

1 introduction: hair tropes

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Hair seems to be quite ordinary stuff, but it is difficult to discern what is ordinary about it or what sometimes makes it so extraordinary. One might apply Mary Douglas's maxim about impurity, and say that hair, which is often associated with impurity, is matter out of place (1966:35). It would thus have to be ordinary matter when its being out of place can be rectified by setting it in place, until it goes out of place again. From this standpoint, hair would be extraordinary when it appears to have no place at all.

In taking up an invitation to consider hair in Asian cultures, each essayist in this volume can be said to begin by situating her/himself in relation to questions raised by these matters. What is ordinary about hair in Asian population X or tradition X? When is there something extraordinary enough about hair in X to be worth writing about? And how does one write about something so universally ordinary yet sensitive, something that literally gets under one's skin, and takes one under another's?

It is worthwhile to locate the ordinary and the extraordinary in these essays, since each cultural milieu and historical situation has posed different bases for ethnographic description and theoretical reflection. Both Gary Ebersole and Anne Allison, writing about Japan, stress the Japanese perception of hair as "natural," perhaps from its associations in Shinto in which nature is a prominent category. For Ebersole, "the 'natural' symbolism of hair" entails its wildness and

links with sexuality, its marking of a person's age. For Allison, although pubic and underarm hair (particularly women's) are "considered natural" in Japan, they are treated otherwise. Each author puts the term in quotes since, as cultural constructionism argues, it is questionable whether human hair, unlike animal hair, ever exists in a natural state. Hair becomes extraordinary when what is "natural" becomes shocking (Allison) or hauntingly beautiful (Ebersole). For Patrick Olivelle, the ordinary has also been natural (though he doesn't use the term) in his treatment of the growth of body hair, and for males' facial hair, with the onset of sexual maturity. He suggests that this trait is uniquely human and one of three factors in the "root meaning" of hair.

But like most of the other essayists in this volume, Olivelle locates the ordinary not in the natural but in the socially and culturally normative. Here the extraordinary is located in breaches of such norms: a woman who shaves her head to perform a funeral rite restricted to males (in Julia Thompson's essay); the disturbing sight of longhaired destitutes (in James Watson's essay); edicts compelling the change of traditional hair styles (Weikun Cheng and Sarah Nelson); the hairiness of barbarians (Frank Dikötter); the transferral of gender codes (Alf Hiltebeitel); varied spectrums of women's hair styles and choices under transcultural negotiation (Barbara Miller).

Emic explanations of hair practices veer between such notions of the ordinary and encounters with the extraordinary, depending on where explanation is attempted. Olivelle, Thompson, Dikötter, Nelson, and Ebersole look to their sources for whatever explanations can be found about hair conventions as they appear, respectively, in lawbooks, hair professions, scientific discourse, sumptuary codes, and poetry. Miller, Cheng, Allison, and Hiltebeitel do the same by looking at family, history, public culture media, and festivals. Most authors bring out varied and competing explanations within their sources. Especially striking is Watson's account of the different explanations for the shocking sight of longhaired destitutes given by Hong Kong urban informants (including police, border patrols, social workers, and diplomats) and villagers still living in their ancestral home areas.

It begins to look as if nothing is ordinary about hair. It gets into everything, but whatever it gets into, it never seems to be explained the same way; rather, it always seems to be used differently to explain something else. Let us consider what is certainly one of Asia's, if not the world's, most sustained meditations on hair. It comes from the Buddhist tradition which, though it is not taken up as a primary focus in any of our essays, is the same tradition that says extraordinary

things about the Buddha's hair that are noted by Olivelle and Hildebeitel, and that, with its practice of head shaving for monks and nuns, has, in the writings of Edmund Leach (1958) and Obeyesekere (1981), probably provoked more theoretical reflection about hair than any other Asian tradition.

In Buddhaghosa's *The Path of Purification*, shaved heads are ordinary and surely in the author's background. Commenting on a passage in which the Buddha directs attention to the "repulsiveness" of the body's thirty-two aspects, Buddhaghosa submits hair to a kind of phenomenological reduction, which he describes as part of "the development of Mindfulness Occupied with the Body as a meditation subject." This is a mindfulness that enables those who savor and find "the deathless" (Nānamoli 1975:259–60). What is first to be noted is the primacy of hair in this meditation. The Buddha's text begins, "Again, bhikkhus, a bhikkhu reviews this body, up from the soles of the feet and down from the top of the hair and contained in the skin as many kinds of filth thus: In this body there are head hairs, body hairs, nails, teeth, skin, flesh, sinews, . . ." etc., down to "urine." Buddhaghosa gives full attention to the rhetorical force of "beginning with head hairs":

Head hairs, body hairs: these things beginning with head hairs are the thirty-two aspects. The construction here should be understood in this way: In this body there are head hairs, in this body there are body hairs.

No one who searches through the whole of this fathom-long carcase, starting upwards from the soles of the feet, starting downward from the top of the head, and starting from the skin all round, ever finds even the minutest atom at all beautiful in it, such as a pearl, or a gem, or beryl, or aloes, or saffron, or camphor, or talcum powder; on the contrary he finds nothing but the very malodorous, offensive, drab-looking sort of filth consisting of head hairs, body hairs, and the rest. Hence it is said: "In this body there are head hairs, body hairs . . . urine." (Nānamoli 1975:261)

Hair—"head hair, body hair"—is thus a synecdoche for the whole body and a metonym for the whole meditation. It is that to which every one of the other thirty-two aspects leads back in a syntagmatic chain. Bhikkhus are enjoined to give attention to the meditation subject through the "sevenfold skill in learning" and the "tenfold skill in giving attention." The first two of the seven ways of learning are

verbal and mental recitation. The thirty-two aspects are divided into five pentads and one septad. In both verbal and mental recitation, the first pentad is to be recited forward—"Head hairs, body hairs, nails, teeth, skin"—and then backward, to "head hairs." Likewise, all the remaining sets are recited forward and backward, but the backward recitation continues in each case all the way back to "head hairs." One thus starts with "head hairs, body hairs" only once, but returns to "body hairs, head hairs" six times. And one always ends up the one hundred and forty-nine-part tour where one started: with "head hairs."

The recitation should be done verbally in this way a hundred times, a thousand times, even a hundred thousand times. For it is through verbal recitation that the meditation subject becomes familiar, and the mind being thus prevented from running here and there, the parts become evident and seem like [the fingers of] a pair of clasped hands, like a row of fence posts. (262)

One notes how the closing image turns from things aggregated to things disaggregated, from things closed in together to things standing separately.

The last five skills of learning then come from attending to the color, shape, direction, location, and delimitation of each of the thirty-two bodily features, beginning with head hair. Delimitation is a technique of identification and differentiation, as in the example, "Head hairs are not body hairs, and body hairs are not head hairs" (Nānamoli 263). Having "apprehended" the thirty-two features in this five-fold way, the bhikkhu should "define repulsiveness in five ways, that is, by colour, shape, odour, habitat, and location." Here is what makes head hairs repulsive:

[O]n seeing the colour of head hair in a bowl of inviting rice gruel or cooked rice people are disgusted and say "This has got hairs in it. Take it away." So they are repulsive in *colour*. Also when people are eating at night, they are likewise disgusted by the mere sensation of hair-shaped *akkabark* or *makaci-bark* fibre. So they are repulsive in *shape*. And the *odour* of head hairs, unless dressed with a smearing of oil, scented with flowers, etc., is most offensive. And it is still worse when they are put in fire. . . . [J]ust as pot herbs that grow on village sewage in a filthy place are disgusting to civilized people and unusable, so also head hairs

are disgusting since they grow on the sewage of pus, blood, urine, dung, bile, phlegm, and the like. This is the repulsive aspect of the *habitat*. And these head hairs grow on the heap of the [other] thirty-one parts as fungus do on a dung hill. And owing to the filthy place they grow in they are quite as unappetizing as vegetables growing on a charnel ground, on a midden etc., as lotuses or water lilies growing in drains and so on. This is the repulsive aspect of their *location*. (Nānamoli 268–69)

Clearly there is a lot at stake, and quite possibly a good bit of humor, in defining head hairs as repulsive. But once one reaches the last two definitions, the method is clear. Buddhaghosa builds on two features of hair that enter into several discussions in this book. First, hair—or in the strange case of the stringy tree barks felt while eating at night, which by their likeness to hair make us think of hair—can have a certain shock value, and that value can tell us much about hair, and much about ourselves. Second, he draws on a conventional symbolic analogy made widely with hair: that hairs are like plants. But instead of leaving us with the usual mythic decontextualized correspondence, he contextualizes the analogy, as with all the other reductions to the disgusting, to a relatively atypical though certainly not extraordinary situation where disgust at hair is educible. Metaphor becomes metonym. Head hair is contiguous with everything else in the body. Every head hair thus has a disgusting character even when it seems to be in place. But it is when it seems to be out of place that its true ordinariness is seen for what it is. Place being contingent in the Buddhist universe, it is disgusting *everywhere*.

Buddhaghosa is thus troping with hair. That he does so very well is what makes his discussion theoretically interesting, even though he begins with a foregone conclusion: hair is repulsive. What is interesting lies not in this conclusion, which is rather forced, but in his “thick description,” his metaphorical lenses, and his further troping through synecdoche, metonymy, and probably irony. What is further instructive is that such troping with hair is rather ordinary. Cultures do it (Turner 1991), and so do scholars (Clifford 1988)—often to support rather foregone conclusions, though, to be sure, the conclusions were not foregone until someone realized that they could explain a great deal. Take the opening of E. E. Sikes’s often-cited article in the *Hastings Encyclopedia of Religion and Ethics*

as an example of troping in the Frazerian "encyclopaedic" comparative mode (Smith 1982:23):

In custom, ritual, and superstition, the same ideas underlie the majority of beliefs and ceremonies relating to human hair and nails; and the whole class of observances may conveniently be treated in a single article. . . . [C]ertain practices relating to the hair of the head appear to have originated from the wide-spread belief that the head is particularly sacred. Some races think that a spirit lives in the head, and it is important not to disturb this spirit more than is necessary, or, as among the Greeks, the hair is itself regarded as the seat of life—a belief which is found, in a modified form, among the Omaha. Hence the Burmese shrink from frequent washing of the head; and when the hair of their kings was cut, the operation was attended with great solemnity (Sikes 1912:6, 474).

From this brief example of Asian hair, Sikes's next move is to Samson. The claim that "the majority of beliefs and ceremonies" can be treated in one article is made to support a theory of "connections" grounded on Frazer's concept of sympathetic magic, for which hair practices are indeed often illustrative. The supposed "majority" of hair beliefs and practices is then accounted for by the principle of such connections. A set of practices based on the metonymic principle of contiguity is thus taken as sufficiently representative of hair data as a whole to serve as a synecdoche for that imagined whole, which is explained by and no doubt projected into a metonymic ethnographic style of the most dubious connection making.

Let us note only two further instances in the history of hair theory where tropical enhancement is one of the means of making hair's unruliness manageable: C. R. Hallpike's emphasis on social control (1969) metaphorically makes hair, like society, the subject of "manipulation"; and Gananath Obeyesekere's exploration of unconscious sexual symbolism brings the interpreter and his informants together through the metaphoric image of Medusa (1981:6-7). Olivelle's essay reviews the history of hair theory in order to go to the "roots" of the same subject. And so do nearly all, if not all, of the chapters in this volume make their tropical plays on and with hair. Olivelle "teases out" its social meaning. Thompson traces "the multistranded history of beauty parlors." Miller insists that "the culture of hair is no trivial matter." Cheng finds that hair-cutting and queue-requiring edicts sought "to

make Manchus and Hans a unified body." Dikötter and Hildebeitel play on "missing links"; Nelson on hair as "a life and death matter." Allison signals a tropical alert to the ironies of pubic hair as a "site/sight" for moral arbitration. Olivelle and Ebersole see hair as a "grammar" or "semantic field," with Ebersole in particular concerned with poetic conventions known as "pillow words," one of which puts hair on a cushion. Only Watson makes hair troping hard to spot, but he is respecting a situation in which hair provokes shock and its wearers are silent.

Hair may thus be less finite than at least some theorists have thought. That only God knows the number of the hairs on a human head (to paraphrase Matthew 10.29–30 and Luke 12.6–7) reflects something of the hermeneutical situation. If there is a message in such tropic complicities, it is that hair has had to be richly imagined and contextualized, not only in the histories, cultures, societies, and personal lives described but in the intercultural and interpersonal situations of description; that its messiness and loose ends are resistant to theories that reduce it to manageable proportions; and that theories themselves become entangled in the subject. Olivelle, who is the only one in this book to have proposed a theory of his own, reflects such a situation with his stress on the "dialectical nature of hair symbolism" and his advocacy of a polygenetic approach that traces the root meaning of hair to "a multiplicity of sources," which he works down provisionally to three. His theoretical discussion raises interesting questions, particularly, why are men at the center? It could be argued that the expenditure of effort on hair by men is much less than by women. Men hardly do more than tinker. Women have much more symbolic capital in their hair than men, and men often have more such capital in women's hair than in their own. Perhaps what Olivelle's theory reflects is the way in which marrying men, and often women, may place men at the center in the definition and control of hair norms. Such is indeed what the women do at Thompson's Kathmandu hair salon when they ask, "what kind of woman . . . shaves her head like a man," and does not wait for her brother to perform their mother's cremation? Where such male definition and control do not reach, does the theory still hold? As Obeyesekere notes in his foreword, an uninvested male, like a temple priest, may be supportive to such a woman's determination. Should one theorize from the center or theorize from the boundaries? Olivelle's theoretical position identifies a "central" problem that all are dealing with, and that some might tackle differently. Olivelle's theory serves as a sounding board for the other es-

says, which tend to be theory selective, theory reflective, or theory resistant rather than theory productive.

The comparative study of hair ripened in formulating south Asia-based paradigms (Leach, Hershman, Obeyesekere, not to mention Buddhaghosa). The catalytic theories developed in these studies are precisely those that are being revised and rethought within different cultural contexts (east Asia for one) and in this book. Studies of hair in south Asia began with a discourse relating psychoanalytic insights primarily to religious data. The combination of south and east Asian studies in this volume contributes to the contemporary shift in theory toward power, politics, and the body that has global relevance. Allison incorporates postmodernist theory, especially French psychoanalytic theory. Thompson finds inspiration in contemporary theorists of globalization, political economy, and the body. Miller's chapter describes three pools of theory: political economy, feminist, and race. Some of these chapters also take up the pros and cons of magical, psychological, and sociological hair theories. Thus Cheng, Ebersole, and Hildebeitel find points where the magical remains pertinent. Nelson and Cheng find the sociological more useful than the psychological; Hildebeitel the reverse. Ebersole, Allison, Watson, Miller, Hildebeitel, and Nelson deal with subjects where muteness or silence—whether politically enforced, culturally tacit, or personally unexpressed—raise questions about what Olivelle calls "exegetical block." These are working premises pertinent to the materials under discussion, strategic to the specificities of hair in certain contexts, and not arguments for the primacy of any of these theories in and of themselves.

What all these chapters have in common is that they are taken up with the politics of hair and the body (Ebersole less here than the rest, but with no lack of attention to the poetics of imperial hair)—and thus hair and the body politic. Indeed, body hair (especially for Dikötter) is, in some cases, given more equal billing with the head-hair/genital-hair axis than theoretical discussions have usually accorded it. If the essays suggest a "master trope," it is boundaries and their control. From this standpoint, the social body is both a bounded construct and a fluid one. Hair norms and policies are defined around civilizational, cultural, racial, caste, and gender boundaries; and around temporal transitions and spatial frontiers. In most of the chapters (Allison, Nelson, Dikötter, Watson, Cheng, Miller) the lines have been overtly if not primarily political. For Thompson, the salon is also a site where cultural styles are negotiated in boundary-breaking conversations. For Olivelle, hair as public marks society's internal boundaries;

for Miller, hair as private marks the family's internal boundaries. For Ebersole, there are permeable boundaries between hair's sacrality and conventionality, its "natural order" (in quotes) and its wildness (out of quotes). For Hildebeitel, village and festival boundaries are replicated in social and theological distinctions, while present and absent mustaches and phalluses mark gender boundaries under negotiation. To extend Allison's terms from nation to society, culture, religion, and family, one might thus say that in every case there is a "hair debate" that interweaves "the boundaries of nationhood . . . with those of desire and its prohibitions." The rhetoric of such debates would seem to make hair extraordinary where boundaries intersect to open possibilities for reimagining different kinds of power, from the self-discipline of the monk to the goddess's *śakti*, from the policing of borders to what only one's hairdresser knows.

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