2 hair and society: social significance of hair in south asian traditions

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The human body has become in recent years the subject of renewed interest across a spectrum of disciplines, from sociology to literary theory. Approaches to its study vary, of course, with each discipline. Since the groundbreaking study "Techniques of the Body" by Marcel Mauss (1935), however, an underlying assumption in the human sciences has been that the human body is not merely a physical and biological reality confronting human consciousness as an external and independent entity, but primarily a cultural construct carrying social and cultural meanings and messages. Attention has also been drawn by many sociologists and social anthropologists to a central dimension of the cultural construction of the body: the human body stands as the primary symbol of the social body, or the body politic (Turner 1984). Mary Douglas posits the interrelationship between the two types of bodies in clear terms:

> The social body constrains the way the physical body is perceived. The physical experience of the body, always modified by the social categories through which it is known, sustains a particular view of society. There is a continual exchange of meanings between the two kinds of bodily experience so that each reinforces the categories of the other. (Douglas 1982:65)

Berger and Luckman (1967), furthermore, have drawn our attention to a central dimension of culture: all cultural creations, including the human body, have a dialectic nature. On the one hand, it is a human product, is nothing but a human product, and is continuously changed and recreated by human activity. On the other hand, culture stands against the individual as a reality that imposes its own logic on individual consciousness, even though cultural grammars, just as those of languages, are very elastic, and individuals continuously change them in the very process of using them.

This chapter deals with just one aspect of the cultural creation of the body—the symbolic use of hair, especially the hair of the head and face—within the cultural history of just one region—South Asia.[1] Yet, attention to the dialectic nature of this symbol is essential to my approach. Just like language, hair symbolism imposes its own grammar on the individuals in a given period of a given society; an individual is unable to produce an entirely new symbolic value of hair from his or her own subjective consciousness and still be able to communicate with the rest of that society. Hence, we can justifiably seek to understand the grammar of this symbol. On the other hand, being a cultural product, the grammar of this symbol is not rigid; it is elastic and subject to diverse individual appropriations and uses. Such individual uses will, over time, change the very grammar of the symbol. We should, therefore, also seek to understand how that grammar may have changed over time.[2] The comparison with language is instructive. Although English imposes itself on my will, and I am not free to use English in any way I want and still expect to be understood, yet my own usage will change the very language that imposes its rules on me. The point I want to make is that searching for the underlying grammar of hair symbolism, as I will do in this chapter, does not imply some form of social determinism.

I will examine some of the ways hair is used as a public symbol to communicate a variety of socially significant meanings—in a special way, to demarcate the interstices within the complex South Asian societies, to mark their internal boundaries. But my interest in hair symbolism goes beyond the merely descriptive. I want to find out some of the reasons why humans, especially South Asians, have placed and continue to place so much value and significance on hair. To twist Lévi-Strauss's expression, why have humans found hair something so good to think and to communicate with? What patterns emerge from this "thinking with hair" and how do they relate to broader issues of individual and social existence?[3]

Symbols, like words, do not operate in isolation but within a web of relations and oppositions to other symbols. This context within which alone a symbol can be adequately understood, is what I would call the "grammar of a symbol." To understand why, for instance, a Sikh male is required to wear his hair long and to cover it with a turban, we need to examine the other customs that demarcate a Sikh male from Sikh females and from non-Sikhs, as well as the historical context in which the custom was created (Uberoi 1967). It is this symbolic grammar—in both its synchronic and diachronic dimensions—of Sikh maleness that will provide us with the context for teasing out the social meanings of Sikh hair.

Our starting point, however, must include (1) as full and accurate a description as possible of the customs, practices, and rituals concerning hair found within South Asian culture and history, (2) an examination of the broader symbolic grammar within which these practices are located, and (3) a study of the explanations and exegeses of these practices offered by native sources, whether they be informants or texts. Given the limits of space and ability, it will be presumptuous of me even to contemplate the completion of such an enormous task. I will therefore limit myself to describing in greater detail some ritual uses of hair and to drawing attention in passing to others, in the hope that we will have sufficient evidence to tease out some broader social meanings of hair symbolism in South Asia.

Hair Practices

With the help of Table 1, I will first explore the broad spectrum of South Asian rites, customs, and institutions involving some form of hair manipulation. This chart clearly does not contain an exhaustive listing; hair manipulation, especially shaving, pops up in the most unexpected of places. Alter (1992:322), for example, has drawn our attention to a rather unusual group, the wrestlers: "Like some *sannyasis*, wrestlers shave their heads completely or at least have their hair cut very short. . . . *Sannyasis* and wrestlers alike are distinguished from other men by their radical attitude toward hair as a symbol of identity."

In India symbolic manipulations of hair appear as variations of three central themes: (1) the groomed control of hair, (2) shaving the hair of the head (in the case of adult males this involves also the shaving of the beard), and (3) the neglect of hair resulting in either

Table 1

PHYSICAL SEPARATION	SOCIETY	RITUAL SEPARATION
Matted Hair and Beard	**Controlled Hair**	**Uncontrolled Hair**
Forest hermit Exile of the ages Political exiles	ADULT MALE	*Pollution Separation*
Hair, beard, nails left to grow without any grooming	Hair groomed: cut or long —arranged close to head and/or covered by turban	Women in mourning Menstruating women
		Vows of Vengence
	ADULT FEMALE	e.g. Draupadī and Cāṇakya
	Hair groomed: always long —arranged either close to head or braided and left hanging; — never covered by turban; but may be covered in other ways	**Shaving**
		Temporary Separation
		Initiatory Separation
		First hair cut *(caula)* First beard/hair cut *(gondāna)* Vedic initiation *(upanayana)* Sacrificial consecration Pilgrimage
		Reintegration into Society
LONG-HAIR ASCETICS	SIKH MALE	Outcastes Lepers End of studentship King after consecration Other impure people
Avadhūta Śaivite ascetics Sri Lankan female/male	Unshaven head and beard hair enclosed in turban	*Pollution Separation*
		Mourning son
		Penetential Separation
		Prior vows and penances
		Permanent Separation
		Polution Separation
		Widows, corpses
		Penal Separation
		People guilty of major crimes
		Ascetic Separation
		Hindu/Buddhist/Jain Ascetic—both male and female [wrestlers]

loose unkempt hair or dirty matted hair, often accompanied by the neglect of nails, and, in the case of males, of the beard. Without denying the possibility of personal meanings—which, after all, are only to be expected, given the dialectic nature of cultural products—all these types of hair manipulation, I hope to show, communicate deeply social meanings, placing the individual whose hair is so manipulated in different relationships both to the broader society and to the segment of that society to which that individual belongs.

Groomed Hair

Groomed and controlled hair is the hallmark of people with publicly recognized roles within society, in a special way of adult males and females (Hallpike 1969). I believe that the "controlled social hair" of such individuals, especially of married males (given the patriarchal nature of traditional South Asian societies), is the point of reference of most—although not necessarily all—other hair manipulations from which they derive their meaning and significance. This is simply to say that society is the ultimate point of reference even in its critique and rejection.

The hair of an adult male in modern India is usually short and combed and his beard and mustache shaved or trimmed. The medical treatise of Suśruta advises a man to keep his hair and nails trimmed, and to oil and comb his hair regularly.[4] The latter advice, as well as trimming the nails,[5] clearly applies to women as well. Customs regarding male hair may have varied according to caste.[6] Brahmin men, for example, were expected to shave their heads but leave a tuft of hair, the topknot, unshaved. This topknot was generally kept tied in a knot when a Brahmin appeared in public.[7]

The hair of an adult female, especially a married woman, is long but restrained by a knot, by one or several braids, or by some other means; some women may even cover their hair, especially when they appear in public. The distinctive ways in which hair is worn by adult males and females clearly symbolize their different gender roles. Even though short hair appears to be distinctive of the male in modern South Asia, the picture is less clear in ancient and medieval periods.[8] Both males and females are depicted in Indian art and sculpture, for example, with long hair but with distinctive coiffures (Padma 1991). It will be an interesting study to detect gender differences in these modes of coiffure, but one distinctive element is the long braided hair of females.[9] What is common to both genders, however, is that their hair is groomed and controlled.

Loose Hair

The groomed control of hair is especially demanded when people present themselves in public. Thus, when a person appears in public with loose and uncontrolled hair, it carries a variety of meanings and messages (see the chapters by Watson and Miller). Untying the hair before a king, for example, is regarded in the legal literature as an insult subject to punishment (Lingat 1973:239). On the other hand, legal authorities uniformly affirm that a thief should run to the king, with his hair loose (*muktakeśa*) and carrying a club on his shoulder, to confess his crime.[10] Here loose hair in the presence of the king appears to indicate the thief's recognition of his status as a sinner and an outlaw removed from the bounds of society.

Loose hair, especially of women, is a sign of domestic informality and even of sexual intimacy. In sculpture, for example, erotic couples are depicted with loose and falling hair (Padma 1991:266–67). In iconography disheveled and flying hair may indicate the demonic and the female outside of male control, as in representations of Kālī.[11] Marglin (1985:54) observes: "The single goddesses are often represented iconographically with loose flowing hair, which signals their celibate state." Indeed, it may signal even more their liminal and dangerous status. An early medieval ascetic text, for example, warns mendicants not to beg from a *muktakeśinī* ("a woman with loose hair"), a term which could indicate either that there is sexual intimacy or, as we shall presently see, that she is having her monthly period.[12]

What is clear, however, is that males and in a special way females are not expected to present themselves in public with loose and ungroomed hair. If they do, their actions carry publicly recognized meanings—they are making a public statement about their social status.

Loose and especially disheveled hair is associated in a special way with temporary ritual separations from society. The most common instance of such a separation is that of women during their menstrual period, when the hair is left unbraided and unwashed. As Hershman (1974:278), in his detailed study of hair among the Punjabis, has shown, the expression "I have to wash my head," is used euphemistically by even contemporary women to indicate the onset of their menstrual period. Their ritual separation makes them untouchables; no social intercourse with them is permitted, including touching. Menstruating women do not cook or even sit with the rest of the household to eat. Loose and disheveled hair of women, but sometimes also of men,[13] is also a sign of mourning, another ritually impure state when normal ritual activities and social relations are suspended.[14] Loose hair on all these occasions of ritual separation tells the world "I cannot be approached."

There are also two prominent cases in Indian literature where the hair is left loose until a vow of vengeance has been fulfilled. Literary sources depict Draupadī, the wife of the Pāṇḍava brothers in the *Mahābhārata*, as leaving her hair loose after she was insulted in public by the Kauravas until their final defeat and death (Hiltebeitel 1981). Her hair was, in fact, already loose when the outrage occurred, because she was then having her period. Cāṇakya, the prime minister of Candragupta Maurya, provides the other example. Viśākhadatta, in his Sanskrit play *Mudrārākṣasa* (Act 1, verse 9), depicts him as keeping his Brahmanical top knot untied until he had fulfilled his vow of placing Candragupta securely on the throne and vanquishing completely the dynasty of the Nandas. In both these cases the vow of vengeance suspends the normal social roles of Draupadī and Cāṇakya until the completion of their vows, a feature such vows share with penitential vows I examine below that require the shaving of the head.

People who display loose and uncontrolled hair in public, therefore, appear to have temporarily suspended—for a variety of reasons and with a variety of consequences—their normally assigned roles in society.

Shaving

Clearly the most common and possibly the most significant manipulation of hair in South Asian societies is the shaving of the head.[15] It occurs so frequently in ritual settings that space does not permit me to fully explore individual instances. Instead, I derive the symbolic grammar of shaving from a brief survey of the broad spectrum and a closer examination of a few of the rituals of shaving. The dominant social meaning of shaving in South Asian traditions that emerges from this examination is the separation of the shaven individual from society, a separation certainly more profound and often more permanent than that signaled by loose hair. For heuristic purposes I distinguish different types of social separation signaled by shaving, both in terms of duration and the type of separation involved.

TEMPORARY SEPARATION

Initiatory Separation: The most common temporary separation occurs in initiation ceremonies. Since van Gennep's (1960) ground-breaking work *Rites de Passage*, initiation rites are commonly recognized as having three moments: separation, liminality, and integration. The initiate is

first ritually separated from society and from his or her social role and rank and left in an ill-defined marginal state. The initiatory rite concludes with the reintegration of the initiate into his or her new status within society. In South Asian traditions almost every initiatory separation is accompanied and signaled by the ritual shaving of the initiate.

When a young boy undergoes vedic initiation (*upanayana*), when a sacrificer is consecrated (*dīkṣā*) prior to his performing a vedic sacrifice,[16] when a king is anointed (*abhiṣeka*)—at all these initiatory rites the subject is first shaved. Indeed, these ceremonies are presented expressly as new births of the individuals (Gonda 1965:331). Many explicit statements and symbolic enactments of the initiates' return to the womb are found in these ceremonies:[17] "The sacrificial priests make into an embryo again the man whom they prepare for the sacrificial consecration (*Aitareya Brāhmaṇa* 1.3.1). Shaving of the initiate clearly belongs to the same symbolic grammar. Shaving reduces the individual to the state of an embryo or an infant—the asexual and hairless condition.

The first cutting of a child's hair (*caula* or *cūḍākaraṇa*) is also a rite (*saṃskāra*) that marks a transition. The ceremony is performed generally when the child is about three years old. The mantra accompanying the shaving states that the shaving is intended to assure a long life. The connection with fertility is implicit in the places where the cut hair is buried, for example, in a cow pen or at the foot of an Udumbara tree.[18] Another life-cycle rite is connected with the first shaving of the beard (*keśānta*, also called *godāna*, at which the head is also shaved), performed at age sixteen and associated with sexual maturity (Pandey 1969:143–45).

The final rite of passage in the Hindu liturgy is the funeral. It is regarded by the Brahmanical tradition as the last sacrifice of the deceased at which his own body becomes the victim offered in the cremation fire. Here too the individual is reborn through the sacrifice. Now, according to most ritual texts the head or even the entire body of the corpse is shaved prior to cremation.[19]

I believe that initiatory shaving, especially the shaving of the boy at his vedic initiation and of the sacrificer at his consecration, was paradigmatic and influenced the ritual articulation of most ritual separations in South Asian societies.

Initiatory Reintegration: The other side of the coin of initiatory separation is the reintegration into society of people who have been separated for a considerable period of time due to a variety of factors. Outcasts, the polluted, students at the completion of their period of study, the king after his year-long seclusion following his consecration—all are reintegrated into their respective social ranks through ceremonies that feature the ritual shaving of the head. During the year-long separation the king leaves his hair uncut and ungroomed; he does not bathe and sleeps in the shed where the sacred fire is kept. The student, on the other hand, either lets his hair grow into a matted condition (*jaṭila*) or shaves the head but keeps his topknot unshaved.[20] In these ceremonies of reintegrating people after protracted periods of social separation, shaving appears to mark the conclusion of that period—a kind of separation from their liminal state—and their assimilation into their new social roles.

Noteworthy is the absence of shaving during the marriage rite, which is the most central life-cycle ritual within the Brahmanical system. The reason for this absence is unclear, but it appears that for the adult male the marriage ceremony is the final act of a process that starts at the conclusion of his vedic studies. The final bath and the other ceremonies associated with his return from his teacher's house remove him from the ascetic, celibate, and mendicant life of a student. Such an individual, technically called *snātaka* ("bathed"), is then decorated with garlands, ornaments, and finery. His status is said to be higher than that of a king. It is significant that in the legal literature the provisions for a *snātaka* often overlap those for a married householder, who is also often referred to as *snātaka*. The interval between the completion of studies and marriage is supposed to be relatively short. We may thus view the shaving prior to the ritual bath at the conclusion of his studentship as the first step and the marriage itself as the final chapter of the reintegration of the student into his new social role and status.

Pollution Separation: Social intercourse is forbidden with people who are tainted with ritual pollution. Such people are ritually separated during the period of impurity. Some of these temporary periods of separation, such as those created by the death of a close relative, can also be marked by shaving. A son, for example, is expected to shave his head at the death of his father or mother.[21]

Penitential Separation: A person undergoing a penance or vow (*vrata*) also is separated from society, and many of the major penitential practices of Hinduism are preceded by the shaving of the penitent. Some

sources give a reason for this practice: sins become lodged in the hair. Thus a person who wishes to expiate sins should shave the hair.[22] People also shave when they go to a place of pilgrimage (*tīrtha*), an act which may be regarded as either an initiatory or a penitential separation from society.[23]

PERMANENT SEPARATION

Pollution Separation: A permanent ritual separation from society occurs in the case of a widow. The social position of a widow has undergone repeated changes in Indian history. There is at least one period when the ritually impure, inauspicious, and unmarriageable state of a widow was signaled by the shaving of her head. A frequently cited verse states: "The long hair of a widow's head grows in order to bind her husband. A widow should, therefore, always keep her head shaved."[24] The permanence of this condition, moreover, required that she keep her head permanently shaven, and in this and other customs a widow often resembled an ascetic.[25]

Penal Separation: Major crimes, such as murder, were punished by death, but when the capital punishment was not meted out, as when the criminal happened to be a Brahmin, the criminal was shaved and lived the life of a beggar outside of society.[26]

Ascetic Separation: The best known ritual shaving associated with permanent separation from society is that of the Hindu *saṃnyāsin* or renouncer, the Buddhist and Jain monk, and their female counterparts. A central feature of the rites of initiation into the ascetic life in all these traditions is the removal of head and facial hair. Throughout their life these ascetics keep their head and face clear of hair by periodic shaving.[27]

Even though, as I will argue, the central social meaning of ascetic shaving, just as the shaving of students, sacrificers, and widows, is that of separation from society, sexual symbolism is not lacking. Not just ascetics, but all people ritually shaven are forbidden to engage in sex. For most this is a temporary condition required by a rite of passage or necessitated by ritual pollution, but for the ascetic (and often also for the widow) it is permanent, and therein lies the difference between ascetic and other forms of ritual shaving. Social control, after all, is primarily sexual control, and the controlled hair of social individuals symbolizes their participation in the socially sanctioned structures for sexual expression, especially marriage (Hallpike 1969). Removal of hair separates the individual from that structure and from the legitimate exercise of sexual activity. Shaving for the ascetic, I believe, indicates his or her removal from socially sanctioned sexual structures, and, a fortiori, also from other types of social structures and roles.[28] In the Indian context, this implies loss of caste, inability to own property, and lack of legal standing in a court of law for most purposes (Olivelle 1984:140–51).

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.

The sexual symbolism of hair also helps explain some interesting features of ascetic behavior toward hair. It is well known that Jain monks at their initiation and periodically throughout their life remove their head hair by tearing them by the roots, a painful procedure I believe. That this custom was not limited to the Jains is demonstrated by its presence in a somewhat abbreviated form in the Hindu ritual of ascetic initiation. Here the ascetic's hair is first shaved, but five or seven hairs at the crown are left uncut.[29] At the conclusion of the rite, the ascetic plucks these few hairs from the roots. Although one may attribute these practices to the common ascetic propensity to bodily torture and pain, this literal eradication of hair, especially viewed in the light of the broader grammar of ascetic bodily symbols, can be seen as a symbolic and ritual uprooting of sexual drives and attachments.

That shaving is the opposite of sexual engagement is also brought out in the head-shaving rites of Hindu ascetics during the annual liturgical cycle. They are not allowed to shave any time they may want. Rather the prescribed time for shaving is at the junctures between the five Indian seasons: spring, summer, rains, autumn, and winter. Now the Sanskrit term for season is *ṛtu*, the same term that is used to indicate the monthly menstrual cycle of a woman. Brahmanical law and ethics require a husband to engage in sexual intercourse with his wife in her *ṛtu*, that is, soon after the end of her period when a new "season," a new fertile period, begins for his wife (*Manusmṛti* 3.45). I

think it is not farfetched to see a correspondence between the husband approaching his wife at the beginning of her fertile season (*ṛtugamana*), and the ascetic shaving his head at the beginning of each calendrical season (*ṛtuvapana*). The *ṛtugamana* is thus transformed into *ṛtuvapana*. This shaving appears to symbolize an ascetic's renunciation of sex precisely at the time—at least in a terminological sense—when the ethics of society requires a married man to engage in it. Significantly, it is this very need for periodic shaving that is denied in the case of the Buddha. According to a Jātaka account, the Buddha cut his hair with his sword to the length of two fingers-breath. His hair remained the same length for the rest of his life, signifying, it would seem, the total extinguishing (*nirvāṇa*) of his sexual fires.[30]

A closer examination of the three institutions involving either permanent or extended periods of separation from society marked by head-hair shaving—the vedic student, the widow, and the world renouncer—indicates their structural similarity. Indeed, the Brahmanical legal literature frequently brackets these three institutions together because many legal provisions are common to all three.[31] They share similar characteristics: all are shaven-headed, all are forbidden to have sexual relations, all receive their food from others, all are expected not to adorn themselves or to participate in amusements, and all have a marginal legal status—they do not own property, for example, and are not permitted to enter into contracts or to take part in legal proceedings, such as being a witness or a surety in a court of law. They lead a penitential life, sleeping on the floor, not chewing betel, not anointing their bodies, and eating little. Students are reduced to the level of servants of their teachers. Both students and ascetics move out of their homes and are reduced to the status of beggars; neither is affected by pollution at the death of a relative.[32]

Indeed, when we look at the other prolonged states of separation signaled by shaving, we detect many of these same features. I want to focus here especially on food. People who are either in a permanent or a prolonged state of ritual separation, including ascetics, vedic students, widows, and criminals, do not own food; they have to obtain their food from people in society.[33] During shorter periods of separation, people either fast or eat food cooked and given to them by people within society. There is a parallel between the restrictions with regard to food and sex, both being derived from their removal from social structures and roles. I want, however, to highlight one aspect of the food habits of shaven individuals.

Apart from caste endogamy, the most distinctive feature of Hindu society consists of dietary restrictions that limit the exchange of food across caste boundaries. The purest food is your own food. Those who are ritually separated from society, however, live in a liminal state defined by the absence of boundaries. This absence is symbolized, I believe, by their acceptance of food from others—in the case of ritual beggars, from people whose level of purity cannot be easily determined; hence the legal fiction that begged food (*bhikṣā*) is always pure. Begging is the paradigmatic opposite of the restrictive laws of food exchange. The one establishes and reinforces social boundaries; the other symbolizes the lack, or, as in the case of ascetic ideology, the transcendence, of such boundaries. Significantly, Hindu law forbids householders from accepting cooked food from other people.[34] The food of shaven people, likewise, becomes unfit for others: people are instructed, as we have noted, not to touch the food of ascetics and people consecrated for a sacrifice (*dīkṣita*).

Shaven individuals of widely different sorts, from ascetics to criminals, are excluded from the two central institutional spheres of society: the sexual and the economic. Celibacy and mendicancy are the results of the separation of shaven individuals from social structures, whatever the cause and motive of that separation.

Neglected Hair

Finally, we have a unique manipulation of hair by refusing to manipulate it at all—that is, the utter neglect of hair. The most common instance of neglected hair is the so-called matted hair (*jaṭā*) associated with forest hermits.[35] At least in its early history, neglected and matted hair symbolized ideally and typically an individual's physical separation from society and civilized living, even though there are instances when the *jaṭā* is recommended for other individuals separated from social living but not necessarily from social geography, such as vedic students (see above n.20).

To understand the symbolism of matted hair it is necessary to locate it within the larger grammar of the symbols associated with physical withdrawal from society in ancient India. Besides long and matted hair, bodily symbols of forest living included a long and uncut beard in the case of males, long and uncut nails, eating only uncultivated forest produce, clothes of tree bark or animal skin, and frequently also bodily uncleanliness.[36] People with matted hair are required to live in the forest or wilderness; they are repeatedly

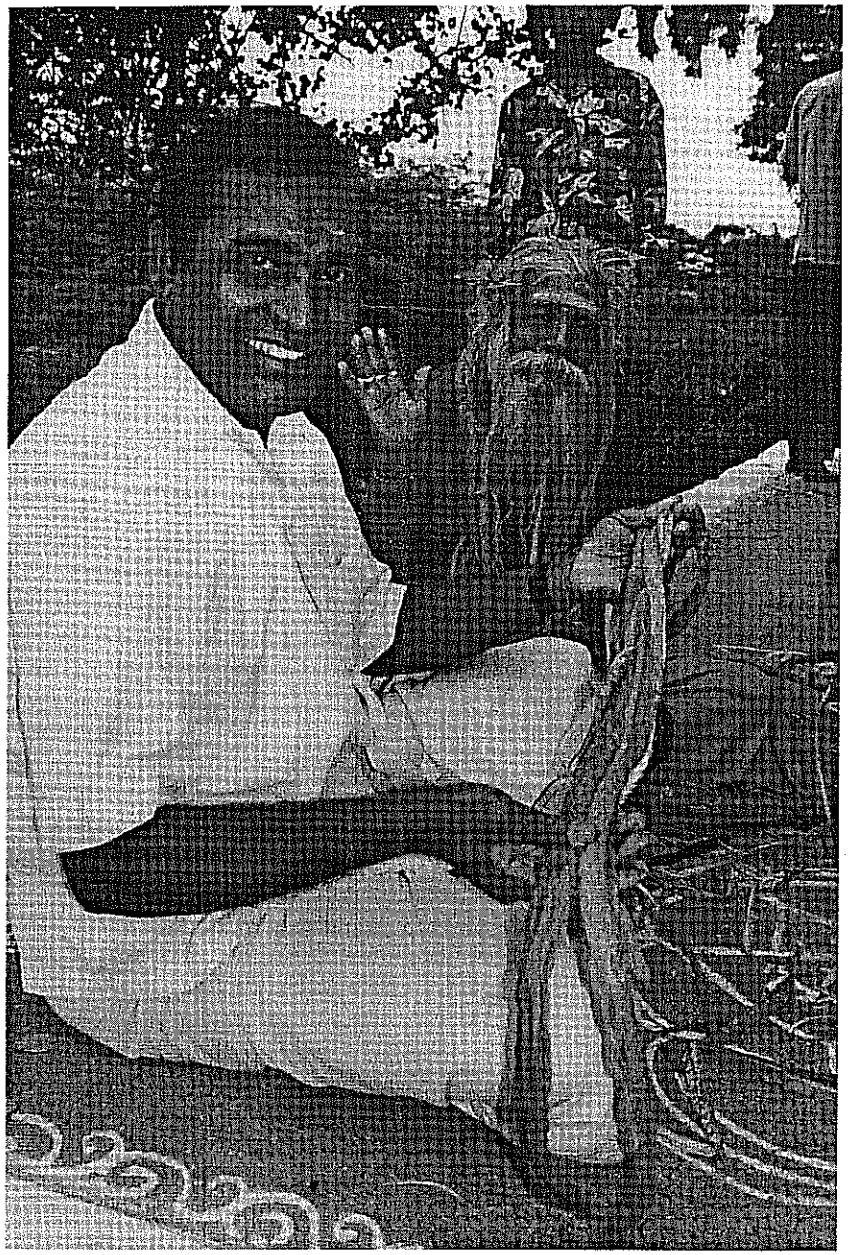

Figure 1. A Tamil *sādhu* named Balanand, visiting a festival for the south Indian god Kūttāṇṭavar near Coimbatore, unwinds his matted locks and draws admiration from a festival-goer. Photo by Alf Hiltebeitel.

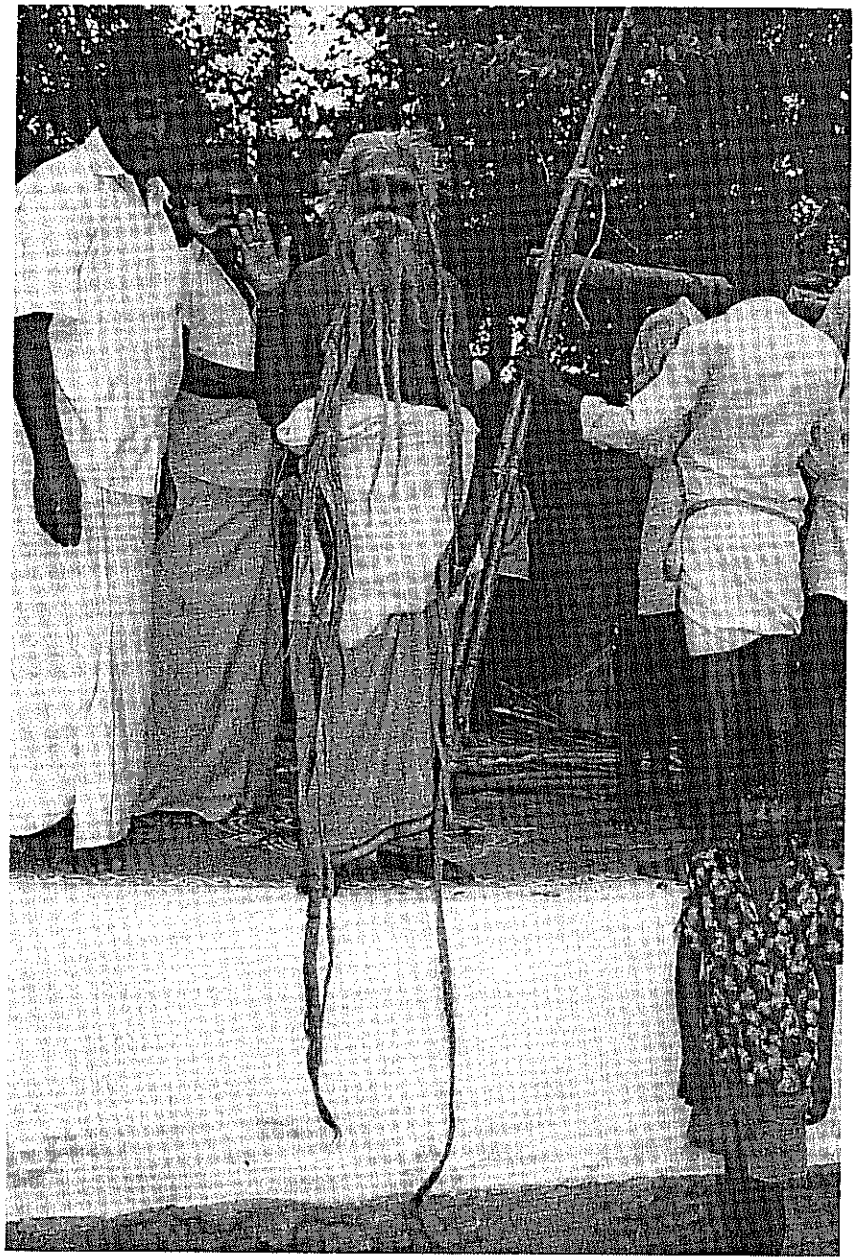

Figure 2. A Tamil *sādhu* shows the length of his matted locks, which, he says, have grown uncut for fifty years since he was age seven. Photo by Alf Hiltebeitel.

admonished "not to step on plowed land," the prime symbol of civilized geography.[37] They are often said to imitate the habits of wild animals. One can decipher from this symbolic grammar the following statement: a matted-hair individual withdraws from all culturally mediated products and institutions and from all culturally demarcated geographical areas and returns to the state of nature, the condition of the wild, to the way of life of animals. Not grooming the hair, not controlling it in any way, letting it grow naturally into a wild and matted condition—all this appears to symbolize a person's total and absolute withdrawal from social structures and controls and from human culture as such.[38]

In Indian history we can identify at least three distinct types of matted-hair people who have withdrawn or have been forced to withdraw from society. First, there are the forest hermits called Vaikhānasa or Vānaprastha, and second, the aged. Old people, especially old kings, both within the Hindu institution of the four orders of life (*āśramas*) and outside that structure, were expected to leave their family and society and assume a forest mode of life.[39] These two classes—the hermits and the retirees—are often collapsed into a single category in Indian legal literature. The third class consists of political exiles. The epic heroes of the *Mahābhārata* and the *Rāmāyaṇa*, the five Pāṇḍava brothers and Rāma, for example, are all sent into political exile. Significantly, political exiles assume the bodily symbols and the mode of life of forest hermits just as criminals assume the life style of shaven ascetics.

People and groups viewed by the mainstream of society as standing outside social boundaries, such as the tribal and forest peoples of India and the Sri Lankan Veddas, are also depicted in art and popular imagination with long and unkempt hair.

Exceptions to Ritual and Physical Separation

Although I call these "exceptions" for the sake of convenience, they illustrate rather the extremely loose nature of any cultural grammar. They demonstrate the ease with which individuals and groups can cross from one symbolic domain to another.

The first example is the Sikh male.[40] He is not permitted to cut any of his hair—head hair or beard—from birth until death. An adult Sikh male is distinguished by his long hair and beard. He is, however, married and part of the social fabric. To understand the hair symbolism of Sikh males we have to locate it within the historical context—

North India between the fifteenth and the eighteenth century—that gave birth to the Sikh tradition. Coming from the background of devotional religion (*bhakti*) and saints (*sant*) of northern India, the early Sikh gurus deliberately drew a contrast between the Sikh bodily symbols and those of both the traditional Hindu renouncer with his shaven head and the Moslem with his circumcised penis. The Sikh holy man, by contrast, has long hair, is married, and is uncircumcised. There is a structural inversion between Hindu renouncers and Sikhs. The Sikh householder, the representative of a new form of holiness, stands, in structural opposition to two Hindu institutions: the ordinary householder because the Sikh is a holy man, and the renouncer because the Sikh affirms holiness within marriage and society. This dual opposition is symbolized on the one hand by the Sikh long hair and on the other by the turban that encloses and controls the hair and by the well-groomed and waxed beard. An interesting historical point is that the Sikh long hair is itself a symbol borrowed from another and by then obsolete form of separation from society, the uncut hair and beard of the forest hermit. Yet, as part of the social fabric, the uncut hair of the Sikh is not neglected; it is washed, oiled, combed, and enclosed within a turban—a traditional way of hair control in India. As Uberoi (1967:96) has pointed out, the symbolism of the five *k's* expresses power and its control. The comb controls the power of the hair, the steel bangle controls the power of the sword, and the underwear (*kach*) the power of the uncircumcised penis.

As the Sikh male crosses the boundary between society and ritual separation from it, so the long matted hair of certain types of Hindu ascetics living within society stands at the boundary between ritual and physical separation from society. There were and are a variety of such ascetics, including those of some Śaivaite sects and those known in the ascetic literature as Avadhūtas. We must include within this class the Sri Lankan male and female matted-hair ascetics described by Gananath Obeyesekere (1981) in his *Medusa's Hair*. The literature makes it clear that the Avadhūtas, and possibly also other Śaivaite ascetics, let their hair grow and become matted to symbolize their liberated status and freedom from normal ascetic rules. Thus they let their hair grow to show their transcendence of the shaven-headed state of the ordinary ascetic. They, like the Buddha, have no need to periodically shave their head. The Avadhūta symbol of matted hair, therefore, should be understood not in relation to the adult male in society but in relation to the mainstream asceticism of shaven monks, an institution these ascetics claim to have transcended.

A Search for Meanings

The Native Exegesis

It would be equally naive to limit scholarly investigations to the meanings assigned to rites by the actors themselves or by the native tradition and to ignore the meanings and interpretations offered by that tradition. Both the rites and the indigenous interpretations of the rites constitute the data that the scholar must take into account.

As with most condensed and central symbols of a society, indigenous exegesis of hair is neither extensive nor frequent. The ascetic literature, for example, never tells us why an ascetic must shave his head. This block in native exegesis, which generally waxes eloquent in most other areas of ritual practice, suggests some level of discomfort in dealing explicitly with this symbol.[41]

One aspect of hair that stands out clearly in native exegesis, however, is its impurity.[42] Most ancient Indian sources require that people throw away any food contaminated by hair.[43] Hair in this sense is equal to excrement. Seneviratne (1992:181) refers to a Sinhala belief that hair and nails are made from the impure waste produced in the process of digesting food, and that cutting hair and nails is similar to voiding excrement.

Ancient vedic texts share this belief; the reason for shaving before a ritual is to remove the impurity of hair and nails from the body. The *Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa* (3.1.2.2), for example, explains why a sacrificer must shave before his consecration:

> He [the sacrificer] then shaves his hair and beard, and cuts his nails. For impure, indeed, is that part of man where water does not reach him. Now at the hair and beard, and at the nails the water does not reach him: hence when he shaves his hair and beard, and cuts his nails, he does so in order that he may become pure before he is consecrated.[44]

According to this interpretation, hair and nails are impure because they do not absorb water, the ultimate means of purification, whereas according to the *Taittirīya Saṃhitā* (6.1.1.1–2) they are impure because they are dead skin.

A significant and informative contradiction within the native tradition occurs, however, when what is said to be equivalent to feces is offered ceremonially to gods and goddesses (Hershman 1974). This happens, as we have seen, especially when young children are shaved for the first time. How can the same substance be regarded as excrement in one ritual setting and as a substance fit for the gods in another?

The sexual symbolism of hair that I discuss below may provide one clue. If at some level of its symbolic complex hair represents the fertile sexuality of its owner, then we can see how it can be at the same time both a sacred offering and excrement. Indeed, sexual fluids, especially male semen, are at one time said to be the most refined part of the body and of food, even the carrier of personality from one birth to the next,[45] and at other times bracketed with urine and feces as impure substances. A common way to indicate the depravity of a particular act, for example, is to say that if a man does it "he, in fact, offers to his ancestors semen, urine and excrement."[46]

Another element of the native exegesis of hair is its frequent connection in both myth and ritual to grass and plants, emphasizing thereby its relationship to fertility. A couple of Ṛgvedic verses (8.91.5–6) connects three areas of hair/grass growth: head, pubic region, and fields. In this hymn Apālā, a young girl, prays to Indra to make the hair grow on her father's head, on her own pubic region, and in her father's fields.[47] The connection between hair and grass/plants is well established in the vedic literature (Gonda 1985). The *Taittirīya Saṃhitā* (7.5.25.1) states quite simply that "vegetation is hair." Another text records the myth that the hair that fell from the creator god Prajāpati's body turned into vegetation (*Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa*, 7.4.2.11). Other myths connect the creation of grasses and plants to the hair of Viṣṇu incarnate as a boar (Gonda 1985:63–64). This correlation is brought out nicely in the Upaniṣadic verse:

> As a spider spins out a thread, then draws it in;
> as plants sprout out from the earth;
> as on body and head hair grows from a living man;
> So from the imperishable all things here spring.[48]

Gonda (1981) has objected to Lincoln's (1977) claim that hair-cutting rituals of Brahmins establish a clear association between hair and vegetation. Even though Gonda is right that there was no fixed rule regarding the disposal of ritually cut hair as suggested by Lincoln,[49] it is nevertheless clear that shaving the head is related to prolongation of an individual's life span and that many elements of the rite, including grass, sesame seed, ghee, and the burial of the hair in a place covered with herbs, posit a clear relationship of hair cutting with fertility. Indeed, Gonda (1956) himself has suggested a similar

correlation in another hair ritual, the parting of a pregnant wife's hair (*sīmantonnayana*).

This correlation is brought out clearly in two riddles and their solutions recorded in the *Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa* (11.4.1.6–7, 14–15). The riddles ask how one knows from an analysis of the full-moon and new-moon sacrifices (1) why people are born with hair, why hair grows a second time on the face, armpits, and other parts of the body, and why in old age the hair of the head first turns gray and finally one becomes gray all over; and (2) why the semen of a boy is not fertile, that of a man in midlife is fertile, and that of an old man is again infertile. Here are the solutions:

> Inasmuch as he spreads a cover of sacrificial grass (on the altar), therefore, creatures here are born with hair; and inasmuch as he for the second time, as it were, spreads the Prastara-bunch of grass, therefore, for the second time, as it were, the hair of the beard and the armpits, and other parts of the body grow; and inasmuch as at first he only throws the Prastara-bunch after (the oblations into the fire), therefore it is on the head that one first becomes gray; and inasmuch as he then throws after it all the sacrificial grass of the altar, therefore, in the last stage of life, one again becomes gray all over.
>
> And inasmuch as the fore-offerings have ghee for their offering-material, a boy's seed is not productive, but is like water, for ghee is like water; and inasmuch as, in the middle of the sacrifice, they sacrifice with sour curds and with cake, therefore it is productive in the middle stage of life, for thick-flowing, as it were, is that offering, and thick-flowing, as it were, is seed; and inasmuch as the after-offerings have ghee for their offering-material, it again is not productive in his last stage of life, and is like water, for ghee, indeed, is like water. (Eggeling's trans. slightly modified)

Here is an interesting and informative juxtaposition of hair growth, ritual use of grass, and fertility of semen. Hair on the head of children produces weak and infertile sexuality. The second birth of hair on the face and body produces fertile semen. The graying of hair produces a second childhood when semen becomes weak and infertile.[50]

The Social Meanings of Hair Manipulations

There is no single and unique meaning to be discovered within this vast range of hair rituals. Further, as we have seen in the case of Sikhs and Sri Lankan ascetics, historical contexts and individual decisions can give new meanings to traditional symbols.[51] It is in the very nature of the dialectic character of a cultural product, moreover, that the same fact or act may carry different meanings to different individuals or groups of individuals, creating what Obeyesekere (1981) calls "personal symbols."

Nevertheless, a set of related symbols of a society—in this case the ritual manipulations of hair—cannot exist in total isolation. Just as a word in a language, so a symbol operates within a broader grammar within which alone it becomes meaningful. And just as it is heuristically profitable to search for the root meaning or the etymology of a linguistic symbol, not because it will exhaust the meanings available in actual usage but because such a meaning permits us to discover the relationships among those operational meanings and thereby further our understanding of those very meanings, so also is it useful to search for a root meaning, or a cluster of such meanings, of a symbol such as hair. Such a root meaning will not exhaust the multiplicity and the variety of operational meanings, but it may allow a deeper understanding of those meanings and their interrelationships and of the enormous power of this ubiquitous symbol. The validity and usefulness of such a search is also indicated by the relative uniformity of the modes of life signaled by shaving and the neglect of hair in South Asian traditions. Why, for example, are all shaven people, whether they are ascetics or criminals, forbidden to engage in sex or to eat their own food?

Much of the theoretical work on the symbolism of hair has been carried out thus far by scholars in the fields of anthropology and psychoanalysis. It may be useful here to review briefly some of the major contributions. James Frazer in *The Golden Bough* (1913:II, 252–87) was one of the earliest to pay systematic attention to the customs relating to hair. Although his focus is on the reasons for the methods various peoples use to dispose of cut hair and nails, Frazer also deals with the significance of the head, head hair, and hair cutting. The reason why people of widely different cultures consider the head and head hair sacred and taboo, Frazer (1913:II, 252–53) argues, is because they believe that various spirits or divinities reside in the head and hair. "When the head was considered so sacred," Frazer concludes, "it

is obvious that the cutting of the hair must have been a delicate and difficult operation" (258). A fascinating, though no doubt extreme, example of the precautions taken at cutting one's hair is that of the chief of Namosi in Fiji, who, according to a letter Frazer received from a Christian missionary, "always ate a man by way of precaution when he had his hair cut. There was a certain clan that had to provide the victim, and they used to sit in solemn council among themselves to choose him" (264).

There are two major problems with Frazer's analysis. The first, common among early anthropologists, is that he cites examples of hair customs from around the world without regard either to the accuracy of description or to the social and cultural context within which those customs are located. He cites indiscriminately from travellers' diaries, from the writings and letters of Christian missionaries, and from ethnographies of varying degrees of reliability. He makes little attempt, moreover, to understand the customs he mentions within their contexts. The meanings of symbols, like those of words, can be studied adequately only if they are located within the broader grammar of the society. In the case of the Fijian chief, for example, we do not know whether he ate the man because he wanted to shave, or whether he shaved in order to eat the man, or, what is more likely, whether both acts were part of a larger ritual undertaking and liturgical calendar within which alone the two acts may reveal their significance.

This brings us to the second problem: what Frazer offers as a theory is in fact merely a generalized account of the native exegesis. Hair is sacred because a god dwells in it. A theory, if it is to have cross-cultural validity and usefulness, has to go beyond the native exegesis, which is part of our data and not a substitute for a theory.

Moving beyond Frazer, theories of hair symbolism fall broadly into two categories: psychological and sociological. The psychological, or, more accurately, the psychoanalytic theory sees hair symbolism among humans as derived from the workings of the unconscious. Clinical observations reveal that through the mechanism of displacement the head often stands for the penis. The phallic symbolism of the head, it is argued, is transferred to the hair, where hair itself may stand for semen or the phallus. Cutting of hair or shaving is thus viewed by proponents of the psychoanalytic theory as equivalent to castration.[52]

Edmund Leach (1958) in his influential essay "Magical Hair" examines the psychoanalytic theory and finds that the ethnographic evidence by and large corroborates the sexual symbolism of hair. He concludes that "an astonishingly high proportion of the ethnographic evidence fits the following pattern in a quite obvious way. In ritual situations: long hair = unrestrained sexuality; short hair or partially shaved hair or tightly bound hair = restricted sexuality; close shaven hair = celibacy" (1958:154). Leach, however, wants to keep the psychoanalytic and the anthropological fields separate, the former dealing with individual motives and the latter with social meaning. He does so by neatly dividing symbols into private and public. A private symbol "reflects the *actual* psychological state of the actor" (1958:153, original italics), whereas a public symbol is merely a means of communication with publicly recognized meanings and does not necessarily correspond to the "psychological state of the actor."

Hallpike rejects even the somewhat circumspect acceptance of the unconscious association of hair and sexuality of Leach in his response to Leach, appropriately entitled "Social Hair" (1969). He rejects the association of shaving with castration for the simple and obvious reason that it is inapplicable in the case of women, whose heads may also be shaved in ritual contexts such as mourning. He also asks why, if head hair equals male genitals, so little regard is paid to beards, the symbol par excellence of masculinity, in ritual contexts. The hair of the beard, after all, is physically more similar to pubic hair than the hair of the head. Finally, he finds it very strange that, if long hair equals unrestrained sexuality, celibate ascetics wear long hair. Not surprisingly, Hallpike rejects the psychoanalytic theory and offers instead a thoroughly sociological one. His own theory boils down to this: "Long hair is associated with being outside society and . . . the cutting of hair symbolizes re-entering society, or living under a particular disciplinary regime within society" (1969:260). He accepts dressing the hair as a ritual equivalent of cutting. Thus we have the equation: cutting or dressing the hair places a person within society and social control, while long and loose hair places one outside such control.[53] Hallpike appears to include within one category both the cutting of hair by ordinary people in society and the close shaving of the head associated with monks and ascetics. "Thus the cropped head or tonsure in all three cases of monk, soldier and convict," Hallpike (1969:261) argues, "signifies that they are under discipline."

The manipulative potential of hair makes it suitable for use in ritual,[54] but Hallpike never shows why hair and only hair has become almost universally a powerful symbol of the relationship between individuals and society. The psychoanalytic theory provides a reason for this association, and if we are to reject that theory then we must

be prepared to offer an alternative. Further, Hallpike's identification of the shaven head and the ordinary cutting of hair and grouping them together under the category of social control and discipline are unconvincing; the evidence points in a different direction.

Two anthropologists, Hershman (1974) in his excellent essay "Hair, Sex and Dirt" on hair symbolism among the Hindu and Sikh Punjabis and Gananath Obeyesekere (1981, 1990) in two of his recent works, *Medusa's Hair* on modern Sri Lankan matted-hair ascetics and the more theoretical *The Work of Culture*, have attempted to bridge the divide between the psychoanalytic and the sociological viewpoints.

Hershman (1974:274) does so by establishing "a connexion between the symbolism of the individual subconscious and that of the collective consciousness." "It is my contention," he argues,

> that this connexion lies in the fact that bodily symbols gain their emotive power through being subconsciously associated with the anal-genital organs and processes, but that they are then used to spell out cultural messages, where the message is something quite separate and apart from the symbols which are transmitting it. It follows that a message becomes empowered by the subconscious associations of the symbols in whose terms it is expressed, but that its communication content remains something entirely different.

I agree that there is a distinction between the emotive power of a symbol and its social message; but the two, surely, cannot be "entirely different." A theory of hair must address the problem of their connection: how is the socially accepted message related to the original unconscious symbolism of hair?

A way toward a solution is pointed out by some important concepts put forward by Obeyesekere, who objects both to Leach's watertight division between private and public symbols and to the psychoanalytical assumption that all symbols must have deep motivational significance. He suggests a distinction between personal symbols, where deep motivational significance is involved, and "psychogenetic symbols."

> Psychogenetic symbols *originate* in the unconscious or are derived from the dream repertoire; but the origin of the symbols must be analytically separated from its ongoing operational significance. This is often the case in myths and rituals: symbols originating from unconscious sources are used to give expression to meanings that have nothing to do with their origin. (1981:13–14; original italics)

Obeyesekere's distinction between the genesis and the operational significance of symbols is similar to, but expresses more clearly, Hershman's distinction between emotional power and cultural message. But is it possible that the operational significance of a symbol could "have nothing to do with their origin?"

In his later book, *The Work of Culture*, Obeyesekere presents a more systematic and theoretical discussion of the phenomenon that he earlier referred to simply as the distinction between a symbol's unconscious genesis and its operational significance. He calls this distinction "symbolic remove." A symbol may operate at different levels of symbolic remove from its genesis in deep motivation "producing different levels of symbolization, some closer to, some more distant from the motivations that initially (psychogenetically) triggered the symbolic formation" (1990:57). The theory of symbolic remove, I believe, is an important contribution to our understanding of the formation and function of symbols, and in what follows I will examine the symbolic remove that takes place in the case of hair symbolism of South Asia.

Let us make some preliminary observations. Although Obeyesekere's theory of "symbolic remove" is a rich heuristic device, at least implicitly he appears to acknowledge only a single source—namely, the unconscious—for the origin of a symbol. Such a position could be called the "monogenesis" of symbols. But I think we should posit that at least some symbols, including hair, are polygenetic—they originate from a multiplicity of sources. This suggests at least two consequences. First, polygenesis may create the polysemy of a symbol; that is, the same symbol either simultaneously or in different contexts may contain more than one meaning.[55] Second, not all the meanings of a symbol may be reducible to a single root meaning or to the same source.

An adequate theory, moreover, should offer a root meaning (or a cluster of such meanings) of a symbol—that is the meaning least removed from its genesis—and should delineate the process of symbolic remove that gives rise to its operational meanings. Now a root meaning of a symbol, like the root form of a verb, is ultimately a fiction; it is abstracted or extrapolated from observed meanings and forms. Yet, as in the case of words, it helps us establish the various symbolic removes that occur in actual practice and understand the relationship between various operational meanings of the same symbol

that may appear on the surface to have little in common. A root meaning, in other words, helps us formulate the grammar of a symbol.

As a fiction, the root meaning is neither true nor false, but more or less adequate or useful. The adequacy and usefulness of the root meaning we ascribe to a symbol can be validated only by comparing it with the actual and operational meanings available through ethnographic and historical study. This may appear to be a vicious circle, the root meaning being abstracted from operational meanings and the root meaning in turn validating the operational meanings. Just as in philology, however, this circle can be converted from a vicious to a hermeneutical circle (Obeyesekere 1990:93). The concrete uses of a symbol yield its root meaning; the root meaning will reveal further levels of meaning of the symbol; as more operational meanings from the same culture (and from other cultures, if one is engaged in a cross-cultural study) are analyzed, they will help us further refine the root meaning.

In explicating my theory, I first examine the sources from which the symbolism of hair is derived and then proceed to analyze the root meaning and the levels of symbolic remove. At least three sources are significant for the development of the symbolic meanings of hair.

First, in humans there is a clear and visible association between the growth of body hair—especially axillary, pubic, and, among males, facial hair—and the onset of puberty and sexual maturity. As far as I know, this is a developmental feature unique to human beings; at least it is absent in animals likely to influence the human creation of symbols. This curious biological fact is also the likely foundation of the second source,[56] namely the unconscious association between head hair and sexuality; this association has been sufficiently demonstrated both clinically and ethnographically. One may observe, however, that this association can stand on its own and apart from the related unconscious association of the head with the penis suggested by psychoanalysts. This dissociation of head and hair symbolism is also necessitated by the fact noted by Hallpike that female hair is treated in ways very similar to male hair. The third source is the biological fact that hair and nails are unique among body parts in that they grow continuously and they grow back when cut. On the one hand, they can be trimmed, shaved, and otherwise manipulated in ways that are impossible with other bodily parts. On the other hand, they may be viewed as imbued with extraordinary vitality. Hair on the human body, as we have seen, bears a striking parallel to grass on earth; both grow again when they are cut, and both testify to the vitality and the fertility of their respective hosts. Hair and grass even show a certain physical resemblance.

All three sources contribute to the complex of hair's symbolic meanings. There may be others. Some symbolic uses of hair that consider it as excrement may derive that meaning from the fact that hair resembles dead matter, without blood or sensation, and often falls from the body on its own. The South Asian materials we have examined, however, point to the association of hair with puberty and sexual maturity as the primary source of the root meaning of hair symbolism at least within the South Asian context.

Now to the root meaning. 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. The adequacy of this root meaning can only be gauged by examining how the operational meanings can be derived from or related to it, and how it enhances our understanding of those operational meanings.

The root meaning I have assigned to hair is significantly different from the one proposed by the psychoanalytic school. In some contexts, as in neurotics, in the dream repertoire, and when hair is used as what Obeyesekere calls "a personal symbol" by an individual, hair may stand for the sex organ in general or the phallus in particular. That psychoanalytic meaning, however, cannot explain the variety of socially established and ritually enacted forms of hair symbolism we have encountered in South Asia; indeed, even apart from female shaving, in many cases the equation of shaving with castration is simply inadmissible. But at least one portion of the psychoanalytic theory is essential for explaining the process of symbol formation in the case of hair, and that is the theory of displacement. Simply stated, displacement occurs when the unconscious substitutes the entity X for the entity Y, thus permitting individuals at the conscious level to speak about and to manipulate X which at a deeper level are statements about and the manipulation of Y.

The need for displacement arises because of a block at the conscious level that prevents individuals from dealing with Y directly. In the case of hair, it is not the pubic, axillary, or even facial hair—that is, hair associated with sexual maturation—that is the focus of attention in most rituals but the hair on the head. This hair at the source level is unrelated to puberty, appearing as it does at birth or soon thereafter. In ritual contexts the root meaning of hair as sexual maturity

appears to be displaced from hair with clearer sexual connotations to the hair on the head without such connotations.[57]

The root meaning of hair as such, however, does not occur in actual ritual or social settings. A basic symbolic remove intervenes between the root and operational meanings. This symbolic remove consists in the transformation of the root meaning of sexual maturity into its operational meanings relating to the status and role of an adult within the structures of society. This transformation of meaning is a fairly simple operation, because the central social structure within which adults are co-opted into and operate within society is marriage, the structure that controls the adult sex drive. This assumption is validated by, among others, the fact that, as we have observed, the ritual separation from society associated with shaving the head invariably entails the suspension of sexual activity.

Having isolated the root meaning and its main operational derivative, we must nevertheless recognize that the meaning of a symbol, by its very nature, is rich, nuanced, and multifaceted, that several meanings normally inhere simultaneously, and that individuals participating in a ritual performance or social custom may be aware of or place emphasis on different aspects of that complex of meanings.

Using this basic operational meaning, let me now delineate what I consider to be the main features of hair symbolism manifested within the broad spectrum of hair rituals in Indian religious history that we have examined. Hair in ritual has no inherent or absolute meaning; its meaning or meanings are derived always from its relationship or opposition to other ritual functions of hair existing within the same society. Thus, to understand the meaning of shaving the head or letting the hair fall loose and uncontrolled we must locate them in relationship to others in society who do not shave their head or who keep their hair braided or under control.

Now, it is not necessary that all hair rituals obtain their meanings in relationship to a single point of reference. Thus, as we have seen, the long hair and beard of Sikh males derive their primary meaning in relation to the shaven head of a Hindu ascetic, whereas the clean and trimmed hair of an adult in society may be the point of reference for the long matted hair of hermits. Nevertheless, I believe that the most significant and central person with reference to whom most other hair rituals within the South Asian social context, and probably in most other societies, derive their meaning is the adult male, and to a lesser degree the adult female living within society. Their status and role within the social structure, their submission to and participation in the structures of social control, including structures for sexual control, are symbolized by the public control of their hair, a control that can be exercised in a variety of ways and not just by cutting, as supposed by Hallpike.[58] There are cultural and historical variations in the methods of hair control, but the most common method, at least in contemporary South Asia,[59] is for an adult male to trim and dress the hair and to shave or at least to trim the beard and for an adult female to braid or to tie the hair in a knot. Thus we arrive at our first principle: *control of hair by cutting, grooming, braiding, enclosing in a turban, or other means indicates an individual's participation in social structures within a publicly defined role and that individual's submission to social control.* Such a submission assigns the subject clear social roles and grants him or her rights and privileges.

We have seen that the most significant and widespread ritual use of hair in India is shaving, most frequently the shaving of the head and face, but sometimes also of the entire body. If we return to our root meaning of hair as sexual maturity, removal of hair would mean the denial or suspension of sexual maturity. The shaven individual is ritually reduced to the level of an infant, that is, to a sexually, and therefore socially, undifferentiated status. At a level symbolically removed from this, the primary meaning of shaving, I posit, is that the shaven individual is placed outside the social structures and denied a social status and role; hence, the almost universal association of shaving with rites of passage. Since permitted sexual activity is restricted to precisely such a social structure, namely marriage, shaven separation from society invariably involves celibacy. Thus we arrive at our second principle: *shaving the head amounts to the ritual separation of an individual from society either for a temporary period or permanently.* Shaving relating to reintegrating into society of persons who have been separated for a relatively long period of time shows an inversion of that process. Here the separation is not from society but from a liminal condition; the individual is released from that condition to assume his or her new social role.

Variant forms of ritual separation from society are expressed not through shaving but through lack of control of hair. We have seen that periods of separation resulting from pollution such as menstruation and death are often marked by women leaving their hair unbraided, uncombed, and unwashed. Shaving and leaving hair uncontrolled, therefore, in their own way oppose the controlled public hair of people in society. In both cases there is some form of interdiction of social intercourse between people in society and those ritually separated from it.

Related to such lack of control over hair is the third type of ritual use of hair in India: the neglect of hair associated with the physical separation of an individual from society. When an individual is ritually separated from society, he or she continues to live within the geographical boundaries of society and often in close relationship with people in society, whereas in physical separation the rite of separation culminates in the individual's departure from the social geography into the uncivilized realm of the forest or the wilderness. In India this type of separation is symbolized by long and uncontrolled hair that is left unkempt and unattended. The meaning of matted hair must be seen in its relation to the controlled hair of the adult within society. The total lack of hair control and the resultant long, ugly, matted hair (accompanied by long nails) indicates an individual's utter separation from civilized structures and controls and his or her integration to the uncivilized realm of the wild and the beast. The third principle, therefore, is: *matted hair indicates an individual's physical separation from society and civilized structures.* In medieval and modern South Asia, however, such physical separation has not been a lived reality. Thus, we have seen the diverse operational meanings given to matted hair in South Asian traditions. The case of the Sri Lankan male and female ascetics studied by Obeyesekere falls into the latter category. When the institution of forest hermits disappeared, it was easier to give new operational meanings to this practice.[60]

Conclusion

Once a particular social meaning has been assigned to a form of hair manipulation within a specific institutional or ritual setting—shaving as ascetic separation, for example—that same symbol may acquire new meanings for the participants, meanings that may go beyond, and thereby transform the earlier meaning. Thus ascetic shaving has acquired the meaning of "belonging" to a particular community as opposed to separation from society, in a way similar to that of the Sikh hair. In this way hair becomes a symbol that demarcates new boundaries—the monastic community or the Sikh community. Its new conventional meanings may thus hide to a large degree some of the basic meanings that I have attempted to uncover.

In the new conventional settings a particular type of hair manipulation may become a "condensed symbol," that is a symbol so powerful that it encapsulates all the diverse aspects of the symbolized, which under normal circumstances would require separate symbolic

expressions. A flag or a national anthem may become such a condensed symbol; the rule against pork for the Jews and Friday abstinence from meat for traditional Catholics are similar condensed symbols that signify the essence of being a Jew or a Catholic. I think that the shaven head for the Buddhist monk and the uncut hair enclosed in a turban for the Sikh are such condensed symbols. This is nicely illustrated by an ethnographic observation of H. L. Seneviratne,[61] who found that one way contemporary Buddhist monks in Sri Lanka display their independence from monastic authority and their modernist outlook is to let their hair grow, now only to the length of a crew-cut, but who knows what is in store for the future? Hair thus remains both a means of strong institutional control and an instrument of liberation from and critique of social and institutional controls.

Notes

1. My principal focus will be on traditional India, although I will comment on some modern practices in several South Asian societies.

2. This diachronic and historical aspect of hair symbolism is often ignored by anthropologists and psychoanalysts. Obeyesekere (1990:39) notes the need for uncovering the historical/genetic etymology of a symbol. Truly diachronic study of a symbol within a given culture can advance the study of its etymology, just as much as psychoanalytic investigations. Such a historical study (with a keen sense of humor) of the beard in Europe has been done by Reynolds (1949).

3. I am not searching for a single and universally applicable reason because the reasons are multiple even within the same culture. Further, I am not searching for a single meaning of all hair practices or even of a single practice. I am convinced that this is a complex symbol with a spectrum of meanings and significances both public and private, both conscious and, often, unconscious (Obeyesekere 1981).

4. *Suśruta Saṃhitā*, Cikitsāsthāna, Ch. 24. 29, 73–75, 89. Manu (*Manusmṛti* 4.35), likewise, advises a young adult who has completed his vedic studies and is about to get married (*snātaka*) to keep his hair, beard, and nails trimmed (*kḷptakeśanakhaśmaśruḥ*).

5. Most sources regard hair and nails as a pair. When hair is cut, as we shall see, so are the nails, and when hair is left unattended, nails are also left to grow.

6. The *Vasiṣṭha Dharmasūtra* (2.21), for example, states that people should wear their hair according to the custom of their castes.

7. An ancient text states: "He shall not untie his topknot on a road"—*na pathi śikhāṃ visṛjet.* Hārīta quoted in Aparāditya's commentary on the

Yājñavalkyasmṛti (Ānandāśrama Edition), p. 225. On the practice of keeping a certain number of topknots to indicate one's lineage, see Kane II, 263–64.

8. Even in modern times long haired men were a common sight in Sri Lankan villages until quite recently; the practice has not completely disappeared even today. Sikh men, of course, do not cut their hair or beard. The length of male and female hair is subject to cultural determination. In Tikopia, for example, women's hair is short, while men's hair is long (Firth 1973:272). It is thus not possible to make a universal symbol out of the customs of modern South Asia and Europe, as Hallpike (1969) appears to do. Nevertheless, within each society gender difference is expressed in the prescription of gender specific coiffure.

9. On the distinctive patterns of braiding called *ekaveṇi* (single braid or clasping all the hair once in the back and letting the rest fall loose), *triveṇi* (triple braid), and the like, see Hiltebeitel 1981:184–86. On the way hair is worn by contemporary women in Punjab, see Hershman 1974.

10. See *Manusmṛti*, 8.314; *Āpastamba Dharmasūtra*, 1.25.4; *Gautama Dharmasūtra*, 12.43; *Baudhāyana Dharmasūtra*, 2.1.16; *Vasiṣṭha Dharmasūtra*, 20.41. The king beats the thief over the head with the club. Whether he dies or survives the blow, the thief is freed from his crime and sin.

11. See Kinsley 1975:81–159; Hiltebeitel 1981:206.

12. Yādavaprakāśa, *Yatidharmasamuccaya*, ed. P. Olivelle (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1994), 6.145.

13. The loose topknot of a Brahmin, for example, may be a sign of mourning: *Āśvalāyana Gṛhyasūtra*, 4.2.9; *Śrautakośa*, English Section, ed. R. N. Dandekar (Poona: Vaidika Saṃśodhana Maṇḍala, 1958–73), I.2, p. 1079. The disheveled hair of a woman in mourning is recorded already in the *Atharvaveda*, 9.9.7. Some sources instruct the mourners to ruffle their hair and to put dust on it: *Āpastamba Dharmasūtra*, 2.15.7; *Śrautakośa*, I.2, p. 1052.

14. The relatives of a person excommunicated from the caste are also expected to let their hair hang loose during the rite: *Vasiṣṭha Dharmasūtra*, 15.13.

15. For a study of cross-cultural symbolism of shaving, see Firth 1973:287–91.

16. The *Taittirīya Brāhmaṇa* (1.5.6.1–2) provides the interesting detail that at a sacrifice the shaving should be done the "divine" way: one first shaves the hair of the armpits, then the beard, and then the head. The demons (Asuras), on the other hand, did it the opposite way, which was the reason for their defeat at the hands of the gods. The *Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa* (3.1.2.3) alludes to a custom of shaving the entire body of a man at his sacrificial consecration.

17. For a detailed examination of the symbols of rebirth, see Gonda 1965:284–462, especially 337.

18. For a study of the connection between hair and fertility, see Lincoln 1977. At least in modern times, the hair is often offered to the goddess or put in a river: see Hershman 1974; Freed and Freed 1980:396–97.

19. For primary sources from the Gṛhyasūtras, see the *Śrautakośa*, I.2, pp. 1033, 1039, 1070, 1071, 1074, 1080, 1083. See the *Āśvalāyana Gṛhyasūtra*, 4.2.9, for shaving the whole body.

20. See *Manusmṛti* 2.219; *Āpastamba Dharmasūtra*, 1.2.31–32; *Gautama Dharmasūtra*, 1.27; *Vasiṣṭha Dharmasūtra*, 7.11.

21. For the general behavior expected of people in mourning, see Kane IV, 238ff. See also above, n.13.

22. See Kane IV, 122 for sources of this belief and for other customs involving shaving when a person performs a vow or a penance.

23. Some sources, such as the *Padma Purāṇa* and the *Skanda Purāṇa*, make shaving obligatory prior to a pilgrimage. See Kane IV, 573–76 for further details and sources of this practice. A frequently quoted verse states: "One should shave one's hair at Prayāga, before a pilgrimage, and at the death of the father or mother; one should not shave without cause" (Kane IV, 574, n. 1300). Kane (IV, 575) notes that some texts make a distinction between the technical terms *kṣaura* and *muṇḍana*, the former referring to the shaving of the head and the beard, and the latter indicating the shaving of only the head. Val Daniel (1984:245–87), in describing the pilgrimage to the shrine of Ayyappan, notes the initiation rite prior to departure, a rite that amounted to the ascetic renunciation of the pilgrims. He does not mention shaving explicitly, but the context strongly suggests it.

24. The *Kāśīkhaṇḍa* (4.75) of the *Skanda Purāṇa*. See Vāsudevāśrama, *Yatidharmaprakāśa* (ed. P. Olivelle; Vienna: 1976–77), 71.96–97; Kane IV, 585.

25. See Kane II, 583–98 for the customs and duties relating to a widow.

26. For further details see Kane III, 396–97. Other punishments subject to shaving include adultery and incest with the wife of one's teacher. Shaving associated with punishment and reduction to slavery is a widespread practice cross-culturally: Firth 1973:289–90; Hallpike 1987:155.

27. Hindu renouncers shave at the beginning of each of the five Indian seasons, thus shaving approximately every two months. Periodic shaving (or uprooting) of head hair is a feature also of Buddhist and Jain monks. One rule permits Buddhist monks to keep only one and a half inches of hair on their head: see *Cullavagga*, 5.2.2–3.

28. This is the opposite of what Eilberg-Schwartz (1990:145) points out in the case of circumcision: "Since circumcision exposes a boy's sexual organ, it is also a natural symbol of his readiness for social intercourse. Sexual intercourse, after all, is one of the most powerful symbols of social intercourse." As Eilberg-Schwartz (1990:145) himself notes, "when a person is outside or in transition between recognized social positions, sexual intercourse is prohibited."

29. These hairs represent the Brahmanical topknot. Its uprooting may thus also indicate the ascetic's abandonment of the ritual religion represented by the topknot and the sacrificial string, both of which are abandoned by some types of Brahmanical ascetics. See the *Yatidharmaprakāśa*, ed. cit., 21.39, 104.

30. See Zimmer 1962:160. See H. C. Warren, *Buddhism in Translations* (New York: Atheneum, 1962), p. 66. The belief that the hair and nails of a liberated individual (*kevalin*) do not grow is found also in the Jain tradition (Dundas 1985:179 and n.142).

31. One source, for example, states: "Ascetics, vedic students, and widows should abstain from chewing betel leaves, from anointing their bodies with oil, and from eating out of brass plates." Yādava Prakāśa, *Yatidharmasamuccaya*, ed. cit., 7.140. For the legal status of a renouncer, see Olivelle 1984, and for a discussion of the similarities and differences between a widow and an ascetic, see Leslie 1991.

32. See Kane IV, 298, where other instances are given where ascetics and students are treated alike with reference to periods of impurity. With regard to food, the ascetic resembles a man consecrated for a vedic sacrifice (*dīkṣita*): the food of both causes impurity and are not to be eaten by others. On the ascribed purity of begged food, see Yādavaprakāśa, *Yatidharmasamuccaya*, ed. cit., 6.95, 109–10.

33. On the symbolism of food in the ascetic traditions, see Olivelle 1991.

34. "By giving cooked food to a householder one goes to the Raurava hell." Vāsudevāśrama, *Yatidharmaprakāśa*, ed. P. Olivelle (Vienna, 1976–77), 68.62–63.

35. Matted hair is generally caused by the neglect of hair. I have found one instance, however, where the matted coiffure is artificially created using the juice of a banyan tree: *Rāmāyaṇa*, 2.46.55–56. For a study of modern examples from Sri Lanka, see Obeyesekere 1981; the subjects of his study uniformly viewed the appearance of matted locks as sudden and interpreted it as a divine gift.

36. See *Gautama Dharmasūtra* 3.26–35; *Āpastamba Dharmasūtra*, 2.22.1–11; *Baudhāyana Dharmasūtra*, 2.11.5; 3.3.1–22; *Vasiṣṭha Dharmasūtra*, 9.1–12. A significant incident in the epic story of the *Mahābhārata* relates to the ugliness and smell of an ascetic. While accepting the invitation to father a son for his deceased brother, Vyāsa tells his brother's widow that she should "bear with my ugliness. If she bears with my smell, my looks, my garb, and my body, Kauśalyā shall straightway conceive a superior child" (MBh 1.99.42–43; trans. of van Buitenen). His odor and sight are so overwhelming, however, that the woman is forced to close her eyes when he comes to her bed, resulting in the blindness of her son, Dhṛtarāṣṭra.

37. See *Gautama Dharmasūtra*, 3.26–35; *Baudhāyana Dharmasūtra*, 2.11.15.

38. A man with matted hair (*jaṭila*) is among those forbidden at a funerary offering (*śrāddha*): *Manusmṛti* 3.151. There is nothing in this symbolic structure to suggest the unrestrained sexuality proposed by Leach 1958:154. The operational meaning of neglected and long hair in this context is far removed from what I call its "root" meaning (see below). It is, however, clear that even though the operational meaning is about withdrawal from society, the rules of life of hermits are very ambivalent regarding their sexuality, some prescribing celibacy and others suggesting a noncelibate life style. Celibacy is not a hallmark of matted-hair ascetics in quite the same way as it is of shaven-headed ascetics.

39. See Olivelle 1993; Sprockhoff 1979, 1981, 1984, 1991. Both the *Rāmāyaṇa* (2.20.21) and the *Mahābhārata* (3.186.2–3) ascribe the institution of this practice to ancient seers or to the very first king. Buddhist sources ascribe its foundation to the universal emperor Daḷhanemi (*Dīgha Nikāya*, III, 60–64) or to King Makhādeva of Mithilā, who was the Buddha in one of his former births (*Majjhima Nikāya*, II, 75–82).

40. For extensive studies of hair among the Sikhs, see Uberoi 1967 and Hershman 1974.

41. On the possible reasons for such blocks in native reflections on rites and symbols, see Obeyesekere 1990, 43.

42. For an examination of this attitude toward cut or fallen hair cross culturally, see Leach 1969:156–57, and Firth 1973:287. Hershman (1974:292–94) objects, I think wrongly, to Leach's and Douglas's (1966) cross-cultural study of "dirt" as applied to hair.

43. *Āpastamba Dharmasūtra*, 1.16.23. Yādavaprakāśa (*Yatidharmasamuccaya*, ed. cit., 10.74) tells an ascetic to discard both his bowl and the food in it when water from the hair or beard falls into it. In a significant juxtaposition, he immediately goes on to say what an ascetic should do if he happens to purge, to vomit, or to void urine or excrement while he is begging. The *Mahābhārata* (1.3.126) records the story of one Utaṅka, who curses King Pauṣya because the king gave him food with a hair in it.

44. The block in native exegesis that I referred to earlier is borne out by the contradictory reasons given in the *Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa* itself. In giving the reason why a king after his consecration remains unshaved for a year, it says: "The reason why he does not shave his hair (is this): that collected essence of waters wherewith he is then sprinkled (anointed) is vigor, and it is the hair (of his head) that it reaches first when he is sprinkled; hence were he to shave his hair, he would cause that glory to fall off from him and would sweep it away: therefore he does not shave his hair" (5.5.3.1; Eggeling's trans.). So one shaves because the water does not reach the hair, and one refrains from shaving because the water reaches it first!

45. The *Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad*, 6.4.1, states: "Earth is the essence of these beings; water is the essence of earth; plants are the essence of water; flowers are the essence of plants; fruits are the essence of flowers; man is the essence of fruits; and semen is the essence of man." See also *Praśna Upaniṣad*, 1.14. For the semen as the carrier of personality, see *Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad*, 6.2.9–16; *Chāndogya Upaniṣad*, 5.4–10.

46. See, for example, Varada's *Yatiliṅgasamarthana* (ed. in P. Olivelle, *Renunciation in Hinduism: A Medieval Debate*, vol. 2; Vienna, 1987) III.43.

47. For an examination of this text, see Schmidt 1987; Vajracharya 1988.

48. *Muṇḍaka*, 1.1.7. The *Aitareya Upaniṣad* (1.1.4) makes following sequence in the way the original being (man) gave rise to the creation: first the skin; from skin, the body hairs; and from the hairs, the plants and trees.

49. The list of places cited by Kane (II, 263)—near water, under an Udumbara tree, in a bunch of *darbha* grass, in a wooded area—indicate a clear association with fertility.

50. In this context it may also be worthwhile to note that bald-headed men were considered ritually handicapped and bracketed with others with similar disabilities, such as eunuchs, lepers, cripples, and the blind. The *Gautama Dharmasūtra* (15.18) forbids the feeding of a bald man at a *śrāddha*. Bald men also, along with eunuchs, are among those not permitted to become Brahmanical ascetics: *Nāradaparivrājaka Upaniṣad*, 136; *Bṛhat-Saṃnyāsa Upaniṣad*, 251–52 (both in *Saṃnyāsa Upaniṣads*, trans. P. Olivelle; New York: Oxford University Press, 1992). A person who is *keśava*, probably meaning a man with long hair, is said in the *Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa* (5.1.2.14) to be neither a woman, because he is a man, nor a man, because he has long hair. The reference may be to a eunuch. On the relation between hair and sex within the Indian context, see also Hara 1986.

51. We see a similar profusion of significations in modern fads and practices. There have been and are actors and athletes who have shaved their heads. And there is the motley group of young men called "skin heads." It is difficult to see a uniform social meaning or message underlying all these practices.

52. See Berg 1951; Leach 1958; Obeyesekere 1981 and 1990; Hershman 1974.

53. Mary Douglas (1982:72, 85, 89) also supports such a distinction, where the smooth stands for control and the shaggy, for the informal, the antisocial, and the prophetic.

54. Hallpike's (1969:257) analysis of hair symbolism is based on nine special characteristics of hair that he isolates: "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." At least some of these features, as I shall point out, clearly played a role in the genesis of hair symbolism.

55. Indeed, polysemy of symbols is at the very heart of Obeyesekere's (1990:56) theory. Although polysemy is possible in the context of symbolic remove even within a monogenetic scheme, I think the parallel notion of polygenesis will strengthen the case for polysemy.

56. I say the foundation, because the unconscious after all must receive the grist for its mill from the conscious and the sensory spheres.

57. This displacement is clear in the case of Brahmanical ascetics who are not only enjoined to shave their heads but also positively forbidden from shaving their armpits and the pubic regions; appropriate penances are prescribed for those who do (see Yādava Prakāśa, *Yatidharmasamuccaya*, ed. cit., 8.9–11).

58. The Sikh males are a good example from India. Rivière (1969) has shown how the hair tube is used by the tribes in the northern Rupununi district of Guyana to enclose and control the long hair of adult males. Cf. n. 11 on the Tikopia.

59. As I have noted above, the picture is much less clear in ancient times.

60. I wonder, however, whether within the mainland of India, where the legends of matted-hair ascetics and seers are still alive, an ascetic would be able to publicly claim that his or her matted hair was the gift of a god, as the Sri Lankan ascetics regularly claim. In Sri Lanka where the matted hair tradition and legends are less frequent, it is evidently easier to ascribe deeply personal meanings to this symbol because it lacks an articulated public meaning.

61. Personal communication.

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