

**Social hair  
(Revised)**

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A central problem in the interpretation of ritual is the fact that while the participants in each society may be unable to give an explicit explanation of the meaning of the symbols involved, there is a large body of symbols and symbolic acts which is common to a wide variety of cultures, and while any particular symbol may have a multiplicity of meanings from society to society, we find that these meanings constantly recur. For example, as Turner (1966) has pointed out, black, white and red are the colours most often used in ritual, where black is very often symbolic of dirt or rain-clouds, white of milk or semen, and red of blood. Given, then, that there is a number of symbols, with a common signification in different cultures, we must try to explain the basis of this similarity.

Two different hypotheses suggest themselves. The first is that the meanings ascribed to symbols are related to the workings of the subconscious, which are assumed to be similar in members of every culture and, more specifically, to the mechanisms of the repression and sublimation of the sexual impulses. The second is that, given the common concern of all societies with survival, the nature of the physical environment, procreation, the social role of the sexes, youth and age, order and disorder, and similar basic concepts, there are certain symbols and symbolic acts which are inherently appropriate in expressing these concepts, and that this is why these symbols are so commonly found and often have the same meaning in different cultures.

All that I mean by 'inherently appropriate' is that since blood and fire, for example, are red and not green, we would expect to find that cultures which ascribe symbolic values to colours would choose red as a symbol of blood or warfare, and not green. This does not mean that only one symbol is ever appropriate to express any particular concept. For example, one culture may choose red as a symbol of death through its association with bloodshed; another might choose white through its

association with bone; and a third might choose black through its association with night, and the setting of the sun. The point I am making is that we elucidate the meaning of symbolism by examining the way in which people conceptualise the associations of entities in the real world. Thus the first hypothesis mentioned above regards symbols as 'about' the subconscious, while the second hypothesis regards them as 'about' the world and man's place in it. The object of this article is a re-analysis of Dr Leach's celebrated and stimulating essay 'Magical hair' (1958) in which he advances a theory of the symbolic meaning of hair which is of the first type.

Leach examines the relationship between the significance of symbolism in the individual subconscious, as seen by a psychoanalyst, Dr Charles Berg, and the significance of symbolism in social ritual, as interpreted by ethnographers. The particular piece of symbolism which he uses as a basis for discussion is Berg's hypothesis that there is a basic symbolic equivalence between head hair and the male genitals in the subconscious, such that hair-cutting equals castration. His problem is to explain how the conclusions of psychoanalysis about the symbolic meaning of hair in individual fantasies, as a matter of fact, though without much logical or empirical justification, turn out to be closely in accord with what ethnographers have to say about the significance of hair in ritual. His conclusion is that the psychologists and the ethnographers are discussing quite different types of phenomena (the subconscious and the social), but that the psychologists can contribute to our understanding of ritual because much of its content is designed to express, and therefore to control, our potentially dangerous emotions. Phallic symbolism occurs often in ritual because 'ritual makes explicit these powerful and dangerous thoughts...Phallicism in ritual is thus a form of cathartic prophylaxis; it is not an expression of the repressed unconscious of the collective individual, it is a social process which serves to prevent the individual from developing sexual repressions at all'.(Leach 1958:161) This may or may not be so; the problem with such theories is to bring them into some sort of relationship with the facts, so that they can be shown empirically to be true or false.

The whole relationship between private and social symbolism is too complex to be considered here; on this occasion my immediate concern is to consider a particular symbolic theme, in the light of Leach's psychological theory, and to try to determine

whether it is really true that head hair can be shown to be associated with sexuality in a wide range of societies and, more explicitly, if it is true that:

head = phallus  
 hair = semen  
 hair cutting = castration

and that:

long hair = unrestrained sexuality  
 short hair = restricted sexuality  
 close-shaven hair = celibacy.

Let us first of all consider the special characteristics of hair.

1. Like the nails it grows constantly.
2. It can be cut painlessly, again like the nails.
3. It grows in great quantity, such that individual hairs are almost numberless.
4. Head hair is apparent on infants of both sexes at birth.
5. Genital-anal hair appears at puberty in both sexes.
6. In some races, males develop facial hair after puberty, and also body hair.
7. Hair on different parts of the body is of different texture, e.g. eyelashes, pubic hair, head hair.
8. In old age, hair often turns white and/or falls out.
9. Hair is a prominent feature of animals, especially monkeys, man's analogue in the animal kingdom.

Now the human body is the focus of much ritual, and it is not surprising that a physical feature with such manipulative potential as hair should be used so frequently in ritual. Moreover, in view of its manifold characteristics, which I have just set out, it would be surprising if all its ritual and symbolic manifestations could be reduced to a single origin.

One of the most frequent ritual uses of hair is in association with mourning. On this point Leach says:

That hair rituals may have sexual associations has been apparent to anthropologists from the beginning, but mostly they have not regarded this as a matter of crucial significance. Tylor, for example, classed ritual hair-cutting as one 'of an extensive series of practices, due to various and often obscure motives, which come under the general heading of ceremonial mutilations' (Tylor 1871 (2) 403). Of other such practices he mentions blood-letting and the cutting-off of finger joints. He avoids reference to circumcision, but the latter rite is clearly a 'ceremonial mutilation'. (Leach 1958:150)

While conceding that ritual does not reflect the psychological condition of the individual performing it, but rather that ‘the structure of the social situation requires the actor to make formal symbolic statements of a particular kind’, (ibid., 153) he still finds Berg’s hypothesis in relation to shaving the head at mourning - that loss of the loved one equals castration equals loss of hair - to be meaningful as explaining the genesis of the symbolism in the first place. Now exactly why people should react to grief by shaving off their hair and mutilating themselves is undoubtedly amenable to psychological explanation, but there is no *prima facie* reason to link it with castration. Certainly circumcision has no such meaning, but quite the reverse in most primitive societies.

One of the greatest weaknesses in Berg’s hypothesis that shaving head hair equals castration is that women shave their heads in mourning as well as men. But what on earth does it mean to talk of ‘female castration’? The notion is sufficiently bizarre to require some elucidation for readers who are not psychologists. Moreover, references to shaving the head at mourning very frequently describe other mutilations such as gashing the face and body. For example, Frazer lists, (1923:377-83) besides the Jews of the Old Testament, sixty-eight societies in which some form of self-mutilation is performed at mourning, and in almost every case we find that the cutting off of the hair is accompanied by bodily laceration. In the absence of any indication to the contrary, why should we not therefore assume that the cutting off of the hair is simply a particular type of self-mutilation?

We frequently find in ethnographical literature that hair has close associations with the soul. For example, to refer to Frazer again: ‘The Siamese think that a spirit called *khuan* or *kwun* dwells in the human head, of which it is the guardian spirit. The spirit must be carefully protected from injury of every kind; hence the act of shaving or cutting the hair is accompanied with many ceremonies’ (1922:230); and he cites many other instances to show the sacred character of the head and consequently the peculiar nature of head hair. Since the head is the seat of reason and the sensory organs, among other things, this is surely good reason for recognizing that it is a most appropriate seat of the soul, in primitive eyes. Leach concludes however that ‘the “soul stuff” of such writers as Hutton and Wilken is not perhaps very different from the “libido” of the psychoanalysts’.(1958:150) Not

perhaps *very* different, but sufficiently different to require considerable demonstration of similarity, which we are not given.

Magic is another familiar ritual use of hair, which is treated, along with nail parings and bodily secretions, as symbolically equal to the person from whose body they came. Of this Leach says:

The psycho-analyst, being concerned with the inner feelings of the individual, categorizes all actions which cut away part of the individual's body as symbolic equivalents of 'castration'. He then argues that these ritual acts have emotional force for the individual because they are in fact felt to be a repression of libidinous energy. In contrast, the social anthropologist is concerned with the publicly acknowledged status of social persons, and he notes that the ritual acts in which part of the individual's body is cut off are prominent in *rites de passage*...He might well label all such rites 'circumcision'. The social anthropologist's explanation of why rites of 'circumcision', so defined, should be emotionally charged comes from Durkheim. The ritual situation converts the symbol into a 'collective representation' of God and Society...These two arguments, the psycho-analytic and the Durkheimian, appear to be sharply contrasted, yet they are not contradictory. We can accept them both simultaneously together with a third argument, borrowed from Frazer, to the effect that magical power typically resides in objects which are detached from individuals in ritual situations - e.g. the blood, hair, nail parings, etc. of persons involved in *rites de passage*. We cannot simply merge these three arguments, but if we recognize that they all refer to 'the same thing', then we are led to conclude that magical potency, regarded as a social category, is something which inheres in 'circumcision' symbols, but that such symbolization is effective because for each individual the ritual situation is felt to signify 'castration'. (ibid., 162)

Originally, it will be remembered, Leach was concerned to show that Berg's equation of head hair equals genitals was relevant in explaining certain ethnographical facts, but now we have gone far beyond this and are being asked to believe that *everything* cut or removed from the body has a sexual significance – specifically, castration. But if blood and body dirt as used in magic and ritual symbolize castration, does the use of personal names, garments, foot-prints and shadows, which are very prominent in magic, also symbolize castration? In fact, of course, there is a much simpler explanation of why hair, nails and blood, etc. are used in magic on a *pars pro toto* basis to symbolize the person from whom they were taken.

In the first place, hair and nails grow constantly and this is surely a very good reason why they should be believed to be specially endowed with vitality; blood and semen, for different reasons, are also believed to be sources of vitality in primitive thought. But these considerations cannot apply to body dirt or nasal mucus, and still less to foot-prints, shadows, names and garments. In primitive thought we frequently find that the person is thought of as having extensions, of which personal names, personal belongings, shadows and foot-prints are examples. It seems likely, therefore, that there are two reasons why hair is chosen as a

symbol of the whole person in magic. It is endowed *par excellence* with vitality (and may have associations with the soul if it has come from the head), and it also falls into the wider category of extensions of the person.

So far in this article I have tried to demonstrate something of the multiplicity of hair in its ritual aspects. For example, it can be thought of as associated with the soul, through the head, as having inherent vitality because it grows; it may figure in the general category of bodily mutilations; and its physical characteristics make it very appropriate, like dress, for expressing changes or differences in ritual or social status. There is thus no reason why a theory of hair in ritual should be obliged to reduce all the manifestations of hair to a single origin – symbolic castration. It is only when we realize that the ritual uses of hair are of widely differing types that we can attempt to explain any of them. But Leach's theory not only tries to provide a single explanation, but founders on three stubbornly empirical facts.

The first is one to which I have already referred. This is that women's hair, as well as men's, is frequently the focus of ritual attention. The second is that if head hair equals male genitals, why is it that comparatively little regard is paid to beards in ritual contexts? As I remarked earlier, head hair is common to both sexes and is present at birth, while the facial hair only develops in the male at puberty. Moreover, in texture the latter has more resemblance to pubic hair than to head hair. If there were any plausibility in the theory that head hair equals male genitals, and that cutting hair equals castration, one would expect beards to be more prominent than head hair in ritual; so it is surely strange that in fact beards have a comparatively minor role, even allowing for the fact that in some races males do not develop much facial hair. The third and most serious defect is one to which I have not so far alluded. This is the fact that ascetics commonly have long hair. Now of course, according to the equations: long hair equals unrestrained sexuality; short hair equals restricted sexuality; close-shaven hair equals celibacy; this is all wrong. Leach of course is aware of the problem; but his solution, in so far as he advances one, is far from adequate.

He quotes Iyer as follows:

The *sannyasin's* freedom from social obligation and his final renunciation of the sex life is symbolized by change of dress but above all by change of hair style. According to the mode of asceticism he intends to pursue a *sannyasin* either shaves off his tuft of hair [the isolated tuft of hair is an essential social identification mark of the male Brahmin] or else neglects it altogether, allowing it to grow matted and lousy. (ibid., 156)

Berg explains the long hair as follows:

Fakirs simply ignore altogether the very existence of their hair (cf. the ascetic tendency to ignore the existence of the genital organs). It grows into a matted lice-inhabited mass and may be as much a source of unremitting torment as the neglected penis itself. Apparently it is not permitted to exist as far as consciousness is concerned. (ibid., 156)

Leach points out that far from the *sannyasin's* behaviour being compulsive, it is socially prescribed: 'The correct hair behaviour...of Indian ascetics was all laid down in the *Naradaparivrajaka Upanishad* over 2,000 years ago'. (ibid., 156) But he agrees with Berg that 'for the Brahmin the tonsured tuft "means" sexual restraint, the shaven head "means" celibacy and the matted head "means" total detachment from the sexual passions.' (ibid., 156) But this explanation is of course quite opposed to the theory that long hair equals unrestrained sexuality.

There is a striking passage in Gibbon's *Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* relating to long hair and asceticism:

The monks were divided into two classes; the Coenobites, who lived under a common and regular discipline; and the Anachorets, who indulged their unsocial, independent fanaticism. The most devout, or the most ambitious of the spiritual brethren, renounced the convent, as they had renounced the world...All superfluous incumbrance of dress they contemptuously cast away; and some savage saints of both sexes have been admired, whose naked bodies were only covered by their long hair. They aspired to reduce themselves to the rude and miserable state in which the human brute is scarcely distinguished above his kindred animals; and the numerous sect of Anachorets derived their name from their humble practice of grazing in the fields with the common herd. They often usurped the den of some wild beast whom they affected to resemble...The most perfect Hermits are supposed to have passed many days without food, many nights without sleep, and many years without speaking ...(1960:516)

This illustrates very well the hypothesis I wish to advance in this article: that long hair is associated with being outside society and that the cutting of hair symbolizes re-entering society, or living under a particular disciplinary regime within society. Of course, one may be outside society partially or wholly and I am not suggesting that long hair is appropriate only to hermits and outcasts. By being 'outside society' I do not mean therefore the total exclusion of ascetics and similar categories, but rather an attitude or condition of rejection of which the asceticism of the anchorite or *sannyasin* is the ultimate expression, or, again, the possession of certain traits such as spiritual power by reason of which the possessor is not fully amenable to social control. To be more precise, I would formulate the theory as 'cutting the hair equals social control'.<sup>1</sup> Dressing the hair may also be ceremonially equivalent to cutting it. (I should have emphasised this rather more than I did in

the original paper, and also pointed out that loose, dishevelled hair can therefore symbolise much of what in most of the paper I attributed to long hair alone.)

The tonsure of the monk is a familiar aspect of Christian religious life, to which Leach refers briefly (*ibid.*, 154) and which at first sight seems to support the theory that shaven head equals celibacy. But the monk takes three vows, of which chastity is only one; the others are poverty and *obedience*. The monk in fact is under discipline, ideally of a most rigorously social type. The anchorite, as Gibbon's quotation makes very clear, is under no social discipline whatsoever and indeed represents rejection of social control in its most extreme degree; yet he, like the monk, abstains from the lusts of the flesh. The monk, of course, is not the only person under the discipline of institutional life who has his hair cut short. The soldier and the convict are other well-known examples, but nobody would suppose that soldiers are ideally intended to refrain from having sexual relations, even if convicts, by reason of their circumstances, are in practice deprived of sex. Thus the cropped head or tonsure in all three cases of monk, soldier and convict signifies that they are under discipline. Orlando Patterson also notes the ubiquity of the shorn head as the mark of the slave:

In Africa we find the shorn head associated with slaves among peoples as varied as the Ila and the Somali. In China, in highland Burma, among the primitive Germanic peoples, the nineteenth century Russians, the Indians of the north-west coast, and several of the South American and Caribbean tribes, the heads of slaves were shorn (in the ancient Near East so was the pubic hair of female slaves). In India and pharaonic Egypt slaves wore their hair shorn except for a pigtail dangling from the crown. (Patterson 1983:60)

By contrast to these groups, we may consider three categories of person who are, in Western society, generally credited with long hair - intellectuals, juvenile rebels against society, and women. It is not difficult to see that in various ways they are, or are thought to be, in some respects less subject to social control than the average man. The intellectual is someone who is, by reason of his interests, remote from the concerns of everyday life, or even positively hostile to and critical of society; and enough has been written about 'hippies' to make any explanation of their long hair somewhat superfluous. But the case of women perhaps needs a little more elucidation. In the first place, they are traditionally concerned with domestic affairs and not with the running of society as a whole, and secondly, they have always been considered to be more governed by their emotions, more whimsical and less predictable than men. (Whether truly or falsely is beside the point - it is still a



widely held social stereotype.) It is of course true that in past centuries men have worn long hair, but in such periods women's hair has been even longer; at the end of the eighteenth century it was not considered unmanly for men to weep publicly, but there is no indication that they outdid women in this respect.

Long hair is therefore frequently a symbol of being in some way outside society, of having less to do with it, or of being less amenable to social control than the average citizen. But the means by which one attains this condition are of course various. Anchorites, witches, intellectuals, hippies and women all have long hair, but there is no single quality which they have in common besides the negative one of being partially or wholly outside society. There is however one characteristic which is often associated with being outside society, for whatever reason: this is animality.

Gibbon's irony delights in emphasizing how men in their search for holiness come to resemble the beasts, and while I am not suggesting that the relationship between spiritual power and beastliness is more than outward and analogical, it is nevertheless a striking resemblance. There is considerable evidence in fact for an association of 'outside society equals hairiness equals animality'. The animal familiars of witches and the wild beasts over which the Egyptian saints had such power, come to mind in this connection. Most primitive societies give animals an important place in their cosmologies and they often symbolize the chaos of untamed nature before the process of socialization. The culture hero Dribidu of the Lugbara as described by Middleton (1960) is a good example of this association:

They [the two culture-heroes] were not human as men are now; Dribidu means 'the hairy one' since he was covered with long hair over most of his body. He is also known as 'Banyale' ('eater of men'), since he ate his children until he was discovered and driven out of his earlier home on the east bank of the Nile...(1960:231)...In our own terms the significant differences between the two periods before and after the heroes is that in the latter the personages were ordinary human beings, who behaved as people behave now, and were members of clans, whereas in the former they behaved in a contrary manner and lived in isolation, in a world in which there were no clans. (ibid., 233)

The theme of 'hairiness = animality, not part of human sociality' is also very well brought out in the following myth of the Kukukuku of Papua New Guinea, in which hairiness is associated with a state of primeval ignorance in which the first men were covered in hair and cooked their food on their women's genitals. A culture-hero in the form of a bird shows them how to make fire and cook their food properly, and when they do this all their hair falls off:

Once upon a time the women cooked the food on their genitals, and everybody ate it. The men ate sweet potatoes raw [i.e. not cooked on a fire]. They smeared the sap from the stem of a plant (*himaluwje*) on branches and thus caught birds, which they dismembered and laid out in the sun. The sun dried them, and they ate them in this way. When it got dark they all went into the men's house to sleep [instead of sitting round the fire as now]. The bird *tabadewje* sawed fire on the branch of a tree. He said: 'I am no bird, I am a man.' The man who had smeared bird-lime on the tree wanted to take the fire, but the bird nevertheless put it out quickly. The man asked: 'What do I do now, then?' Then the bird took a piece of split wood and a bamboo strip and tinder and threw them on the ground. The man sawed with the bamboo strip on the piece of wood and smoke appeared. The bamboo strip broke and he had fire. He roasted a bird and tried eating it. It tasted very good. He took pieces of wood and bamboo strips and dried them on the fire. Then he doused the fire and went to the bachelor house to sleep. The next morning they gave him sweet potatoes that had been cooked on the women's genitals. He said: 'I don't like that; give me raw sweet potatoes!' They gave him raw sweet potatoes; he ate half and put the other half in his string bag. Then he went and cooked it on the fire and ate it, whereupon all the hair of his skin fell off. At that time all men were hairy, because they cooked their food on the women's genitals. The man went back to the men's house and the other men asked him: 'What have you done to make all your hair fall off?' He said: 'I shaved it off with a bamboo knife'. [But eventually he shows them the secret of fire-making, and they, too, lose all their hair, and so to this day men have no hair on their bodies.] (Fischer 1968:395-6, Tr. Hallpike 1979:154)

Again, in the Mesopotamian *Epic of Gilgamesh*, we are told how the goddess Aruru, who had created mankind, was asked by the gods to create a primitive counterpart to the hero Gilgamesh:

In the wilderness (?) she created valiant Enkidu,  
 born of silence, endowed with strength by Ninurta<sup>a</sup>.  
 His whole body was shaggy with hair,  
 he had a full head of hair like a woman,  
 his locks billowed in profusion like Ashnan<sup>b</sup>.  
 He knew neither people nor settled living,  
 but wore a garment like Sumukan<sup>c</sup>.  
 He ate grasses with the gazelles,  
 and jostled at the watering hole with the animals;  
 as with animals, his thirst was slaked with (mere) water. (Kovacs 1989:6)

(a) God of war.

(b) Ashnan, the goddess of grain, was portrayed with hair of billowing grain.

(c) Sumukan was the god of wild animals. Enkidu was clothed in animal skins.

The association of hairiness with pre-social animality could hardly be clearer, and is exactly parallel to the theme of the Kukukuku myth. There were also very strong associations of hairiness, animality, and rebellion against society in traditional Chinese culture. For example,

Comparable to the myth of the wild man in Europe, the hairy man was located beyond the limits of the cultivated field, in the wilderness, the mountains, and the forests: [on]the border of human society, he hovered on the edge of bestiality. Body hair indicated physical regression, generated by the absence of cooked food, decent clothing, and proper behavior. Hair as a symbol of excessive sexuality was

encapsulated in stories about the abduction of humans by hairy men...(Dikötter 1998:52)

Long, unruly hair on Chinese males was taken as a mark of banditry and insurrection. Taiping rebels were known as 'long hairs', reflecting their open defiance of state-imposed conventions...From the perspective of government troops, the sight of rebels with their long hair blowing in the wind as they rode into battle was, quite literally, a vision from hell: Chinese ghosts were also portrayed (in popular iconography) with long, unruly hair...(Watson 1998:179, and see also Cheng 1998)

The Bible, again, provides considerable support for this association between hairiness and various aspects of animality, but little for Leach's hypothesis. Esau, the hunter of wild beasts, was a hairy man, while his brother Jacob, a herdsman dwelling in tents, was a smooth man. Esau also sold his birthright for food (Genesis XXV, 23-7). In Leviticus it is prescribed that a sufferer from leprosy and therefore an outcast, when cured and thereby ready to be reincorporated in society, shall shave off all his hair (Leviticus XIV, 8, 9). The Nazarites, who separated themselves unto the Lord, were never allowed to cut their hair until the end of their separation, when the hair was formally shaved off at the tabernacle (Numbers VI, 1-18). In Deuteronomy (XXI, 10-14) it is prescribed that female captives taken in war, if made wives, shall pare their nails and shave their heads. In the Book of Judges we are told that Samson's strength resided in his hair, and when he is shorn he is as weak as any other man (Judges XVI, 17-19). 2 Samuel XIV, 26 records that Absalom only cut his hair at yearly intervals, and that each polling his hair weighed 200 shekels (estimated at 3 5/7ths lbs avoirdupois, by Hastings 1902:904). He was not remarkable for his fertility, and begot only a daughter and three sons, who pre-deceased him (2 Samuel XIV, 27; 2 Samuel XVIII, 18). His principal claim on our attention is, of course, that he attempted to overthrow his sovereign and his father, King David.

The description of how King Nebuchadnezzar was overthrown and made an outcast is another very clear example of the association of hairiness and the separation from society in the state of nature: '...and he was driven from men, and did eat grass as oxen, and his body was wet with the dew of heaven, till his hairs were grown like eagles' feathers, and his nails like birds' claws' (Daniel IV, 33). In a discussion of St Paul's injunction to women to cover their heads in church, W. F. Howard says: 'It may be a sign of the husband's authority. So Stack and Billerbeck show from Rabbinical sources that the bride walked in the wedding procession with uncovered head as a token of her free maidenhood. Then, as a sign

that her husband's authority was upon her, Jewish usage required that the married woman should always appear with her head covered' (1 Corinthians XI, 3) I should emphasize that I have not been partial in my selection of these Biblical examples in order to prove a point. On the contrary, the examples are a complete list of every significant mention of hair, except those passages dealing with the cutting-off of hair in mourning, an aspect of hair already discussed.

The Bible therefore provides the following associations between long hair, or cutting the hair, and social attributes:

- hairiness = hunter (Esau)
- hairiness = wild beasts (Nebuchadnezzar)
- hairiness = physical strength (Samson)
- hairiness = rebellion (Absalom)
- growing long hair = separation from society to God (Nazarites)
- shaving hair = rejoining society (Nazarites, when lepers are cured)<sup>1</sup>
- shaving hair = submission to captors by women
- covering hair = discipline (women's acceptance of husbands' authority).

The only marginal case among these is that of Samson, in that taken by itself it could be cited as evidence of the association of head hair and sexuality. But it fits equally well with my hypothesis.

Stith-Thompson's *Motif-index of Folk Literature* (1955-8) also provides considerable support for my hypothesis, and little for Leach's. There are twenty instances of hairiness being associated with supernatural or half-human beings, such as fairies, dwarfs, giants, water and wood spirits, devils and mermaids; seven associations with animal-human relationships; three associations with witches; three associations with vegetable-human relations; seven associations with the soul or vitality; and six with asceticism. (I have consulted only the references to 'hair' and 'hairy'.) There were no clear references to head hair in association with sexuality, though Leach might disagree with me.

This is not to deny that in some cases the head and its hair may have a clear sexual significance. For example, it is evident from Onians's account of Greek and Roman beliefs about the body that the head was seen as the source of semen, in the form of cerebro-spinal fluid, (Onians 1954:109-10) and that the hair was an indication of sexual vigour (ibid., 232). Yet he also makes it clear that these beliefs were derived from the observation of animal and human physiology, and not the repressed workings of their subconscious minds, and the same is true of Hershman's (1974) discussion of the explicit sexual symbolism of the head and hair among Hindu and

Sikh Punjabis. Nor do either of these examples provide any evidence for castration symbolism, and in any case I have emphasised that there is no reason at all to expect that hair should only have one symbolic meaning.<sup>2</sup> But it does seem that hair and its cutting are more usually associated in ritual with animality/sociality, indiscipline/restraint than with sexuality and especially with castration.

The chief deficiency of Leach's hypothesis however is not that it applies to a much narrower range of facts than he leads us to suppose, but that on its own ground, where social status is overtly associated with hair and with sex, it fails to provide any explanation of why long hair is associated with ascetics and with men like Samson, and why short hair is associated with monks and soldiers.

My primary objection to Leach's theory therefore is simply that it takes account of very few of the facts. But there is a more fundamental weakness in his theory, which it shares with all such psychological theories. When an anthropologist is trying to understand the rituals of an alien culture he does not concern himself with what the symbols stand for in the subconscious of each participant; indeed, he has no means of knowing this. His mode of analysis will be twofold. He will ask the natives what each symbol means (without necessarily eliciting a satisfactory answer) and make a list of the occurrences of each symbol in its ritual context. When he has collected sufficient data of this type he will try to discern the structure of the symbolism and its relation to the people's cosmology, social organization and values. A good example of this procedure is Turner's paper on symbols of *passage* in Ndembu circumcision ritual (1962). Of course, the success of the interpretation will depend on the quality of the anthropologist's intelligence, imagination and training; the facts cannot interpret themselves. But the point I am making is that once the anthropologist has discerned the structure of the symbolism in the culture he is investigating, his work is complete. The structure is *there* in the symbolism, just as the structure is *there* in a language analysed by the linguist.

The advantage of treating symbolism as 'about' the world, rather than 'about' the subconscious, is that the relations between symbols and the world are empirically verifiable, and it is accordingly possible to evaluate different explanations of a particular piece of symbolism in terms of how well they fit the facts. Thus the advantage of my theory that cutting hair equals social control is that it can be applied fairly rigorously to the logic of social situations in which hair is symbolically significant. In other words, we do not have to ask ourselves: 'What is going on in the

minds of people who cut off their hair after being cured of leprosy?’ (quite possibly nothing at all is going on in their minds beyond the acceptance of a social rule); we simply consider the structural form of the evidence. With psychological theories such as Leach’s, however, we cannot relate a people’s symbolism to the facts of their natural environment and their society, but only to one of an indefinite number of theories about the subconscious.

In an interesting paper, Patrick Olivelle has said that ‘Hallpike never shows why hair and only hair has become almost universally a powerful symbol of the relationship between individuals and society.’ (1998:33) But since there is a clear cross-cultural association between hairiness and animality and a pre- or non-social lifestyle (like nudity or eating one’s food raw), then one can see why control of the hair through cutting or dressing should also have very frequent associations with conformity to social norms and discipline. This being so, it seems to follow of necessity that hair will indeed be an exceptionally appropriate symbolic means for expressing ‘the relationship between individuals and society’.

As well as presenting a modified, but still quite unconvincing, defence of psychoanalytic theory (ibid., 37-8), Olivelle also says that ‘I posit that the root meaning from which most, though not necessarily all, operational meanings of hair is derived is a multifaceted complex consisting of sexual maturity, drive, potency, and fertility. For the sake of brevity, I shall henceforth refer to the root meaning simply as sexual maturity’. (ibid., 37) One would entirely agree that hair may convey a strong impression of physical vitality and drive, which will include sexual maturity and fertility. But we do not need to appeal to the subconscious to recognize these truths, and to reduce the root meaning of hair to ‘sexual maturity’ simply fails to address, let alone explain, all those ethnographic facts of hair symbolism that centre on its various associations with animality and the wild, in which a mature and vigorous sexuality is only one component of a much larger picture.

(I have said more about hair and symbolism generally in *The Foundations of Primitive Thought*, pp. 152-7, including a discussion of Hershman’s 1974 paper on hair symbolism among Hindu and Sikh Punjabis, and also in Hallpike 1974a, 1978b, 1979d, 1997b, 1999a.)

### Notes

1. I did not, however, realise the symbolic possibility that, particularly in India, ‘Shaving reduces the individual to the state of an embryo or an infant – the asexual and hairless condition’ (Olivelle 1998:18), which is appropriate for ritual rebirth. Ascetics when ritually renouncing the world may therefore also be shaven, on which Olivelle comments:

‘Elements of the ascetic initiatory ritual also indicate that shaving symbolizes the return to the sexually and socially undifferentiated status of an infant. During the Hindu ritual, for example, the shaven ascetic takes off all his clothes. The naked renouncer is significantly called *jātarūpadhara*, which literally means ‘one who bears the form he had at birth’. The ascetic is not just naked; he is reduced to the condition in which he was born, to the state of a new-born infant. I believe that shaving is part of the symbolic complex that signifies his return to ‘the form he had at birth’. The absence of hair, just as much as nakedness, takes the initiate back to the prepubertal state of infancy.’ (Olivelle 1998: 21)

2. It is necessary to point out here that Hershman quite incorrectly attributes to me ‘the unlikely proposition that hair behaviour has precisely the same meaning in every culture’. (1974:291). While ‘Social hair’ (SH) advanced a particular hypothesis on the interpretation of hair symbolism, in opposition to Leach’s, I also made it quite clear that there could be no question of reducing all forms of the ritual use of hair to a single formula – hence the preliminary discussion of mourning, extensions of the person, soul-stuff, vitality, and magic, and the listing of all the physical characteristics of different types of hair. I said explicitly ‘...in view of [hair’s] manifold characteristics, which I have just set out, it would be surprising if all its ritual and symbolic manifestations could be reduced to a single origin’, (SH, 257), and ‘So far in this article I have tried to demonstrate something of the multiplicity of hair in its ritual aspects...There is thus no reason why a theory of hair in ritual should be obliged to reduce all the manifestations of hair to a single origin – symbolic castration. It is only when we realise that the ritual uses of hair are of widely differing types that we can attempt to explain any of them’. (SH, 259)

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