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Hair -

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All mammals have hair and only mammals have hair. When the individual hairs are fine and closely set together the coat of hair is called fur. When the hairs are soft, kinky, and matted together the coat is called wool. When the hairs are coarse and stiff they are called bristles; and when they are stiff and pointed, as in the Porcupine, they are called quills or spines. Individual hairs are composed mostly of keratin with coloring pigment added, but they have no blood vessels or nerves. Sometimes the hair contains interstitial air bubbles which give the coat of hair a silvery sheen. A human has about 100 thousand individual hairs in the scalp, and these generally live from about four months to as long as five years. Hair grows about 2/5 of an inch a month and, if allowed, will grow to a length of about twenty four to thirty inches. When hair attains a length of about one foot the growth rate is cut in half. Hair does not grow at a constant rate but grows faster at some times, slower at others. The fastest growth occurs in women in the age group of sixteen years. Human hair falls into three broad groups which correspond to the three main racial classifications, Negroid, Mongoloid, and Caucasian. In fact, the form of the hair is one of the most important and reliable indicators of race. The nearly black hair of the Negro is wooly. It grows from a curved follicle, a minute pit in the scalp which contains the blood supply for the hair and a tiny muscle called the 'erector pili', which makes the hair 'stand on end'. In cross section, wooly hair is flat which helps it to kink. The curved follicle also imparts a spiral effect as the hair grows. The hair of a Mongoloid is coarse, straight, and black. It grows from a straight follicle and is round in cross section. The hair of a caucasian is intermediate in form, being oval in cross section; and while it grows from a straight follicle it frequently tends to curl. Besides having interesting physical characteristics, hair has tremendous economic importance. Furs have always constituted a valuable article of commerce. The myth of Jason and the Argonauts and the quest for the Golden Fleece may refer to a fur trading expedition of Bronze Age Greeks. The importance of the American fur trade is well known, and in Russia today the annual auction of Siberian furs at Leningrad brings millions of foreign exchange. Wool is still the best material for making men's suits, topcoats, and other garments which require warmth, water repellency, comfort, and fit. Last and far from least is the enormous share of the Gross National Product devoted to the care of the hair on the human head and face.

Every culture, no matter how Primitive or Poor devotes some of its resources to grooming the hair. In the United States and Western Europe billions of dollars are spent on haircuts, Permanents, lotions, shampoos, hairspray, dyes, razor blades, and shavers. Concern with the coiffure has always been one of the most intense interests of mankind. A statuette called the Venus of Willenburg has been dated to Cro-Magnon times 20,000 years ago. Its facial features are ill defined but the pattern of the hair style was meticulously incised by the artist.

Why did mammals evolve hair in the first place? What use does it serve in its natural state? First, it provides warmth or insulation, protects the skin, and responds to the touch. Many mammals, such as cats, have sensory hairs which grow from follicles richly supplied with blood and nerves. These hairs are used as feelers to obtain information from the surroundings. Hair also provides protection from blows, creates an attractive appearance to the opposite sex, and may serve to camouflage the animal.

Many animals raise the hairs on their heads, faces, necks, and chests into a ruff when angry or when obliged to fight. This frightful appearance may obviate the necessity of actually fighting and serves to protect vital areas. The beard of human males probably served the same purpose in primitive societies, tending to make the possessor look fiercer and more dangerous, and perhaps making him feel much bolder. The same uses are probably served by ~~men's~~ men's beards today.

All cultures of mankind, as well apparently ~~do~~ some primates, consider hair to have aesthetic value. In primitive societies it is generally the men whose hair is the subject of interest. They typically spend hours grooming and adorning it. Women's hair is usually short and receives little attention.

As societies advance, however, the interest shifts to the women's hair and attention and adornment is lavished on it. Poetry and art convince us that it was ever so. Milton endowed Eve, 'our first mother' with hair so luxurious that Satan was lured to her side in Eden where he began to weave the world's great woe:

'Her unadorned golden tresses were dishevel'd, but in wanton ringlets wav'd as the vine curls her tendrils...'

Care of the hair also involves a great deal of socializing. Monkeys, apes, and other primates spend hours grooming each other. Human societies also have grooming rituals.

We expect the barber to be garrulous, and most of us engage in the same pointless talk about the weather, sports, politics, gossip, or any other subject, while in the barber's chair. Indeed a regular refusal to engage in such repartee is interpreted as a sure sign of a grouchy or anti-social person. Women, I am told, tend to share even greater confidences with their hairdressers, and indeed, hairdressers tend to be confessors. The barber and the hairdresser accept an obligation to confide these confidences to no one else.

Finally, the condition of the hair indicates social status. The dominant lion in the pride and the top monkey in the pack is usually the best groomed. Among humans, hair style indicates status, age, sex, occupation, personality, and sometimes, religious affiliation. Among the people of the earth it is the mythic, social, and symbolic meanings of hair that really attest its importance.

The myth of Samson illustrates one universal belief about hair: 'And Samson, the consecrated one, told Delilah all his heart. He said, 'There hath not come a razor upon my head; for I have been a Nazarite unto God from my mother's womb: if I be shaven, then my strength will go from me, and I shall become weak, and be like any other man.' (Judges 16:17).

In 1905 a pious lady missionary to the Chippewa Indians of Lake Superior saw a young brave whose long and lustrous hair was being combed by his sister. The lady playfully asked him for a lock of his hair. Solemnly he replied, 'That I cannot do. Were I to cut my hair, I should lose all my strength.'

From Biblical times to modern times, from ancient Spartan to modern Sikh his hair has been the warrior's pride. The shrunken heads of the Jivaro are mostly hair. The ancient Scythians as well as the Indians scalped their enemies. The warrior's long hair or his scalp lock was a visible taunt to his foe: 'Come and take it if you can!'

The loss of one's hair to an enemy involved the ultimate weakness: death, the final loss of strength. It was a logical step to the primitive mind to connect loss of hair to physical weakness, sexual impotence, and loss of status.

In many societies the shaving of the head accompanies some kind of loss: the death of a spouse, the loss of individual freedom by entry into a religious order, the military, or prison. This raises a question. If hair equals potency and freedom, why are puberty initiates in various cultures shorn of their hair. In ancient Athens a young man's hair was cut when he reached puberty whereas in childhood it had been allowed to grow long. Thereafter he wore his hair short. Upon cutting his hair was dedicated to a god. In Sparta, at puberty the boy's hair which had been cut short was allowed to grow long. The connecting element is the fact that any variation from the norm can symbolize change or transition. ...the cutting or growing of the hair is a very visible way to set apart the novice or initiate. Thus cutting or growing the hair symbolize many changes that are time-bound:

the Period of mourning for a loved one; the bridge between youth and maturity, the division between the sacred and the secular; all journeys that have been completed when the hair has reappeared or been rearranged.

While humans have hair over the entire body, it is obvious that some parts are hairier than others. Humans have abundant sweat glands; there is less need for body hair for insulation. One theory holds that as humans became hunters, chasing and catching large animals, there was a natural selection of those who had the most efficient cooling systems. Absence of hair was thus an advantage. Warmth could be provided by using the fur of the animals caught and killed.

Hair on the head is necessary to protect the head from the elements. Hair on the armpits and pubic hair indicated sexual maturity. It is also theorized that such hair trapped secretions whose odor was much more acceptable to our prototype ancestors. Pubic hair thus made mating more likely and the preservation of the species more certain.

Having said all this about the prevalence of hair, we must recognize that certain societies have preferred to be hairless. Modern Chinese and Japanese consider hairiness to be extremely unattractive. The ancient Egyptians customarily shaved off all body hair including the hair of the head and pubic hair. They covered their heads with cloths. The pharaohs and nobles wore elaborate wigs or headdresses designed to look like lions' manes on ceremonial occasions. The Hopi Indians were totally shaved.

Coolness and hygiene probably explain the practical reasons for being hairless. Also there is the fact that long hair and elaborate beards require considerable attention. In a society in which the man's only job was to be a warrior he had plenty of time to take care of his hair; but Egypt was hot, it was not a warlike society and its main interest in hair became an interest in maintaining an absence of hair. Their neighbors, however, the Hittites, Hebrews, and Assyrians were among the hairiest of societies.

Parenthetically, we might note that the absence of hair in men has usually symbolized a pacific nature. Men usually become bald as they age. In primitive societies an old bald man is not a threat. Priests often shaved their heads to denote that they were not warriors and to show that they had sacrificed their hair to their god. The tonsure of the Roman priests was adopted by the Church for its priests and monks. By accepting the tonsure the cleric accepted his role and symbolically showed that he was not a threat physically or sexually.

Males and females have usually worn different hair styles, indicating a desire by society to make a distinct difference in the social roles of each sex. In recent years there has been a desire on the part of some people to end these role distinctions and to symbolize this by adopting a so-called unisex hair style. The jury is still out on this question.

As I have said, in Primitive societies men generally wore their hair long and women wore it short. I have already described how men wore their hair in Athens and Sparta. Greek women generally dressed their hair rather elaborately. They parted it in the middle, brought it down over their temples, carried the two divisions to the back of the neck, and finally brought the hair together over the point where the part began where the ends were pinned or tied into a knot.

Roman men generally wore short hair but the women had elaborate hairdos, including wigs made from hair of slaves.

The Germans, Normans, Saxons, and Normans wore their hair long. The men generally let it fall over their shoulders while the women parted it into braids which they pinned to their heads. Short hair was worn only by slaves or someone in disgrace or punishment.

In the 17th and 18th Centuries the custom of powdered hair, queues, and wigs for both men and women was wide spread. Women's hairdos became especially elaborate among the nobility.

In 1872 a Frenchman named Marcel introduced the Marcel wave. This was a flat wave made with a grooved heated iron. In 1905 Charles Nessler of Germany introduced the 'cold' wave or permanent wave in which the shape of the hair is altered by use of chemicals which impart waves and curls and cause the hair to hold its shape until it grows out.

19th Century American and European men favored long hair and beards as well as sideburns and moustaches and these styles prevailed until the 1st World War. As millions of men went into the world's armies, they faced the barber shears, and hair and beards were sacrificed to the cause of health and discipline. Short hair remained the style for men through the 20's and 30's and was reinforced in the 40's and 50's. I well recall a beloved Latin teacher who used to lecture the teenage boys in her class to the effect that we would look so much better if we would only wear our hair longer.

In the 1960's the youth of America obliged, and society was scandalized by the sight of men and boys with hair down to their shoulders or plaited in pigtails. A newspaper report from Buffalo, N.Y., in 1970 stated that 'A long haired hippie-looking young man was walking down the street. Three 'hard-hat' laboring men in a fit of spontaneous, apparently unprovoked rage and anger, grabbed the young man, threw him to the ground, and cut off his long hair.'

It seems to me upon reflection and research that every hair style possible has been worn at various times and in various societies and that long and short styles have all been discarded. ~~It is obvious then that long or short styles are not material at any time,~~ ^{but} ~~but~~ ^{it is obvious then} ~~but~~ the relative length and the symbolism of a style. ^{some}

Women's styles have not caused the ^{some} problems that men's styles have caused. The symbolism of women's styles is aesthetic and sexual. Girls generally wear their hair long and, among teenage girls, straight, even if it is naturally curly. It is possible that the lank, straight hair of the 60's and 70's is giving way to another style, but I have not attempted to verify this.

UPon marriage women tend to wear their hair much shorter and wavier. As they age women tend to adopt tighter and tighter curls so that the hair tends to become almost rigid. Married women who continue to wear their hair longer or more loosely waved than the norm send out an ambiguous signal. They seem to be seeking attention which society does not approve, at least the society of other women.

The color of hair is thought to be significant, especially for women. Blondes are dumb but they have more fun. Platinum blondes are ~~confident and forbidding~~ ^(more so). Brunettes are serious and down to earth. Red-heads are high-tempered. Some researchers believe that blond men are not as well regarded in business as their darker headed colleagues. Blondness, they say, tends to be associated with youth or immaturity.

In addition to social and sexual connotations, men's hair and beards have political and aggressive associations. A beard may suggest anger, a Van Dyke may suggest a sardonic nature. A loose flowing beard may suggest an artistic, impractical personality. The square beard of the Amish man or the Hasidic Jew implies rigidity and orthodoxy.

Long hair in men is still regarded by many people as a sign of a radical; and this is a perfect example of cultural bias. In 17th Century England the Puritans were the radicals and they were called Roundheads because of their short hair. The long-haired Cavaliers were the conservatives defending the status quo.

It is true that in the '60's and '70's male political opinion could be gauged by the length of a man's hair. This seemed to be an application of the principle that long hair is a symbol of freedom, in that case, freedom of opinion or expression.

It is amusing now to look at films of the Beatles as they appeared on the Ed Sullivan Show in the early '60's. They wore the haircuts of small English boys, complete with bangs and they look about as threatening as small English boys. Yet at the time they were very threatening to many people, and indeed they did symbolize the radical change that was beginning in many institutions.

But now twenty five years have passed and all but the most reactionary conservative radicals wear haircuts that would have been unthinkable in the '50's. The crew cut is gone, no longer equated with manliness but with squareness. One so-called 'wardrobe engineer' cautions young executives about carrying things too far. He 'suggests that people over 40 in American society don't trust a man whose hair covers his ears or drops below the edge of his collar.' But what a change this advice is from the crew-cut days of the '50's.

Where do we go from here? I suggest that at least for men baldness is the next style. Baldness is a natural state for 40% of men and it is usually loathed by its victims and feared by those who know they might be next. The unfortunate connotations of baldness I have already explained.

But what is done artificially always seems more acceptable

than the natural state of things. The ancient Hebrews, believing state of it Samson, mocked baldness, but later, as they came to appreciate baldness, but scholarship, they thought that much study caused the loss of hair. Over the years this particular myth seems to have made sense to a lot of people. How else can we explain the fact that all reports of alien and extraterrestrial visitors, spacemen, and citizens of other galaxies have outsized heads as innocent of hair as a billiard ball. Some prophets of our future foresee a time when humans will have evolved similarly.

There is another myth that I must mention in the hope that it might be true. Bald men are said to be more virile. Certainly two generations of theatre-goers believe that to be true of Yul Brynner. If we can convince society that baldness equals brilliance equals virility, then we may experience a tonsorial revolution. The old associations of hair and its imagery will be gone forever. Goodbye Samson. Hello Razor.