuit presents "security issues". Here the mind boggles, since I cannot quite see how a suicide bombing apparatus could be successfully concealed beneath a burkini especially since anyone's beach bag would do nicely. Nevertheless, the madness continues and in keeping with this highly charged political climate, it is alleged that such traditional garb displays a loyalty with terrorist attacks which makes no sense given that in Nice, among those allegedly killed 86, were 30 Muslims wearing traditional attire. Given our proverbial human nature, such as it is, this irrational hysteria is somewhat comprehensible in the aftermath of recent, multiple, so called "terror events" (check out: Operation Gladio B). This latter accusation by municipal officials is especially interesting in light of the fact that their own French government, along with our NATO member states, has been supplying weapons and training to listed terrorist organizations in Syria. (21stcentruywire.com, August 25,2016).

And, while we are on the subject of France's professed concern for women's rights, we might reasonably ask: Where exactly do ostensibly enlightened French values stand in relation to their country's global commitment to women's rights? Consider, if you will, that in 2015 President Hollande committed \$15.3 billion, foreign investments to Saudi Arabia, thus becoming that Arab, extremist, Wasabi, Muslim,

country's third largest investor . In uber-repressive, paleo-medieval Saudi Arabia, women are strictly forbidden to drive, open bank accounts, show their faces in public and even foreign women cannot swim. Violation of attempted or even suspected intent of violation of these edicts are likely result in gruesomely severe, physical and psychological punishments. (theguardian.com, August, 27,2016)

Cross cultural tensions have worsened in Nice. Burly, male, municipal police in boots and dark uniforms ,armed with bullet proof vests, batons and pepper spray, confronted a lone mother peacefully resting upon the sand, together with her small daughter. Shamefully, they ordered her to immediately and publicly strip off Muslim style garments protecting her modesty. Oblivious to her frightened child in tears, these dutiful officers (just following orders) wrote out an on-the-spot citation for her mother's dress code violations. Vive Le France? After this story went viral, Nice's Deputy Mayor defended police actions and threatened legal action against anyone disseminating pictures of municipal law enforcement personnel. Shortly thereafter, France's Council of State, their country's supreme administrative authority, founded by Napoleon in 1799, weighed in by overturning all municipal bans. This ruling prompted a right- wing backlash as a majority of local officials have vowed defiance while also maintaining that burkinis are "unhygienic".

While Anya Cordeu, writer and recipient of the Spirit of Ann Frank Award, for her work against designating any group as " Other", agrees that there are lots of issues with swimsuits..."ask any woman ", she warns that we are on a slippery slope with this one. With "hygiene" given as the reason to classify" the Other" as unclean, filthy, unsavory, contaminated and in need of "cleansing ", a cruel and darkly sinister path then opens toward "ethnic cleansing" and out and out, genocide. This age old , ancient even, concept and practice of genocide is founded upon a belief that some groups are inherently unclean, subversive and preferably eliminated altogether. Have we forgotten those horrific photos of sadistic Nazi bullies gleefully chopping off the beards of "Dirty Jews"; a people who were initially banned from public spaces, as well as the "filthy Gypsies" herded into death camps along with other "degenerate", undesirable, Others? (huffingtonpost.com, August 25, 2016)

This unenlightened, reactionary and potentially toxic belief in the reality of " Otherness " denies the truth of our essential human unity. While we are, admittedly

and essentially different in many ways, we are also, absolutely and entirely ,... everyone of us, human and deserving of mutual respect. And still, realistically, public sentiments in France and other European countries with burgeoning Muslim populations, are not so enlightened nor are they so inclusively inclined. Presidential candidate and former center right President Nikolas Sarkozy quickly tuned into this xenophobic atmosphere wherein the French are now taking umbrage to foreigners coming into their country and attempting to impose their own values. While these resentful, territorial, "us and them" feelings may be understandable, they fail to take into account the complicated history of their own French colonial practices of forcibly imposing their own Gallic values in Algeria, Morocco, Tunisia, Vietnam, Angola, and other African and Middle Eastern countries (Syria) and Asia.

And so, while self-important, provincial municipal mayors trumpeted their proud defiance of the high court ruling, Mr. Sarkozy, not to be outdone, in his "throw a bone to the mob" campaign ...while clearly angling for votes from the far right, vowed to re-write the French constitution in order to enact a nation-wide burkini ban if he were to be re-elected to the presidency. As the perennial politician continues to maintain, France must continue to stand strong in response to the threatening "tyranny of the minorities.. and " If we do not resist, we will have Sharia law, tomorrow in France ". Politics aside, there might be other reasons why a woman may wish to cover her head and other parts of her body at the beach, new mothers, skin cancer prevention, and especially skin cancer survivors, as well as non-contagious, psoriatic conditions, tattoo remorse, and so on...

Over all, it does seem that with media complicit rising tensions, we are, all of us, now finding ourselves within a network of multi-cultural diversity composed of competing monocultures fostering an atmosphere of increasingly antagonistic separateness. (Will Hutton, UK Guardian, August 20, 2016).