

Medusa's Hair: An Essay on Personal Symbols and Religious Experience

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Gananath Obeyesekere is professor at Princeton University. The author of numerous works on land tenure, social change, and Buddhism in Sri Lanka, he is widely recognized for his contributions to psychoanalytic anthropology, including a major study of myths and ritual practices concerning the South Asian goddess Pattini (1984) and a theoretical essay conjoining Weberian and Freudian perspectives (1990). *Medusa's Hair* is probably the best known of his works. It is a marvelous study of a number of individual religious ascetics associated with the shrine of Kataragama in Sri Lanka who are notable for their matted locks of hair and their often painful devotional practices. At the same time as Obeyesekere connects the motivational histories of the ascetics to their specific signifying practices within the spectrum of Buddhist-Hindu worship, he develops an abstract account of the relationship between public and private symbols more generally. The book is also notable for its discussion of fantasy as a source of cultural enrichment and for the way it draws on psychoanalytic concepts of transference and counter-transference to illuminate the relationship between anthropologists and their subjects.

Freud himself made several contributions to religion and anthropology. In *Totem and Taboo* (1958 [1913]) he attempted to apply his account of the development of the individual by means of the Oedipus complex to the origins of human society as a whole. The historicity of Freud's account has been largely discounted (Kroeber 1979a [1920], b [1939]) but it remains highly suggestive for understanding the prevalence of themes of desire and frustration in all human societies and in the cultural representations of myth and religion (Paul 1996). Freud made two rather different arguments concerning religion. In *Totem and Taboo* he saw it functioning as a kind of external superego, an adaptation to the basic human personality that reinforces and sanctifies

society's necessary control over the drives (sex and aggression). In *The Future of an Illusion* (1961 [1927]) religion becomes a realm of projection and immature wish-fulfillment. Freud recognized its creative and compensatory qualities but argued that religion could disappear with the progress of rationality. His analysis of the production of symbols in dreams (1953 [1900–30]) has been very fruitful for understanding symbolic processes more generally.

Obeysesekere here provides a nuanced articulation of Freudian theory with mainstream anthropological thought. For a more direct statement see Spiro (1979), which could be read as a useful rejoinder to Lévi-Strauss. Some analyses (Spiro 1982, Paul 1983, and Gillison 1993) continue to explore Oedipal and other sexual themes and representations in the production of culture, while others have provided Freudian interpretations of individual religious practitioners and practices (Crapanzano 1973, 1980). Few as yet have seriously embraced subsequent developments, such as relational theory, within psychoanalysis (Chodorow 1989, 1999, Lambek n.d., Trawick 1990).

Introduction

I will introduce the theme of this essay with a discussion of Leach's influential paper "Magical Hair," where he analyzes the matted hair and shaven heads of Indian ascetics, which he treats as public symbols. Leach argues that, contrary to psychoanalytic thinking, public cultural symbols have no unconscious motivational significance for the individual or the group. By contrast, private symbols may involve deep motivation, but they have no cultural significance. I take this to be the standard social anthropological position regarding symbols – an inadequate one, I believe, since there are grounds for assuming that custom and emotion are often interwoven. I will then present case studies of three female ecstasies to show how cultural meanings are articulated to personal experience. At this stage in my analysis I focus on one symbol – matted hair – and the relation of that symbol to critical personal life crises. The complex personal experiences of the individual are crystallized in the (public) symbol. Thus symbols like matted hair operate on the psychological and cultural levels simultaneously; ergo, a naive psychoanalytic position is as inadequate as a naive anthropological one. Personal symbols must be related to the life experience of the individual and the larger institutional context in which they are embedded.

Thus, from a critique of the antipsychological stance of social anthropology, I move to a criticism of the anti-institutional stance of psychoanalysis. One weakness in the psychoanalytic theory of symbolism is its assumption that all psychological symbols have motivational significance. I argue that psychological symbols can be broken down into a minimum of two types: personal symbols where deep motivation is involved, and psychogenetic symbols where deep motivation does not occur. 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.

Hence it is wrong for us to assume, as psychoanalysts often do, that all psychological symbols are linked to deep motivation; psychogenetic symbols are not. I will

deal with psychogenetic symbols only briefly, to contrast them with personal symbols. It is in relation to the latter that the distinction between private and public symbols makes no sense. There are obviously other areas in social life where this distinction does not hold, but I do not deal with them in this essay.

Private and Public Symbols

Let me begin with my criticism of Leach's influential paper "Magical Hair," where he argues with Berg, a psychoanalyst, about the symbolic significance of matted locks and the shaven heads of Hindu and Buddhist ascetics. The thrust of the debate has to do with the relationship between symbol and emotion, between public and private symbols. Leach argues, rightly, I think, that the essence of public symbolic behavior is communication; the actor and the audience share a common symbolic language or culture. The problematic question is not the logical status of public symbols as communication, but rather the *nature* of communication. For Leach all public symbolic communication is devoid of emotional meaning or psychological content. He clearly recognizes the importance of individual psychology; but he adopts the classic social anthropological position that individual psychology cannot have cultural significance or that publicly shared symbols cannot have individual psychological meaning. If public symbols are devoid of emotional meaning, this is not true of the radically different category of private symbols. "In contrast the characteristic quality of private symbolism is its psychological power to arouse emotion and alter the state of the individual. Emotion is aroused not by appeal to the rational faculties but by some kind of trigger action on the subconscious elements of the human personality" (Leach 1958, p. 148).

Note that Leach, unlike many British social anthropologists, does not deny the validity of psychological analysis; but he thinks it is relevant only for interpreting private symbolism, not for understanding public culture. This position introduces a radical hiatus between public and private symbols, as it does between culture and emotion. "Public ritual behavior asserts something about the *social* status of the actor; private ritual behavior asserts something about the *psychological state* of the actor" (Leach 1958, p. 166).

Nevertheless, Leach says public symbols may originate as private ones. Thus, while a private symbol may originate in the individual psyche as a result of intrapsychic conflict, it somehow or other ceases to have emotional meaning once it becomes publicly accepted culture. Leach poses the *problem* of transformation of private into public symbols; but he does not explain how such a transformation occurs.

[...]

Leach's argument is based on a silly book by a psychoanalyst, Charles Berg, on the unconscious significance of hair (Berg 1951). Berg analyzes – to Leach, quite plausibly – the unconscious significance of hair for the individual: hair = penis. Thus cutting hair is symbolic castration. From here Berg goes on to assert that the meaning of hair-cutting in public symbols and ritual (e.g., tonsure, head-shaving by monks) has the identical unconscious meaning of castration. Even more preposterous is his assertion that when all of us shave or trim our beards we are expressing deep-rooted castration anxieties.

Leach quite rightly castigates this kind of analysis. However, his criticism is not a new one; anthropologists using psychoanalytic theory have stated this before, and some like Hallowell have done so in even more detailed and critical terms (Hallowell 1955). Furthermore, Leach deliberately ignores the fallacy of using one work in psychoanalysis to castigate the discipline as a whole. One bad book does not damn a whole discipline; a weakness or inadequacy in a theory does not render it totally worthless. If this were the case, practically all social science would be of little value.

If some psychoanalysts treat both public and private symbols as belonging to the same qualitative order, Leach commits the identical fallacy. He sees all public symbolic and ritual behavior (and culture in general) as “rational,” devoid of psychological or intrapsychic significance. The handshake is for him the ideal-typical case. The meaning of the symbolic action here is, “We are of the same standing and can converse with one another without embarrassment” (1958, p. 157) (even though such a handshake may be at variance with the actual social reality, since enemies and unequals shake hands). We may invoke common sense (which Leach also does) to point out the obvious fallacies of this position – that public symbolic communication can evoke rage or hostility (in war, in race riots, in language conflicts); that the ethnographic literature has plenty of references to communal orgies, cathartic and expressive rituals where the emotional feel is obvious and readily apparent. Much of social anthropology assumes that all symbolic communication is of a piece, rational and abstract. It ignores the obvious fact that this is *one* type of communication; emotions also may be communicated. If we assume that emotional messages may be socially communicated, we may also legitimately infer that the public symbol used as a vehicle for communicating that message may become invested with an affective load.

Not only can group emotions be generated and sustained in this manner, but shared cultural symbols may have personal meaning to the individual. Weber pointed this out in his discussion of theodicy, as did Evans-Pritchard in exploring the meaning of witchcraft for the Azande. The process whereby a public symbol becomes infused with personal meaning seems relevant for anthropology....

The Problem

The immediate problem I want to investigate pertains to the matted hair of the Hindu ascetic. Leach summarizes Iyer’s argument:

The *sanyasin*’s freedom from social obligation and his final renunciation of the sex life is symbolized by change of dress but above all by a change of hair style. According to the mode of asceticism he intends to pursue a *sanyasin* either shaves off his tuft of hair or else neglects it altogether, allowing it to grow matted and lousy.
(Leach 1958, p. 156; Iyer 1928, 2:383; 1935, 1:332–4)

This statement is not as simple as it sounds, for the crucial phrase is *according to the mode of asceticism*. Some ascetic styles require a shaven head; some require the reverse: matted locks. The two kinds of symbols, as I shall show later, indicate two different modes of ascetic religiosity, on both the sociocultural and the psychological levels. For the moment, however, let us focus on the matted hair ascetic.

Berg interprets this cultural phenomenon thus: "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 almost 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" (Berg 1951, p. 71; Leach 1958, p. 156). Leach finds this an ethnocentric (psychoanalytic) and biased view, since the hair is a public, not a private, symbol.

Dr. Berg's assumption is that the *sanyasin's* behavior is a compulsive one, welling from some hidden springs in the individual unconscious. And no doubt if a European ascetic were to start behaving in this way it would be indicative of some complicated neurotic compulsion. But in the Indian context, the *sanyasin's* detachment from sexual interests and the fact that the matted hair is a symbol of this detachment are both conscious elements in the same religious doctrine. The correct hair behavior – and also the correct sexual and excretory behavior of Indian ascetics was all laid down in the Naradaparivrajaka Upanishad over 2000 years ago. (1958, p. 156)

Leach goes on to say that the "matted hair means total detachment from the sexual passions because hair behavior and sex behavior are consciously associated from the start" (1958, p. 156).

In the case of the neurotic European pseudoascetic, the hair behavior has unconscious experimental significance: for the Hindu ascetic it is not so, because he performs a traditional customary form of behavior.

Both Berg and Leach are wrong, but in different ways. Both are wrong like many others who study symbols: we infer the meaning of the symbol from the symbol itself, rarely referring to the persons in the culture who employ the symbol. The bias is of course most apparent in semiological studies, including structuralism, which can analyze signs without reference to context, much as language may be analyzed without reference to the person, society, or culture in which it is embedded. This is theoretically a feasible thing to do (though it is one that is being increasingly questioned by anthropological linguists). Nevertheless, it would be futile to talk of the psychological significance, or lack thereof, of the symbol from this methodological perspective – in this case the matted hair of the ascetic – without reference to the ascetic himself and the group in which he lives, and to the people among whom he moves. I shall show that Berg is right when he deals with the unconscious emotional significance that hair has for the ascetic, though his statement about the tormented penis requires some qualification in my study of six *female* ascetics. Leach's view is that the symbols are publicly and overtly recognized; they are laid down in sacred books; therefore they cannot have unconscious significance. This seems to me an illogical inference, since there is no intrinsic contradiction between custom and emotion.

It is indeed true that in some instances the sexual significance of a symbol is explicitly and consciously recognized. Other parts of the human anatomy – right hand: left hand, head: foot – and the body as a whole are consciously and explicitly used in cultural symbolism. So with the genitals; penis and vagina are often, along with the act of intercourse itself, employed as obvious symbols of fertility or generation. But the *experience* of sex in human society is a complicated one; it is

therefore likely that the experiential dimension of sexuality, with its strong emotional overlay, also appears in some of the symbols. The mere *existence* of a sexual symbol in the culture does not by itself warrant our making inferences regarding its personal or sociological significance. The operative context is crucial. When it involves inner experience, the significance of the symbol or symbolic sequence may elude the conscious thought of the members of the culture. Turner recognizes this when he says that a block in native exegesis may indicate that unconscious intrapsychic material is involved (Turner 1967, p. 38).

To come back to matted hair. Contrary to Leach, and in spite of the authority of the Upanishads, not one among my ordinary Sinhala Buddhist informants could consciously identify hair with sexuality. None of the six female ascetics interviewed could even remotely associate their matted hair with male or female genitalia. Suppose for argument's sake we agree with Leach and say that hair = genitals (or semen); but contra Leach we can document that this is not consciously recognized. May we not infer that there is a block in native exegesis at all levels and that unconscious perceptions and motivations are involved? If so, matted hair is locked into an emotional experience, which can be unraveled only through our knowledge of the ascetics themselves, not through a priori assumptions.

That ascetic experience is a complicated matter is easy to demonstrate. The person who in late life withdraws from the social world, forsaking family and friends, cutting himself loose from his social moorings, is not just any ordinary person consciously and rationally following the ancient Upanishadic instructions. If such withdrawal were an easy matter, the Indian world would be cluttered with ascetics. Fortunately, though ascetics are conspicuously visible, they are rare creatures. Leaving the world has not been for them a rationally calculated, deliberate act: it has been precipitated by complicated personal and social factors, often of a highly emotional sort. Thus one cannot agree with Leach's view that if a European pseudoascetic were to behave in this way it would indicate a complicated neurotic problem, but that the Hindu ascetic is exempt from this because of his reliance on old texts and customs. *Rather, both involve complicated experiences, but the Hindu's experiences are articulated in terms of traditional symbols. Furthermore, unlike the European ascetic, the Hindu's consciousness is already influenced by his culture, facilitating the expression of intrapsychic conflict in a cultural idiom.*

Female Ascetics and Matted Hair

In this section I shall initially describe the experiences of three female ascetics so as to elucidate the experiential context in which their matted locks emerged. I shall then discuss the genesis of the symbol and interpret the meaning of matted locks for these ascetics. . . .

The case studies are presented from the informant's own point of view; many of the events have been filtered through later experiences and through a cultural sieve. Thus the past of these informants was often constituted of "filtered memories." I take these filtered experiences and memories seriously, since they are the experientially real ones for the informants and are critical to their identity. . . .

Female Ascetic-Ecstatics

Case 1: Karunavati Maniyo (Age 52)

I know very little of Karunavati's childhood. The information she volunteered was significant to her. The most serious early trauma she suffered was that her father deserted her mother when Karunavati was about five years old. She was brought up by her mother and her maternal grandfather, whom she loved dearly.

She married at about twenty in somewhat extraordinary circumstances. Her future husband was an overseer in the Public Works Department and was at that time supervising the construction of a road in her village (Haburugala). He fell in love with Karunavati's younger sister and wanted to marry her. (In this society it is considered unusual for the younger sister to marry while the older is unmarried.) Karunavati claims she had no real interest in her sister's boyfriend; she actually did not like him and objected to his marrying her sister. He was a loafer, a bad man, she said. One day she came from her aunt's house and saw her prospective brother-in-law and sister together in their house. She said for all to hear: "What has my brother-in-law brought us?" "Then I took a mango seed from a dish [curry] and ate it, smacking my lips loudly. . . This was a joke. But I told my relatives that I was going to stop this marriage, as it was going to bring darkness to my sister's life." "Mother," I said, "you can take a coconut branch and cut out thousands, nay millions, of people like this." Karunavati said that this man resented her so much that he went to a sorcerer and gave her a love charm. "After this I had no interest in anything else: I simply wanted to go with this man." She eloped with him without the knowledge of her mother and sister. This, says Karunavati, is why her mother hated her. Apparently her mother was distraught by the incident and "cried and cried," she said. "That jealousy, that rage pursued me after her death."

Eventually her mother and relatives were reconciled and in fact had a formal wedding for her. "However," says Karunavati, her mother told her then, "'Daughter, this marriage of yours will never succeed; one day you'll be reduced to beggary.' You know that prophecy was fulfilled."

Her marriage, she claimed, was a disaster. Her husband used to drink heavily, gamble, smoke ganja, squander money. She enjoyed sexual intercourse with him, but she got "no pleasure out of living. If one goes on suffering, what pleasure is there?" She was also constantly beaten; she did not retaliate. They were often destitute, practically without clothes to wear; her two children were neglected. The husband lost his job as an overseer and became a day laborer. They drifted from place to place. Said Karunavati, "Had I had any foreknowledge of all this, I would have taken a vow of celibacy like our mother-Pattini."

Her mother died after Karunavati had spent seven to ten years of unhappy married life. She did not know of her death (her brother and sister did not inform her, since she was treated as a family outcast). She came to know of it much later. "I felt very sad about her death and about my not being able to be near her." "She apparently wanted to tell me something before she died but couldn't." Hence the punishment, the torture, her mother soon caused her by possessing her.

The initial possession occurred while Karunavati was living with her husband and children in a village near Navagamuva, site of the central shrine of the goddess

Pattini, the ideal chaste and devoted mother and wife of Sinhala religion. "This was three months after my mother's death. The time was twelve noon [a demonic hour in Sinhala belief]. There was a noon ritual for the demon Mahasona [the great demon of the graveyard]. I heard the sound of drums: then I became possessed." It was her mother who had come after her. She had hung on a truck and come with the wind. This information was communicated by the mother, who spoke through the daughter.

The priests (*kattadiya*) who were summoned to cure her diagnosed it as *preta dosa*, misfortune caused by an evil ancestral spirit or *preta*. Several rituals were held to banish the evil spirit (the wrathful mother), but to no avail. The spirit did not allow the priests "to do their work" successfully. Karunavati was now considered *pissu* (mad) by her family and neighbors. She used to wander around, sometimes in and near cemeteries. During one of her attacks her mother spoke through her. "You cannot catch me or imprison me, since I come for your well-being [*yahapata*] after obtaining a warrant [*varama*] from the god."

Karunavati, like all the other ascetics described in this essay, then tried to convert the malevolent power into a force for good. She offered lamps and prayers for the Buddha and for the deity Huniyan, who is her personal guardian and protector. The latter also told her not to attempt to break the power (exorcise the spirit), but to use it for her own good and the welfare of others. Her family stopped the exorcisms and instead had a ritual for her of blessing by the goddess Pattini. During this ritual she became possessed and told a "real truth" to the village headman who was present there. This was her first *sastra*, and it proved accurate. Soon after she was possessed by two benevolent ancestors – her dead mother and grandmother. These departed spirits are mediators between Karunavati and the gods, conveying messages from the latter and helping her utter prophecies and cure the sick. She cemented the relationship between these now benevolent ancestors and herself by daily lighting a lamp for them in her house. She felt she had a *muka varam*, mouth boon, or *basa varam*, language boon, the power to utter prophecies, or *sastra*. However, she was still not sure whether this was truly a divine gift.

She initially interpreted her attack as revenge by the mother, who wanted to take her as a human sacrifice (*billa*). Later on, after her mother's admonition, she felt she was being punished as a kind of "test" of her ability to become a priestess. She said that her mother did not give her anything to eat or wear (she gave up rice but ate a few fruits and vegetables; during this period she compulsively ate bitter *kohomba* (margosa) leaves without even salt or chili pepper. She withered away and became skin and bone. "These noble ones [mother, grandmother, and the gods] wanted to test me to see whether I'd give up. I did not. I renounced everything for them; even my children, who were dispersed everywhere."

Then she went to Kataragama and obtained a formal warrant from the god Skanda to become a priestess. She walked the fire at Kataragama and thereby sealed her relationship with the god. There she was told by her mother in the presence of the god that her *muka varam* was a true gift given by the god. Soon afterward she went to the Visnu shrine at a Buddhist temple of Kande Vihara (near Beruwala), for she felt she had to have *avasara*, permission, from Visnu himself as the head of the pantheon. Then she was told to go to several pilgrimage centers – Alutnuvara, the seat of Dadimunda, the tamer of demons; Kaballava, the seat of Huniyan; and the Kali shrine at Munnesvaram. It was her mother who instructed her thus, either

in person, through Karunavati's body, or in dreams. "She appears in dreams and manifests her form. 'I come for your welfare; do not get exorcists [to banish me]. Go to "places" and get the *vara prasada* [the gift of a boon] that is your due!"

She now is a wanderer going from one sacred place to another, rarely in one place for long.

In many of these cases, increasing devotion to the god is accompanied by a movement away from family responsibility and by a renunciation of sex. The conflict between eros and agape comes out beautifully in her statement: "It is not me, it is the god who shoved my husband aside." She told me with some relish that she refused to let her husband have intercourse with her. This was on the god Huniyan's instructions. "I ran into the forest in the evenings"; that is, she went to visit others and avoided her husband. Sometimes he used force to make her comply.

One day she became possessed while worshipping at the central shrine of Huniyan at Kaballava. The god told her he would bestow on her seven matted locks if she totally renounced sex and obtained her husband's consent for this. According to Karunavati, Huniyan himself has seven locks, though standard iconography depicts him with five. Later she had a vision of the god in a dream; he repeated the same message and added that she should go with her husband to the mountain of Saman, wherein is embedded the sacred footprint (of the Buddha), and there formally obtain *vivarana*, permission, from her husband to renounce sex and be born as a male in her next birth.

The message from the dreaded god was enough to deter her husband. They went to the sacred mountain, and there she obtained from him her *pativrata balaya*, which she interpreted as "the power of celibacy." Sex is impure for the gods, she told him; they should live in purity, doing good. She also obtained permission from him to be born as a male in her next birth. "When I climbed up the sacred mountain I had combed and tied up my hair, but once I was there I was given seven matted locks as ordained by the divine lord Huniyan. Suddenly my hair became knotted into seven locks." She constantly affirmed her recollection of the event. Her husband gave her permission (*vivarana*) to refrain from sex and to achieve a male rebirth; then, lo and behold, seven matted locks appeared!

She claimed that she had an initial desire to cut off these locks. She went to Kataragama several times to ask the god Skanda's permission to cut them, but he refused to allow it; that is, the god spoke through her during her trance at Kataragama forbidding her to cut her hair. "At one time my matted locks were very long, but when I get angry [*kopa venava*, i.e., shake my head in trance] or wander around cemeteries they break; or when they grow old they become brittle. I was told to deposit these relics in the Manik Ganga [the sacred river that flows past Kataragama]." Now she has only two matted locks left intact.

She says that her matted locks are her *ista devata*, her protector and guardian deity, and that they represent Huniyan himself. The hair was given to her to show the god's *sakti balaya*, the power of his *sakti* (strength, creative essence). She also refers to the locks as *dhatu*, relic or essence or life force. She is very protective of them and will not allow anyone to touch them or even come close to them, though she has lost some of them during her rapid changes of residence.

[...]

The Meaning of Hair

My analysis of the meaning of matted hair must deal with three interrelated problems, often confused in the analysis of symbols: the origin and genesis of the symbol; its personal meaning for the individual or group; and the social-cultural message it communicates to the group. It is in regard to the genesis of the symbol that psychological analysis is strongest. It can demonstrate that a certain class of experiences are so painful, complicated, and out of the reach of conscious awareness that the individual must express them in indirect representations and symbol formation. In the case of matted hair the symbol is a public one, but it is *recreated* each time by individuals. Moreover, the symbol would cease to exist (except in texts and nonliving icons) if individuals did not create it each time on the anvil of their personal anguish. For remember that, unlike the shaven head of the Buddhist monk, the matted hair is an *optional* tonsorial style. To be a Hindu ascetic you do not have to have matted hair, whereas a shaven head is an absolute role requisite for the monk.

The genesis of matted locks, or rather their re-creation by individuals, is linked with painful emotional experiences. In practically all cases three processes are noted.

1. Loss of sexual love – that is, the rejection of the husband's penis and an emotional-sexual relationship with him. The most dramatic representation of this process is Karunavati's (case 1) memory of the genesis of her matted locks: the husband vows to renounce sex and grant her a warrant to be reborn as a male when suddenly she is given seven matted locks.

2. Parallel with the movement away from the conjugal relationship is an intensification of an idealized relationship with a divine alter (an image of both husband and father). Always this relationship is established by "orgasmic" shaking of the body. The term orgasm is used advisedly; there is no technical term for orgasm in Sinhala, and many ecstasies have not experienced it in their ordinary sexual lives. The pleasure and release achieved through "shaking from within" is translated into religious language as a divine ecstasy.

3. The god's gift for having renounced eros for agape is matted hair. Psychologically, on the level of unconscious processes, the sublated penis emerges through the head. The matted hair, unlike the shaven head of the monk, does not represent castration for the ascetic, but rather stands for its very opposite: the denial of castration or loss of the penis. For in all of Hindu asceticism sexuality is not extinguished but suppressed. But why does it emerge from the head? Here we are dealing with the Hindu type of ascetics, not Leach's European pseudo ascetics. The consciousness of both may be similar in some fundamental ways, but the Hindu's consciousness has already been conditioned by his cultural heritage. The complex psychological experiences of the individual coalesce around the preexisting meanings imposed by his culture. In this case much of the thought is directly or indirectly derived from *yoga* and *tantra*. For example, in *kundalini yoga* the chief vein in the body is *susumna*, running along the spinal column. Situated along it are the six wheels, or *cakra*; these are centers of vital forces and psychic energy. At the top of this vein, beneath the skull, is *sahasrara*, a powerful psychic center symbolized as the lotus (in turn a female-vaginal symbol). At the lowest *cakra* is *kundalini*, serpent power, which is generally quiescent. In *yoga* practice *kundalini* is aroused, it rises

through the vein *susumna*, passes through all the *cakras*, and unites with the *sahasrara*, the lotus center. That some of these ideas exist in the minds of our informants is clear: Mancini sees her matted hair as the vital breath that helps her turn her *cakras*. And of course we have Nandavati's matted lock that emerged from her head as a serpent (cobra). In my informants the vital forces are released with the *arude* or possession trance, in which the magnetism of the god infuses and suffuses the body of the priestess.

If the hair is the sublated penis emerging from the head, what kind of penis is it? Clearly it is no longer the husband's but the god's. But the relationship with the god is of a different order: eroticism is sublimated, idealized, and indirectly expressed. Gods, those idealized beings, cannot have penes like yours or mine; thus the matted hair is no ordinary penis but the god's *lingam*, the idealized penis, his *sakti*, the source of life and vitality. Hence on another level of meaning it is the life force itself, and its loss, according to Mancini, heralds the death of its bearer. Thus the hair is a fusion of symptom and symbol. In some cases the hair emerges initially as a symptom... progressively it is transformed into symbol. In Karunavati (case 1) the symbol emerges full-fledged, obviating the necessity for symptom. The transformation of symptom into symbol is through the cultural patterning of consciousness, which in turn helps integrate and resolve the painful emotional experiences of the individual, converting eros into agape and patient into priest.

The god's gift establishes a contract, a close relationship between ecstatic and deity. This contract is expressed and sealed in several ways. The number of locks given is often the number possessed by a particular deity: six for Kataragama, seven or five for the god Huniyan, three for Huniyan as demon, and a hundred for Kali. Thus it is the god's own hair that is given, a manifestation of his grace, if one may use that word, and his love. The compact is sealed at Kataragama, generally by walking over the hot coals unscathed.

Personal meaning of (public) symbol

This must obviously be related to the genesis of the symbol but must not be confounded with it. The associations – personal and cultural – clustering around the symbol will help us unravel the personal meaning of the cultural symbol, primarily to the ascetics themselves and secondarily to members of the society.

To practically all ascetics the hair is smelly, dirty, lice-ridden, and uncomfortable, at least in its initial stages. Yet it is also something beautiful...

The Sinhala term for matted hair is *bada palu*, meaning "beauty marks." The object that is held in fear and revulsion by the members of the society is called "beauty marks." I suspect that this semantic designation expresses the ascetics' point of view rather than the outsiders'.

From the public point of view the ascetics' matted locks contain a fleshy growth; practically every person described them as *mas dalu*, "buds of flesh," or "tender fleshy growths." Yet none of the ascetics claimed that their hair was entangled in fleshy growths, which of course is a realistic assessment. I suspect that the public reaction to the symbol is again related to the unconscious dimension of the symbol's origin: they are penes stuck on the head – fleshy growths.

The smelly associations of the symbol receive extra reinforcement from South Asian cultural beliefs pertaining to exuviae, most of which are viewed as polluting

and dirty. Yet for these ascetics, as for some children, feces are also gold (Freud 1953).

Since the matted locks are a gift of the god, his *sakti*, there is power in them. They are religious objects, used for blessing audiences, holy relics that must be incensed and taken care of.

Cultural message and communication

Contrary to Leach, this aspect of the symbol is least amenable to analysis. Hence my view: There are (public) symbols and symbols; the handshake is different from matted locks in its meaning – its message. I shall develop this theme later; for the moment let us look at Leach's argument, which is one most social anthropologists would use. The meaning of matted hair is chastity: this meaning is laid down in texts. For them, nothing else is relevant. Yet note that to limit the meaning of this symbol to that one dimension is to deprive it of the rich symbolic associations presented earlier. Furthermore, are we sure that texts give us the correct information on such matters? Could not these texts, written by learned virtuosos, be rationalized explanations of observed ascetic behavior, or even be nothing but theological casuistry? If the message that is being communicated is a public conscious one – like the ideal typical handshake – then it would be easy enough to get the public reaction to the symbol and their explanations of it. Now here is the rub: not one member of the public that I interviewed at Kataragama could even vaguely associate matted hair with celibacy, except in an extremely indirect manner. They could state that ascetics ought to be celibate; but they need not have matted locks at all, and indeed most of them do not. "Penance" was closer to the public view. However, the most common reaction was emotional: fear, horror, disgust, revulsion. Practically all of them thought of matted hair as fleshy growths entangled in the hair as a result of neglect. Some believed the locks bled if wounded. Many, including educated informants, were puzzled when I explained that flesh does not grow from the head in that manner. Disgust with and fear of matted hair is inevitable, since it belongs to a larger class of polluted objects, *exuviae*. But beneath that it is likely that the symbol also evokes in some individuals deeper anxieties, such as those pertaining to castration anxiety.

Why is this the case? Because matted hair is a special type of symbol. It is manipulatory, that is, *used* by individuals. It is like other ritual symbols that are manipulated by the worshiper, but quite unlike a symbol that exists in a myth or story. Leach says, "the association between hair behavior and sex is not reestablished anew by each individual" (1958, p. 156). But he is wrong, for there is no obligation for the ascetic to adopt this hair style. Thus voluntarism or option is another characteristic of this type of symbol. I shall take up this theme later; here it is enough to assert that when choice exists the symbol may in fact be established anew by each individual and may be linked with complex personal experiences of the individual. Yet we noted that such experiences are orderly and, as we shall soon see, they are predictable: suppressed sexuality; transfer of a relationship from husband to god; the god's gift of grace. Underlying all is the core unconscious meaning of the sublated penis emerging via the head as the god's penis, his *lingam*, his *sakti*. That the symbol is related to the life experience of the ascetic does not mean that it is a private symbol: it only means that we have to reject the conventional wisdom that there is a radical hiatus between custom and emotion.

The matted hair of Leach's hypothetical pseudoascetic is a symptom, not a symbol. So is the matted hair of nonascetic beggars in Sri Lanka and India: they are simply dirty locks matted together through neglect. A symptom is a somatic manifestation of a psychic or physical malady. In my ascetics symptom is replaced by symbol. The symbol is generated primarily out of the unconscious; once generated, it exists on the public level as a cultural symbol. Through it the ascetics convey a public message: fear, revulsion. Nandavati says people are afraid to look at her because of her matted locks. Socially the matted locks act as a marker to set aside their bearer as a special and redoubtable being. In this situation there is no need to draw a distinction between private and public symbols. All symbols are cultural and public; but a cultural symbol may exist on many levels – the personal and the social. It can communicate different messages, emotional and cognitive. The so-called private symbols are either symptoms (somatic signs) or fantasies, signs having deontological meaning only to the individual. Thus the oedipal father of psychopathology is not the real father: it is a fantasized image (Freud's *imago*) of the father, personal to the sufferer. It is not a symbol like god the father, which once again exists on both personal and cultural levels. A symbol, moreover, as many anthropologists have told us, does not exist by itself: it is part of a larger context. This can be the personal-experiential context or an institutional context, . . .

Matted Hair and Shaven Head: Two Kinds of Psychological Symbolism

As I stated earlier, I prefer to define a symbol in cultural terms, and I qualify this view with the idea that there is no necessary contradiction between custom and emotion. It is entirely possible that such a contradiction may exist in some cultures. This depends on the relationship of emotion to public life. For example, in English elite culture, or in the academic culture of Western universities, there may in fact be a radical hiatus between culture and emotion; yet it is wrong to assume that this must be so in other societies. In the cults I describe, the underlying psychic conflict of the individual is permitted expression through public symbols, whereas in English elite life such conflict may be suppressed and not permitted cultural expression. In the latter situation a custom becomes purely formal, and like the ideal-typical handshake, a vehicle for the communication of a formal social message. Later on in this essay I shall discuss why this is the case, but for the moment let me get back to the discussion of matted hair as a symbol.

The communicative value of matted hair is, I have noted, not as important for ascetics as its personal meaning. Rather, it could best be explained in personal-experiential terms. I shall label the class of symbols to which matted hair belongs "personal symbols" – that is, cultural symbols whose primary significance and meaning lie in the personal life and experience of individuals. And individuals are also cultural beings or persons. There are only a few symbols that have exclusive personal meaning; hair has considerable social (interpersonal) meaning also, though it is vague and undifferentiated. Some symbols have both personal and interpersonal meaning, such as dress styles, where personal symbols are individually used and manipulated. Indeed, the looseness and ambiguity of such symbols are critical, since they facilitate manipulation. Even when symbols that have primary social and interpersonal significance are manipulated by individuals (in religious ritual, trance,

and other emotional contexts), they become invested with personal experiential significance. Another feature of a personal symbol is option – choice or voluntariness involved in its use or manipulation. This is a basic difference between matted hair and shaven head. In the former there is choice, for there is no rule that says that an ascetic *must* have matted hair. The ascetic exercises an option, and that hair option is based on deep motivation. By contrast, the monk has no choice: all monks must shave their heads. In this case the link between motivation and symbol is never straightforward, and one finds people with a variety of motivations having little choice but to employ the symbol. In the latter case, the primary meaning of the symbol is interpersonal, intercommunicative. The symbol is part of a larger grammar; the shaven head is articulated with several symbols in a larger set: patched yellow robe, begging bowl, personal demeanor in public (eyes downcast, head bent). The articulation of a symbol in a larger set is true of all symbols used as cultural expressions. This is another reason why the matted hair of the beggar and the ascetic are different: the former is articulated to a set of symptoms, the latter to a larger set of symbols. In the case of shaven head, the primary psychological meaning of the symbol is *castration*; its further cultural meaning is *chastity*; its extended interpersonal message is *renunciation* when it is articulated with the larger grammar.

By the statement that the primary psychological meaning of the shaven head is castration, I mean that the shaven head is a *psychogenetic* symbol without being a personal one as is matted hair. Thus a psychological symbolism may be personal (matted hair); alternatively, it may be psychogenetic but not personal (shaven head). Psychogenetic symbols are also drawn from the imagery of dreams and the unconscious: both matted hair and shaven head are derived from the repertoire of the unconscious. But matted hair is personal in the sense that the symbol is re-created anew by the individual (option and manipulation), whereas the shaven head, though derived from the imagery of the unconscious, is not re-created anew (lack of choice, no manipulation). Thus a symbol can have psychogenetic meaning without having unconscious personal meaning; the symbol originating, as Leach says rightly, in the remote past has been given interpersonal, intercommunicative value (Leach 1958, p. 160). The personal symbol, by contrast, has unconscious, deep motivational and intracommunicative significance, for we know from G. H. Mead that symbolic communication can exist with one's own self (Mead 1934). The distinction between public and private symbols, between culture and emotion, is an artifact of Western culture. Other peoples can create (cultural) symbols that are also personal, a theme I shall develop later on in this essay.

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