Medusa's Hair

An Essay on
Personal Symbols
and
Religious Experience

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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.[6] 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*a*, 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. Later I shall present detailed case histories of three other females, interspersed with interpretations based on the

preceding analysis of hair symbolism. One should remember that the initial draft of this essay was written with the first three cases; the later cases add extremely interesting illustrative matter. I shall present most of the cases in some detail, since I must use them to develop a more general theme later on—that of the relationship between symbolism, personality, and culture. 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.

As I stated in the Introduction, I almost never interview informants cold, but only after coming to know them fairly well. Some of my crucial informants were interviewed many months, in some cases years, after I initially met them. In most cases it is difficult to get conventional interview data—such as age of weaning, early childhood experience, toilet training—since these events have little significance for informants and for the culture in general. The reader will come to realize how I make a virtue of necessity and often conduct my interviews in terms of the informant's own idiom and experiences. I try to get as much accurate information as I can about an informant's past; at other times I conduct a kind of debate or argument with the informant so that the latter may be tempted to express in some detail his or her spiritual experiences and to argue about them.

Three 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.[7] 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.[8] 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."[9]

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 worshiping 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 foot print (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.

Case 2: Nandavati Maniyo (age 62)

Nandavati was also not interested in her childhood, and it was difficult to get her to talk about it. Like the others, all her experiences are focused on her relationship with the god; it is hard for her to talk about anything else. Chronological sequence also has little significance for people like her; she recounts her experiences with deities ignoring linear sequences. Nevertheless, it was possible to piece together some events of her life.

She was one of nine siblings, six of whom died in infancy. Her own father died when she was very small; she recollected some memories of him. "He loved us, he was kind, and carried us in his arms.... I remember his voice." Her mother lived to a ripe old age and died about 1972.

Initially the whole family lived in the mother's village of Kaikavala, near Matale in the Central Province. After her father's death they moved to his home in Kelaniya near Colombo. As a young, attractive woman of about seventeen, she had her first job as nanny in an American engineer's family. She met her future husband, fell in love, and married him. They had one son when she was about twenty, and when she was three months pregnant with her second child she left her husband. Nandavati was extremely reluctant to talk about this event, but eventually she said, "My husband became friendly with another woman. I caught them red-handed... how do you say? I saw them [close together] near a bridge. So I told him we cannot go on like this.... You take the older child and I'll look after this one [in the womb]." She was disgusted with men and has had no sexual relationships since then.

She went back to her mother's village of Kaikavala. To support herself she worked once again as nanny for an American family. But they soon left the island, after finding her a job as seamstress at the Galle Face Hotel, the country's leading hotel at the time. It was at this time that she developed her matted locks. She told me that it "just happened." She was working in the hotel at that time,

and in one week her hair became matted and the braids formed into the shape of a cobra with raised hood. In the interview she placed her hand on her head, imitating such a cobra. Nandavati said that she had no wish to become a priestess until that event, though she added that she had been interested in the deities as a child and a young girl.

Now she could not go to work; the white women who were her customers shunned her and told her to see a doctor. But she was afraid. She consulted Wilbert Sami, a Sinhala who had set himself up as a Hindu type of priest in Kirillapone in Colombo. Wilbert Sami also claimed to have a hundred matted locks from Kali, who has the identical number on her head. Nandavati wanted very much to cut her locks; they hurt her, and they remained in an upright position, conspicuous for all to see. But Wilbert Sami suggested that she go to Kataragama and consult the deity herself, for her matted locks indicated a boon, *varama*, from the god.

Meanwhile Nandavati was without a job, leading a hand-to-mouth existence, neglecting her little boy, whom she loved dearly. In about five months she collected thirty-eight rupees in donations and took the bus to Kataragama with her child. First she stopped at Devundara and offered a *puja* for Visnu there. Her next stop was the famous Buddhist stupa at Tissa. She was at the stupa alone when she was approached by an old woman, who consoled her and said, "Daughter, I come here because of your loneliness." They then meditated at the stupa. The old lady said, "Daughter, you sleep here and I'll watch over you." Next morning they meditated once more, offered a *puja* to the Buddha, and thereby acquired merit. "Now, daughter, I shall leave you," she said, and simply disappeared.

From there Nandavati went to Kataragama, a distance of about fifteen miles. Here she had a series of wonderful experiences. "I still had no real love for the gods. I came here to cut my hair. Then I went toward the shrine with the tray of fruit and flowers for the puja. There was a big puja going on there, with drums and music. As I went past this I also began to dance to the sound of music. I was fully in my senses; but my body was dancing from here below [pointing to her waist]. Yes, from below here. I danced for some time, and then I made a huge effort and left that place." How did she feel when she was dancing? "A shaking with my body all lifeless: *angata pana nati vevililak*." After the dance

stops? "After the dance stops there is an inner shaking, inside my body, though nothing can be seen from the outside. I felt a great pleasure, for this is a sign of a boon from the god of Kataragama. I looked upon it as a good thing. This shaking power comes whenever I hear the sound of music. The first time my lower body quaked. Later it was different—my head shakes, and then only the full body gets *mayam* [magically endowed with power]. When this happens I can make clairvoyant utterances [*pena*]. My body shakes from inside, then it hits my head, which I shake—then I cannot remember what happens."

At the *puja* a priest told her that she should not cut her hair; that she would receive a boon from the god that would be realized within three years. "If you cut your hair you will go mad," he added. After the *puja* for Kataragama, she left one for Huniyan at his shrine. She had no money; her child was crying, she said. But the Buddhist monk of Abhivanaramaya, a Buddhist temple just outside the premises of the Kataragama shrine, gave her some temple food *(dana)*. She was afraid to eat this food, since it was against conventional practice. The monk reassured her; she ate in the temple for the next three months.

During her stay in Kataragama she participated in the annual fire walk. Nandavati was encouraged to overcome her fear by Bhaskara Sami, a Tamil Hindu ecstatic priest who was one of the officials of the fire walk. She speaks of "trampling the fire" as "trampling water," the Tamil Hindu designation for fire walking. "As I watched the fire I was afraid, but when my turn came I walked. I saw the fire shrink in size; it was as if I took one step across the flames."

After the fire walk she slept under the huge bo tree in the shrine premises, with the other ecstatics congregated there. "That night I wanted to utter [prophecies], but the words came out soundless. I was perfectly conscious mind you.... That night, that time I saw someone near the road ... I saw her face, a beautiful woman. 'Daughter,' she said, 'I am Sarasvati. From now I shall give you a boon to say the truth through "seeing" [*pena*, clairvoyant utterances].' Now I knew that my warrant was complete, but others [the public] did not."

After the festivities at Kataragama were over she wanted to go home, but she had no money. "I picked up two cents and gave it as *panduru* offering [at a shrine]. The *sami* of the shrine said,

"You have a *satya-bala-varam* [a boon for truth power], and you can go toward the places [on pilgrimage]." She was very pleased, but she had no money. As she walked out she saw a yellow handkerchief that had a knot in it containing some money (a customary Sinhala way of keeping money safe). This brought her to Colombo. She met Wilbert Sami, who gave her more money.

Soon Wilbert Sami taught her *stotra,* thanksgiving verses for the gods. She still had the cobra on her head. "People were afraid to look at me because of my matted hair. So, very often I used to cover my hair." Soon after coming to Colombo she obtained power from Huniyan and Kadavara for uttering *pena.* She now set herself up as a priestess in a rented house she converted into a *devale,* a shrine for the gods. She stayed here for three years and was then ordered (by the deity) to go to her present place (a little shrine in the village of Kaikavala near Matale, where I interviewed her). "This place was owned by a merchant, Hin Banda Mudalali. I told him of the god's message, and he donated the land to me. I invited villagers, organized a fire walk, danced the *kavadi* [the dance in honor of Skanda], and obtained money to build this shrine."

What about her snake hair? After eighteen months she cut it, having obtained permission from the god. She washed it in milk, bathed in the Manik Ganga, and cut it off there. She now has many strands of matted locks falling over her back, but no snake hair.

I saw Nandavati in 1977 at the annual festival at Kataragama, rolling round and round the burning sands of the god's shrine premises together with her (now adult) son, in abject surrender to the god.

Case 3: Manci Nona (Age 67)

Manci Nona was extremely difficult to interview because of a special transference problem. I triggered the memory of a dead son, and during interviews she constantly broke down and wept. She addressed me fondly as son and imagined that my research was to spread the glory of her son, who was in heaven. The boy, an employee at a Colombo department store, died at the age of nineteen. His mother has abolished his death; he is in heaven, and she constantly invokes him in soft, endearing tones. Up in heaven he "works for," as a servitor to, Visnu-Kataragama gods and

Huniyan.[10] She broke up the interview several times to talk to her son; sometimes I was her son, at other times his spirit seemed to reside in me. She referred to her son (me) in the most flattering terms in high-flown Sanskrit: noble—learned—of high birth—darling child.

Let me briefly outline the main events of her life. She was the youngest in a family of seven children, and the only girl. Her father was a baker in Kalubovila, a suburb of Colombo. She studied in the Kalubovila school, as did her children and grandchildren. Manci married at fourteen, soon after puberty. The marriage was arranged by her father's younger brother. She claimed she was not interested in marriage. "Since I was the only daughter my mother insisted on my marrying. I don't even know how I got three children, since my womb is for [dedicated to] the Buddha and the gods. At fourteen I had my eldest child; at nineteen I had all three children. My man was bad. . . . Living with bad people is bad for our worldly renown and for our next birth . . . so I left him and stayed with mother, worshiping the gods and the Buddha."

Apparently Manci had had spirit attacks before marriage. Her parents interpreted these as caused by Kalu Kumara, the dark Eros of Sinhala belief, and gave her in marriage in the hope that that would solve her problems. Her husband "went after other women," and one day she caught him in flagrante delicto. She repeatedly stated her ignorance of conception. "I don't know how my children came into my womb."

After she divorced her husband, Manci, like Nandavati, was self-employed as a seamstress. Her customers were upper-class women in Colombo. One day she was sewing clothes at 22 Alexander Place, Colombo 5 (she remembered the exact address) on an ancient sewing machine when she heard the sound of Hindu ritual music over the radio. She went on pushing the foot pedal of the sewing machine faster and faster, trying to keep time to the music and the rhythm of the dance.[11] She became possessed; the ladies of the household watched her from a distance, awestricken. "I felt ashamed. But they knew I had the power of the gods inside my body." That very day her hair started to curl into matted locks. "I break it, break it, break it, but next day there are some more. . . . First the hair gets disheveled; then it gets entangled like a weaver bird's nest. Gradually it extends." At first there were

lice in the locks like worms, she says; the hair also hurt badly.

Soon after she got the matted locks she went to Kataragama, "in a trance like I was mad." There she crossed the fire with the assistance of a Hindu mendicant, Selliah Sami. Like others, she legitimated her possession as a true divine gift at Kataragama. She believes that the six matted locks she had were given by Skanda himself, since Skanda has six matted locks, one for each of his six faces. Later the god told her he was going to reduce them to five, Huniyan's number. This simply meant that Manci was now fully involved in the Huniyan cult and had established a relationship with the god. Later Huniyan reduced the locks to three—Huniyan in his demonic form has three locks. This was done so that Mánci could get the power of possession of Huniyan's demonic form. The god himself told her that she is a *sara kari*—an angry one—and hence the relationship with Huniyan's demonic form was more appropriate for her.

Like many others, Manci does not become directly possessed by the deity: her dead mother and father possess her and act as intermediaries between her and the god. She says her mother told her this before she died. "When I die I'll come to you so that you may utter prophecies [*sastra*]; then you won't have to do a [regular] job." This strategy succeeded, she says. Now in her trances she is possessed by these noble beings. Her trance reactions are very much like Nandavati's.

Manci refers to her matted locks as her *prana vayu* (life breath, life force). "They are like my *prana vayu,*" she said, employing Hindu idiom. During the interviews she held out one lock that fell well below her knees. She thrust it at me and with the typical transference said, "Look, son, hold it before your nose and *imbinava* [kiss, smell] it. There is nothing I love more than these." She then kissed the lock and gave it to me to kiss. "I generally fold and tuck up my locks carefully because of my love for them. They are very long and they may touch the floor and get polluted." The relationship between hair and life power came out again when she told me that when the locks break up for good she knows she is going to die. This was told to her by the god Huniyan in a dream. Manci has cathected her locks enormously; they are, perhaps next to her "dead" son, the most important thing in her life. Like the three ascetics to be discussed later (cases 4, 5, and 6) Manci uses her locks to bless her clients.

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 recreation 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 ecstatics 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.[12] 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: Manci 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 Manci, 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 (Nandavati, case 2); 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. This comes out dramatically in Manci's case, where I am her dead son: she gives me the dirty : beautiful, smelly : scented object to hold and kiss.

The Sinhala term for matted hair is *hada 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*b*).[13]

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: C trary 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.[14]

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 ideational 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, a problem I shall now take up.

The Yogi and the Monk: Siva and the Buddha: Matted Hair and Shaven Head

Contrary to the assertions of Iyer and Leach, matted hair and shaven head are not interchangeable symbols: on one level they both mean "penance" (or, as Leach says, "chastity"); they would be interchangeable if this were all they meant. But the unconscious meaning of the symbols has relevance to the institutions of world renunciation centering on these two symbols. The matted hair symbol is oriented to a Hindu view of celibacy, the shaven head (castration symbolism) to a Buddhist concept of celibacy.

Hindu celibacy is not absolute, as is Buddhist celibacy. Hindu ideas of celibacy pertain to withholding sex to conserve semen, the wellspring of vitality, long life, and health. The yogi's goal is a healthy existence through the suppression of sexual urges; sexual potency must not be spilled out and wasted. Its conservation and harnessing for the increase of magical power *(sakti)* is one of the major goals of Hindu asceticism. The extreme case is the tantric virtuoso who has intercourse but is not involved in it and refuses to ejaculate. By contrast, the Buddhist monk's notion of celibacy is radically different: he renounces sex in all its manifestations. The utilization and harnessing of semen, the notion of *sakti*, are all rejected: the Buddhist monk is sexless, a neuter. And this idea is represented in the castration symbolism of shaven head, while matted locks are a denial of castration.

The contrast will come out better when we examine the mythology of Siva and the Buddha, representing two dominant ideal types of South Asian asceticism. Siva is the exemplar of Hindu asceticism: as ascetic, he is covered with ashes, he wears a necklace of skulls, he has matted hair *(jata)*, he wanders in cemeteries. He is a model for certain kinds of ascetics in Hindu society. In our sample we have Karunavati, who has wandered in cemeteries, and Manci, who has prefaced her name with the god's: Pintura Isvara Manci Nona: Siva-image-Lady Manci. But the nature of Siva's ascetism, as Wendy O'Flaherty shows in her superb study of Saiva mythology, is inextricably associated with eroticism (1973). Siva's strength and power are based on his asceticism, which in turn involves withholding semen, or turning the genitals inward. This contradiction is basic to Saiva mythology. Siva castrates himself, but the severed penis reappears as

the lingam. He meditates for enormous lengths of time: suddenly he is afflicted by irresistible and destructive sexual urges. In one famous myth Siva rapes the wives of ascetics in the pine forest: the enraged ascetics cut off his penis, which again reappears as the lingam, an object of worship and adoration (1973, p. 102). Take this myth from the Siva Purana:

> Once in the past, on Mount Mandara, Parvati closed the eyes of the god with braided hair, the god of fierce attack, and she did it in play, as a jest, closing his eyes with her two lotus hands that shone like newly sprouted coral and golden lotuses. When Hara's three eyes were shut, total darkness fell in a moment. But from the touch of her hand the great lord shed the liquid of passion. A drop of that copius water came forth and splashed on Sambhu's forehead and it was heated. It became an infant who terrified even Ganesa, the elephant-headed god, ungrateful and full of anger, strange, deformed, disfigured, a dark, hairy man with matted locks and a beard. He sang and laughed and wept and danced; his tongue flickered and he roared fiercely and deeply. When this creature of marvellous aspect was born, Bhava smiled and said to Gauri, "You closed my eyes as a jest; how can you be afraid of me, my darling?" When Gauri heard what Hara had said, she laughed and released his three eyes, and light arose, but because the hideous creature had been born in darkness he had no eyes. [O'Flaherty 1975, p. 169]

Siva represents in extremis the contradictions in Hindu asceticism.

None of this appears in the Buddha mythology. The Buddha leaves his wife and child, cuts off his hair, and renounces the world. During his meditation under the bo tree, he is assailed by Mara and his hosts and tempted by Mara's daughters, a mythic representation of worldly desires and sensual passions. But he remains impassive, remote, serene: they cannot touch him. Passion has been stilled, and the source of the passion—the penis—is symbolically castrated. Remoteness, serenity, asexuality: these are the dominant features of Theravada Buddha sculpture. On the symbols of shaven head and matted hair are built radically different forms of asceticism.

Institutions must feed back into behavior, and vice-versa. My informants represent in their life-styles the contradictions in Hindu asceticism. All three women (and others in my notes) have become disillusioned with sex and marriage and have adopted a

celibate life-style. They have established a substitute relationship with gods. However, contrast their life-style with that of the celibate monk. The monk isolates himself in a monastery or temple and cuts himself off from the secular world and the intrusion of external sexual stimuli. In the case of our informants, the ascetic life-style stimulates the sexual drive. They deny overt sex; yet they go into possession trances that are orgasmic in nature. Moreover, they live in the world, with their families or others; or they move among people. Hindu gods are involved in eroticism and sexuality; therefore these themes constantly appear in the myths of the gods the ascetics recount. They have renounced the world, but their vocation is curing, a worldly profession. By contrast, the monk is insulated from worldly contact: he does not perform or attend exorcisms or cures; he does not officiate at birth, puberty, and marriage rites. He only officiates at rites of passage at death—when the passions have been stilled and only the dead person's salvation has to be assured.

Social Institutions and the Unconscious

I have discussed the link between symbol formation and personal experience, and the psychological significance of the symbol. I have shown that the psychological meaning of the symbol is in turn embodied in the dominant myths of Hindu culture. At this point one might ask whether the motivational dimensions of the symbol have cultural relevance for the continuity and functioning of ascetic institutions in Hindu-Buddhist civilization. To answer this, let me initially pose the following question: Do all Hindu and Buddhist ascetics have to have the type of personal experiences we have discussed earlier? More specifically, must the unconscious meaning of the symbol have personal relevance to all monks and ascetics? Also, is all of this relevant to understanding the *institution* of Buddhist monkhood or that of Hindu *yogi*s and *sanyasin*s and the ideas of world renunciation associated with these kinds of religious specialists? These are complex matters that have to do with the way asceticism and world renunciation are institutionalized in Buddhism and in Hinduism.

The Buddhist monkhood is a highly formalized institution, with clear-cut rules of discipline and modes of recruitment. The monk also has parish roles that are well defined and centrally related to village society. The position carries high prestige, the highest in

the society. By contrast, none of the orders of *sanyasin*s in Hinduism could be compared to the Buddhist. Even the *sanyasin* order founded by the great Sankaracarya (consciously based on the Buddhist) had not the clarity of the Buddhist order. Moreover, there are many types of *sanyasin*s and *yogi*s who, like the women of my sample, are highly individualistic virtuosos, untrammeled by any fixed set of rules or code of conduct. The only fixed criteria for *sanyasin*s seem to be the renunciation of sex (except in classical tantrism) and of the "world." For unaffiliated or loosely affiliated *sanyasin*s, the motives for renouncing the world and adopting a celibate existence are based on complicated personal experiences. Not everyone could be induced to adopt the ascetic role—only people with special kinds of experiences like our three informants. In Buddhism, by contrast, there are two kinds of monastic orders. The common order is that of the temple monk resident in a monastery. There are, however, a minority of forest monks who have left the world, generally late in life, owing to personal experiences.[15] The forest monk is analogous to the Hindu *sanyasin:* his withdrawal from the world is a response to deep personal travail. Both forest monk and *yogi* have adopted a life-style that involves real psychic pain and deprivation, so that ordinary persons shy away from taking these roles. For the monastery or village monk it is different: his only real deprivation is sex. By contrast, he has many worldly compensations. The problematic nature of unconscious motivation and complexity of motivation in role recruitment have to do with the vast majority of ordinary monks. Here the problem of role recruitment becomes extremely complex. I would put it in this way. When certain statuses or positions carry clear-cut advantages, either economic or social (high prestige), these advantages may be sufficient in themselves as motives for status choice. Thus in Sri Lanka there are many monks who have joined the order for a variety of reasons. Nowadays, for example, many boys join as novices to get a free education and economic security to put them through school and college. This increases random recruitment to the order. Nevertheless, recruitment on the basis of these motives cannot make for *viable* role performance; many drop out of the order after they have achieved their worldly goals. This situation can also be illustrated in the case of shamanism. Not all shamans have undergone the illness-possession-cure syndrome;

some are recruited on purely formal criteria. Yet the *effective* performance of the shaman role requires certain psychological propensities (the capacity to be possessed by a deity) that can best be realized by a prior, psychologically isomorphic illness—that is, a possession experience that is subsequently tamed and brought under both ego and cultural control. Without this kind of deep motivation, shamanism may well become a formal priestly religion, without much dynamism. So with the monk order. In the contemporary situation the question of unconscious motivation in role recruitment is at best problematical. Yet, without deep motivation, roles will not be effectively performed. This accounts for the increase in the drop-out rate and the public criticism of monks as world-involved and unworthy of the great *arhat* tradition of Theravada.

Hence my qualification of Spiro's superb analysis of the unconscious motivations of Buddhist monks in his sample from a village in Mandalay (1970, pp. 338–43). Spiro argues, persuasively, that his sample of monks left the world late in life, and that their motivations were primarily to satisfy their deep-rooted narcissism. He interprets the shaven head and brows of the monk as a fetalized expression, helping the monk to regress to a period of infancy where his narcissism was fully satisfied. The social existence of the monk—food and other material needs being looked after by others—also feeds into this primary narcissism. The trouble with this analysis is that the pattern of unconscious motivation cannot be applied to a larger sample, where monks join the order for a variety of reasons. One may agree with Spiro that urban political monks, like their counterparts in Sri Lanka, are not true monks, but this position is difficult to maintain, since monks, once ordained, are all legitimate members of a publicly accepted order. The problems of motivation, as I suggested earlier, must be linked to the nature of the institutional order at a particular time and place. The analysis of unconscious motivation is appropriate to forest monks or meditating monks rather than to village monks in general. It is doubtful whether the identical or a similar pattern of motivations will apply in a larger sample.

The random nature of role choice in an established order like the Buddhist does not, however, imply the lack of relevance of psychological (especially unconscious) motives, for the reason I presented earler—effective role performance and the maintenance of the ancient and still popular *ideal* of the aloof, detached

arhat of the scriptures. The order will lack its idealized and ideal representatives if *some* do not live up to the ideal. Generally this is represented by the forest monks. Yet even ordinary village monks who join the order for a variety of reasons are not exempt from the operation of unconscious motivations. In Sri Lanka men join the order in childhood as novices. In recent fieldwork I found that most monks enter the order between the ages of eight and fourteen (in conformity with the rules of the order). In other words, young novices join the order in the latency period when they are (temporarily) homosexually motivated. Thus initial role recruitment is related to a motivational propensity characteristic of this period of the life cycle. The role requisite of celibacy is linked to an appropriate motivational disposition.[16] During the early years of their stay in the order they may be taught to control or sublimate their sex drives so as to help them continue to stay there. Alternatively, some may remain in the order and refrain from heterosexual contact, yet maintain homosexual relations with acolytes (often little boys) and novices; or they may find the press of normal psychosexual drives burgeoning in adolescence difficult to control and may leave the order.[17] In any event, initial recruitment, always a critical factor, seems to be dependent on unconscious motivation. Furthermore, by the same token the shaven head (castration idea) also becomes appropriately embodied in the emotional context of the latency period and is attuned to it.

As I stated earlier, contemporary economic difficulties have motivated different personalities to join the monkhood to get a free education and the prospect of later employment. Tambiah has noted this for Thailand also (1976, pp. 313–60). The increase in random recruitment has led to the decay of the ascetic orientation of the order. All this is once again expressed in hair symbolism. Young student monks today do not fully shave their heads: their hair style is very much like the traditional American crew cut. Furthermore, members of the public sometimes express their dissatisfaction at the worldliness of monks in terms of hair imagery: "These are not good monks; look at their hair." Subtle and not so subtle variations in the hair styles of ascetic monks are not new. At other times in Sri Lanka's history we come across the same phenomenon. During the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, for example, the monk order in Kandy had declined, so that no valid ordination tradition was extant. During this period

there was a group of monks known as *ganinnanse* who wore a white or yellow cloth and were married, or at least kept mistresses, and who wore their hair long. Thus a symbol can change or even lose its psychological meaning. Sociologically speaking, this means that there are not sufficient numbers of persons to whom the symbol has emotional meaning (and unconscious) significance. It can also mean that recruitment to the role has lost much of its unconscious motivational relevance. One consequence of this is that the symbol changes its form, and so does the society (the relevant group). Thus today it is common to see short-haired monks: but this also means on the societal level that the monks have become more worldly, politically and socially involved, and the order itself has changed its ascetic orientation.

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 recreated anew by the individual (option and manipulation), whereas the shaven head, though derived from the imagery of the unconscious, is not recreated 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 communicaton 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.

Let me explain further the nature of symbols that are psychological in origin (psychogenetic) but lack personal meaning. I quote two examples, a seemingly trivial one and a more significant example from myth. The first example is from an English nursery rhyme diffused into postcolonial Sri Lanka. Many years ago, I went to pick up my six-year-old son who was in an elite school in Kandy. I heard the whole class sing a beautiful nursery rhyme in unison:

I had a little nut tree
Nothing would it bear
But a silver nutmeg
And a golden pear.

The King of Spain's daughter
Came to visit me
All for the sake
Of my little nut tree.

I thought: clearly there are no such nut trees in nature. Similar nut trees are, however, found as images in dreams and the unconscious: they represent a childhood fantasy about the narcissistic preoccupation with one's own genitalia: the bare nut tree with a silver (small) nutmeg and a (larger) golden pear. The King of Spain's daughter is the sister who admires, enviously, the male genitals she lacks. Here are images from the unconscious used to

construct a poem, itself an impersonal work. All the schoolboys sing it: they have no choice, though no doubt it is, like any rhymed stanza, a pleasurable exercise. But could we say that the unconscious thought that went to create these images is recreated each time in the individual singer? Clearly not, and here Leach's anthropological criticism of psychoanalysis is correct, since the latter attributes a repetition of the original unconscious thought every time a psychological symbol appears in myth and ritual. In my simple example, the current meaning of the imagery is unrelated to its origin in the dream repertoire. The symbol set is psychogenetic but not personal.

My second example comes from the well-known genre of myth of the birth of the hero as studied by Rank (1959). Rank summarizes the main outlines of this myth type.

> The hero is the child of most distinguished parents, usually the son of a king. His origin is preceded by difficulties, such as continence, or prolonged barrenness, or secret intercourse of the parents due to external prohibition or obstacles. During or before the pregnancy, there is a prophecy in the form of a dream or oracle cautioning against his birth, and usually threatening danger to the father (or his representative). As a rule, he is surrendered to the water, in a box. He is then saved by animals, or by lowly people (shepherds), and is suckled by a female animal or an humble woman. After he has grown up, he finds his distinguished parents, in a highly versatile fashion. He takes his revenge on his father, on the one hand, and is acknowledged, on the other. Finally he achieves rank and honours. [Rank 1959, p. 65]

Rank interprets the myth in terms of the personal symbols of the oedipal drama. For Rank, the hero of the myth is a symbolic representation of the ego of the child, and the two parents are idealized images of infantile fantasy. "The hostility of the father, and the resulting exposure, accentuate the motive which has caused the ego to indulge in the entire fiction" (1959, p. 72). In the real-life oedipal fantasy the child gets rid of the parents; here in myth it is often reversed. This is due to the reversal of the actual relation through the mechanism of projection, so that the myth could be seen as a kind of paranoid structure, in view of the resemblance to peculiar processes in the mechanism of certain psychic disturbances (1959, p. 78). The exposure in the water is

both a symbolic expression of birth and a life-threatening risk that in turn represents "the parental hostility toward the future hero" (1959, p. 75). Hence Rank's conclusion: "Myths are, therefore, created by adults, by means of retrograde childhood fantasies, the hero being credited with the myth makes personal infantile history. Meanwhile, the tendency of this entire process is the excuse of the individual units of the people for their own infantile revolt against the father" (1959, pp. 84–85). Hence the crucial killing of the father or, if this is not done, the father's hostility to the son expressed through the operation of *projection*.

The myth as Rank sees it is an objective correlative of the subjective infantile drama. His interpretation has many of the weaknesses of psychoanalysis: it explains the crucial symbol of rebirth as a reversal of the son's oedipal hostility to the father. But notions like projection or reaction formation can explain anything, as well as nothing, and therefore are not always a persuasive explanation. Moreover, in most of the myths recorded by Rank the father is not killed or even displaced (symbolic killing). I also feel that Rank includes myths, like the Jesus myth, that properly do not fit into his own sketch of the ideal type. The essential features of this ideal type of myth are, I believe, as follows:

1. The hero is born of royal parents or of distinguished lineage like that of a divinity.
2. He is rejected by the parents, not always deliberately.
3. He undergoes the flotation episode of the watery birth.
4. The hero is raised by a nurturant animal—a doe or other lactating animal—or by lowly people, often nurturant shepherds.
5. The hero kills his royal parents (or relatives) or displaces them, or more frequently he is reconciled with them. But he ends up by being given his due as the legitimate ruler of the people.

Now let us consider my alternative sociological interpretation of this myth type, which is radically different from Rank's. The myth, as I see it, is a narrative that embodies a powerful historical theme of the hero as a *popular* figure (of the people), yet a legitimate one (of royalty). It is not sufficient for traditional societies to

have a popular hero: he must also be legitimate. Yet legitimacy based on inherited status rarely produces a popular hero. Hence the central issue of this myth type: the hero must be born of royal parents to be legitimate: yet he must *also* be born of ordinary people to be popular. The hero therefore has to be born of royalty, and this is clearly expressed in the myth. He must again be reborn from ordinary people. Now this is a biological impossibility, since the hero is already born out of a queen's womb. Clearly, actual rebirth is not possible: hence the second birth must be symbolic. What kind of symbols best express rebirth? The answer is that as human beings we have experienced two kinds of birth: actual biological birth, and also psychological birth in our dream life and unconscious experiences. Thus, when the necessity exists in the myth narrative to express a second birth, it must inevitably have recourse to our psychological experience of birth based on the dream imagery of the unconscious. This myth type then expresses the second birth in terms of a psychogenetic symbol: that of the watery rebirth. This is the central or dominant symbol of the myth, given the myth theme of popular/legitimate hero. The rest of the plot also now falls into place. The son must be banished (itself a symbol) in order to be reborn from adoptive parents. He must be discovered by ordinary folk, or at least brought up by them. The rearing of the child is by some nurturant animal or by a nurturant group like pastoralists, milk-producing people, all psychogenetic symbols. The hero, to be a legitimate king, must return home and usurp his father's (or relative's place). Sometimes he kills the father, but this is not required by the plot structure, since to be restored to legitimacy need not logically entail the killing of the father. Indeed, in most of the myths mentioned by Rank the father is *not* killed. When the father is killed, one must assume that the psychic principle of overdetermination operates, and the oedipal motive is brought to bear where it is not strictly necessary. In the Oedipus myth the son returns home and displaces the father, which is often expressed in terms of psychogenetic symbolism in the son killing the father. In some myths the theme is reversed, as in the Moses story. Here Moses is born of ordinary, indeed, in some versions, of anonymous parents. He is found in the bullrushes by the pharaoh's daughter and raised as royalty. Here an ordinary person (commoner) is given royal legitimacy: he is reborn (through

the watery rebirth) as a member of royalty. Only then can he be the true leader of the people. Both myth types express the same theme of the hero who must be both legitimate (born of royalty) and of the people (born of ordinary folk). The one is the reversal of the other. The psychogenetic symbols are interwoven in a narrative set that illustrates a powerful sociological theme. The symbols are derived from the language of the unconscious and hence are psychogenetic symbols; yet they do not recreate the diverse motivational origins of the symbols and are therefore not personal symbols.

Now we can understand better the nature of the shaven head as part of a larger symbolic set. The monk must be celibate, which means that sex must be eliminated (not merely withheld, as in Saiva mythology). The biologically obvious way of ensuring this is castration, which is somewhat inconvenient as an institutional arrangement for a plurality of monks. Thus castration has to be expressed indirectly and symbolically through a nonliteral psychological experience of castration in dream symbolism—the shaven head. In another culture and in another institutional complex a different castration symbol may be chosen, as in knocking out teeth in initiation rites at puberty or head slashing by the ecstatics studied by Crapanzano (1977, pp. 145, 167). Even in the same culture the psychogenetic symbol may be given personal meaning in another context. Thus men who have made a vow to the god Skanda may totally shave their heads and grovel abjectly before him in the burning sands of the shrine premises at Kataragama. Here again, head shaving is not a role prerequisite; rather, it is an option exercised by the devotee. In this situation the symbol has probably become a personal one, intimately related to the individual's deep motivations and, like the matted locks of my female ascetics, indicative of a special relationship with the deity. It is the institutional context of the symbol that is decisive in determining whether the symbol is personal or psychogenetic.[18]

Conventionalization of Personal Symbols

One of the problems involved in the study of symbolism is the failure of both anthropologists and psychoanalysts to relate the symbol to its context. It is useless to lump all ascetic hair styles together, as, for example, does Hallpike (1969), without reference

to context. I have noted that shaven heads can exist in different contexts as personal or psychogenetic symbols. Similarly, matted hair can exist on different levels—a personal level, or an institutional level if there exists a group of ascetics who must wear their hair matted, or as a purely formal symbol, as in art styles. Let me deal now with the last.

Among real-life ascetics, matted hair is intensely personal. In Saivà mythology the god appears with matted locks: here the meaning of matted hair is given cultural objectification. In art the matted locks *(jata)* are often represented in stylized fashion as a turban (also *jata*). This comes out very well in both Saiva and Jaina iconography. In the latter, matted locks are stylized into plaited strands and neatly bundled like a turban on the head of Jina images (see Bruhn 1969, pp. 482–88). The conventionalization and stylization of the symbol must be seen in its appropriate context, in this case the nonascetic social context of artisans and craftsmen. Note that the Jina images are never sculptured by the ascetics themselves but are made by castes of artisans, who could not have had personal experience with matted locks. Artisans operate with a different set of conventions about headgear and hair styles; moreover, they are constrained by the nature of their tools and the material (stone) they have to work on. Thus they have stylized matted hair into a turban, or plaited locks: the word, *jata,* is retained, but the symbol has been conventionalized.

When a symbol is conventionalized it loses its inherent ambiguity. Myths and symbols are part of the public culture: their syntactic looseness and ambiguity facilitates manipulation and choice. When a symbol is conventionalized it is deprived of its ambiguity, and ipso facto of its capacity for leverage and maneuverability. One of the commonest occasions for conventionalization is when a popular myth or symbol is taken over by learned virtuosos and narrowed down and given limited and rigid meaning. Hence, as I stated earlier, one must be wary of myths and symbols as they appear in the treatises of learned theologians. Their analytical status is quite different from that of symbol systems on the ground, so to speak. The "rational" explanation of symbols by academic anthropologists are of the same order: they also narrow the field of meaning and produce a conventionalization of symbols.