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How to look at Medusa without turning to stone

Richard A. Shweder

And they are three, the Gorgons, each with wings
And snaky hair, most horrible to mortals.
Whom no man shall behold and draw again
The breath of life... (a narration concerning Perseus and Medusa in
Hamilton's *Mythology* 1942:143)

When the Baba came to Bhubaneswar, he stayed, at first, at the Dhar-masala. He warned everyone not to open the door to his room. There was a man named Malia, who attended to the Baba and carried his stick. Not heeding the warning, Malia looked into the Baba's room. The power of God was standing there in the room. The Baba was doing meditation, while standing and chanting. His matted hair was spreading on the floor like snakes. Malia screamed, closed the door and ran up the stairs. Immediately he started vomiting and defecating. He became sick. His eyelids closed. It seemed as if he was on the brink of death. (A narration concerning Malia and the Baba told in 1984 by a male Brahman resident of the old town of Bhubaneswar.)

According to modern legend, heroes, and other men and women of vision, do not turn away from what there is to see, and they take their risks. Unlike Perseus, Obeyesekere dared to look upon the snake-like hair and hideous face of his Medusa, a female fire walker and ecstatic at Kataragama on the island of Sri Lanka and, as he reports in *Medusa's hair* (1981:7), he became very anxious. If feeling anxious is one way to feel petrified, we might say that Medusa turned Obeyesekere into stone.

At Kataragama Obeyesekere experienced petrification through looking. His goal in *Medusa's hair* is to examine the meaning of the matted hair that embellishes the head of female ecstatics at that pilgrimage site, so that we might look without turning to stone. Honouring Obeyesekere, this essay, a meditation and commentary upon *Medusa's hair* is intended as a fragment of a version of a continuing modern legend about unpetrified viewing.

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The Meditation

Obeyesekere's book carries on a tradition in which anthropologists perplex each other about the meaning of head hair. What anthropologists mean by meaning when they talk about the meaning of head hair is not, as one might suppose, merely a list of features distinctive or characteristic of head hair (slender thread-like outgrowth, located on the top of the head, composed of elongated epidermal cells, can be cut without pain, etc.). What they mean by the meaning of head hair is the use of head hair to express a state of mind, a belief or desire, an idea or emotion, a subjective state; and what they like to perplex each other about are the answers to three interrelated questions: 1. What are the various kinds of things that are done to head hair (cut it short — grow it long, tie it up — let it down, etc.) by various kinds of people (relevant statuses to be defined) on various kinds of occasions (relevant occasions to be defined)?; 2. What state of mind (belief, desire, idea, emotion, subjective state) is expressed or made manifest by this or that manipulation of head hair by this or that person on this or that occasion?; 3. Are there theories about how the world works, how society works, how the mind works, or what hair is like, that help us understand what state of mind is being expressed by what people do to their hair on particular occasions, and why they bother doing it?

That last question has several sub-parts, which, for sake of clarity, should be examined separately in any discussion of the meaning of head hair. 1. Why is head hair per se (and the particular thing done to it; shaving it off; tearing it out) used to express some particular state of mind (e.g., grief); 2. How are we to understand why some particular state of mind (e.g., grief) is the state of mind expressed on some particular occasion (e.g., funerals)?; 3. What is the relationship between the state of mind expressed (e.g., grief) and the actual state of mind (i.e., the subjective experience) of the person doing the expressing?; 4. What are the interpersonal consequences of using your hair to express some particular state of mind on some particular occasion?; 5. What are the intrapsychic consequences of using your hair to express some particular state of mind on some particular occasion?

There is a doctrine called 'conventionalism', which can serve as a useful straw person in discussions about the meaning of hair. The doctrine of conventionalism holds that the link between an expressive symbol and the state of mind it expresses on a particular occasion is sufficiently explained by reference to the existence of a social agreement to express that particular state of mind, in that particular way, on that particular occasion. The doctrine expounds a 'principle of arbitrariness', which asserts the following: From the point of view of designing an expressive code, any expressive symbol could, in principle, serve just as well as any other expressive symbol to express any state of mind, on any occasion. The principle implies that, for any society, the use of certain expressive symbols, and not others, to express

certain states of mind, and not others, is solely the product of a historically formed consensus to use symbols that way, a consensus now conventionalised into customary usage. The doctrine of conventionalism denies that there is any theory about how people work or what hair is like, that can help us understand what state of mind (e.g., grief) is being expressed by what people do to their hair (e.g., shave it off; tear it out) on particular occasions (e.g., a funeral).

An advocate of a full-blown doctrine of conventionalism would answer our five questions as follows: 1. Only social consensus can explain why it is hair rather than any other vehicle of meaning that plays a part in expressing grief; 2. Only social consensus can explain why it is grief rather than any other state of mind that is expressed at funerals; 3. No relation can be assumed to exist between the state of mind expressed with one's hair and the actual state of mind of the person doing the expressing, for social consensus only requires of its actors the occasion-appropriate expression of an agreed upon state of mind (e.g., show grief at funerals), and not the subjective experience of it; 4. The expression (or non-expression) of a state of mind has significant interpersonal consequences, which is the only reason for expressing a state of mind; 5. The expression of a state of mind has negligible intrapsychic consequences, for actors cannot be assumed to actually experience the state of mind they express, and their actual state of mind may well be different from the state of mind that is expressed.

No one, as far as I know, is an advocate of a full-blown doctrine of conventionalism for the analysis of the meaning of head hair. Not even Leach (1958), who flirts with the doctrine yet sharply pulls back from it. Leach flirts with conventionalism by insisting that the state of mind expressed through hair on a ritual occasion neither reflects, nor creates, a parallel state of mind in the subjective experience of the person doing the expressing. He notes that the expression of a state of mind at funerals is sufficiently explained by reference to its interpersonal consequences. For example (1958:152; quoting Malinowski), he recounts that at Trobriand mourning ceremonies 'All those suspected of hostile intentions against the deceased are required to make a symbolic gesture [shaving the head hair] which says "I loved the deceased"'.

Yet Leach also pulls away from conventionalism. He develops a theory about how the mind works, and what hair is like, that might explain the shaving off or removal of head hair on certain ritual occasions. Commenting on a book by Berg (1951), Leach (1958:154) posits a pan-human folk psychobiology in which, consciously or unconsciously, the human head is likened to a penis, head hair is likened to semen, long hair is expressive of sexuality unharnessed, short hair or tightly bound hair is expressive of sexual restraint, and the shaving or removal of head hair on ritual occasions (prototypically, during death rituals) makes manifest the idea of celibacy or castration.

It was a tidy theory, but then along came Hallpike (1969), who spoiled all the fun. He pointed out that the castration hypothesis had difficulty with certain embarrassing facts: In some cultures it is not just men but also women who shave their head during funeral rites; there are other body mutilations besides hair-cutting that occur in the context of mourning; beards and other facial hair are more suggestive of genitals than is head hair, yet they are not as likely to be shaved during funeral rites; and, in some parts of the world, it is celibate ascetics who adorn themselves with long hair.

Hallpike posits an alternative pan-human folk psycho-biology in which the self or the soul is thought to be located in the head, and head hair, closely associated with the head and lending itself to painless manipulation, stands in as a representation of the whole person and can be used to express a state of mind. He goes on to argue that hairiness is a prominent feature of animals. Animals live in a wild state outside of society, which explains why long hair is what you find on intellectuals, hippies and others who live in a state of mind outside of, or in rebellion against, a controlling social regime; and which explains why short hair and a shaved head (e.g., a military cut) can be used to express the idea of living within society in subordination to a disciplinary regime.

It did not take too long for Hershman (1974) to come up with a challenging case for both Leach and Hallpike: Punjabi mourning rituals, where the men shave their heads yet the women let their hair down and leave it dishevelled for several days. To Hershman it seemed implausible to argue that the women were in a heightened state of sexuality while the men were sexually impotent. It seemed equally implausible to argue that the women entered a position outside society while the men did not.

The story about the meaning of hair is further enriched by evidence on death practices from other parts of India, and by local native interpretations of those practices. During Oriya Brahman death rituals, for example, the script for events is ideally played out as follows: On the tenth day after a death, the family barber shaves or trims the head hair and beard of male family members; the barber's wife cuts the nails of female members. While cutting the hair, the barber wears a special cloth or *napkin* to avoid pollution, and when the hair cutting and nail cutting is over, everyone, including the barber, takes a ceremonial bath. The barber also washes his instruments, and women wash their hair. All this occurs at the end of a period of mandated fasting, dietary restrictions, sexual abstinence and withdrawal from routine business affairs.

Now it is certainly possible to liken fingers and toes to a phallic head, to liken nails to head hair, and to view nail cutting as the female's equivalent of castration. It may even be possible to view the hair shaving and nail cutting (and the fasting and the abstinence) as subordination to the authority or regime of the deceased, or to view symbolic castration as merely a body part metaphor for expressing the idea of powerlessness under someone else's

rule. Nevertheless, some of my Oriya Brahman friends have their own doctrinal account of what it all means.

They think there is a lot of pollution caused when someone dies, thus potentially jeopardising the successful transmigration of the soul of the deceased. To protect that transmigrating soul from pollution they undertake a project to turn their own bodies into what might be referred to as 'toxic waste sites.' First cleansing their bodies through fasting and sexual abstinence, they absorb into themselves the pollution of the corpse, thereby facilitating the purification, distillation and migration of the soul of the dead.

During that process of turning oneself into a toxic waste site, pollution absorbed into the body is thought to concentrate in the extremities, fingers, toes and head; and head hair is viewed as an especially effective net for catching the pollution of the corpse. Shaving the hair and cutting the nails on the tenth day is like emptying out the vacuum cleaner. That, along with a bath and a new set of clothes, restores you to the workaday world, after completing your moral obligation to assist the soul of your relative as it separates from its corpse.

That nails and head hair should receive special attention in the process of pollution management is not difficult to understand. The area under the nails is a toxic waste site, concentrating and collecting dirt, a concrete analogue to pollution. And there are many things, from dirt to aromas to lice, that get in one's hair, and stay there, until they are washed out. If the smoke and smells in the room are going to get into your hair then certainly the pollution will too.

The doctrine of head hair as a toxic waste site has broad application. Menstruating women are not allowed to brush their hair, for they will stroke their pollution into the environment; and if hair is combed on the day of ancestor worship (*sraddha*), the ancestral spirits will not enter the house to be fed.

Yet native testimony supports other meanings as well, meanings suggestive of potency and power, subordination and castration, respect and rebellion, and all the meanings have a tendency to spill over into each other. When the Baba came to Bhubaneswar (see above) his hair was not a toxic waste site sucking up pollution, but rather a magnet for the collection and concentration of divine power. Energised during meditation and spreading like snakes to the floor, his hair was an awesome sight, causing mortification to those who dared to look. Apparently head hair is an all-purpose containment site, which can be used to store up either pollution or divinity, or perhaps even personal vitality.

In the Oriya mind snakes and matted hair are associated, of course, with the power and vitality of Maheswar (Śiva), who is not only depicted and pictured as having long matted hair but who also stores up semen in his body and wears a snake around his neck, all the while as the snake raises its hood above Śiva's head.

Yet witches also have long hair down to the ground, and it is told that when a witch is caught, instead of killing her you cut off her hair.

I once witnessed, in Orissa, a 'paranoid' episode and the articulation of a 'delusion of grandeur', in which a man I knew who worked as a driver, verbalised in great agitation to me and others his terror of the police, and claimed to have once been the powerful and prominent Inspector General of police of Cuttack. 'That was before they cut off my hair', he said.

One informant described the cutting of head hair during death rites as a form of penance, a self-mortification designed to pay homage to the deceased and to express grief: 'you cut off your hair because you can't afford to cut off your head.'

Shaving your hair is sometimes associated with lowering your head, as a sign of respect to parents, elders and gods. F.M. Senapati, the brilliant Oriya writer, has a delightful story to tell about hair and obeisance. Reminiscing about his childhood, he remembers how elders never accepted water from you unless you tied your long hair up in a knot. Under the influence of foreigners and an English education, Oriya school children cut off their long hair as a gesture of rebellion against their orthodox parents, and perhaps in anticipation of the 'punk' hair styles of the 1980s.

When it comes to the meaning of head hair and other expressions by the body, everyone rejects the full-blown doctrine of conventionalism, although perhaps no one rejects fully all parts of the doctrine. The most vulnerable parts of the doctrine are the answers to questions 1 and 2 above. Social agreement and a historically contingent consensus are insufficient to explain the use of certain parts and exuviae of the human body, and not others, to express certain states of mind, and not others.

An obvious example of that insufficiency is the case of crying at funerals and at other mourning ceremonies. Putting aside the question (3 above) of whether this or that individual, or any individual, is actually in a grief-stricken state of mind, it is a fact that in almost every society 'shedding tears' is a featured mode of emotional display and expression at funerals (Rosenblatt et al. 1976); and that fact beckons to be explained. Whatever it is that links together the expressive symbol (shedding tears), the expressed state of mind (sorrow) and the occasion (funerals), goes far beyond historical coincidence or social agreement.

Understood as expressive symbols, the body and its parts and exuviae are not like the phonetics of a language. Unlike the characteristically arbitrary relationship between a sound pattern and the meaning it conveys (let's put poetry to the side), it is more than mere convention that links a body part to the state of mind it expresses. Haviland (n.d.), for example, has kept track of the way body part metaphors (hard-nosed, weak-kneed, foot-loose) are used to refer to states of mind in thirty languages, from diverse language

families. He discovers many referential regularities across languages: for example, the skin is used to refer to irritability, the knees to servility, the hands to control. Head hair is widely used to express fear; it was a hair raising experience, his hair stood up on end, etc. Finger nails and toe nails do not appear as entries in his data.

The existence of a core of referential universals for body part metaphors would seem to require some qualifications of the principle of arbitrariness, as a general doctrine. An expression like *hard-hearted* or *tight-fisted* or *weak-kneed* is not an opaque idiom. Haviland discovers, for example, that the chest and upper interior organs (e.g., the heart) are appropriated universally as symbols of emotionality and feeling. A friend of mine once described his ulcer as caused by flakes from his granite heart. Body metaphors such as 'granite heart' have, as Haviland notes, a 'clear and obvious' reference to a particular state of mind; and those expressions that are not entirely clear (for example, in the Australian aboriginal language of Guugu Yimidhirr a greedy person is referred to as a 'hand penis') seem to light up some aspect of experience (a greedy person does with his hand what some people would like to do with their penis), once they are explained.

Instead of being arbitrary, there seems to be a moderate degree of motivation to the way body parts and words for body parts get used to give expression to states of mind. One interpretation of Haviland's findings is that certain aspects of physiological, motoric and interpersonal functioning — grasping, buckling at the knees, body hair standing on edge — provide a minimal universal ground for a folk psychology of body meanings.

The Commentary

While nearly everyone rejects a full-blown doctrine of conventionalism for understanding body expressions, Obeyesekere rejects it almost completely. When it comes to understanding the meaning of the matted hair of his female ecstasies he rejects most parts of the doctrine, including those retained by Leach; although, as we shall see, what Obeyesekere retains of conventionalism (the idea of local rationality) has the potential to renovate the doctrine in significant ways.

Obeyesekere rejects many aspects of the doctrine of conventionalism. For one thing (1981:34), he believes that the coupling that links matted hair to the state of mind it expresses is not arbitrary; for each lock is snake-like, and each snake-like lock, a displaced representation of a penis emerging out of the head, is, according to Obeyesekere, a vehicle of meaning well-suited to the message it conveys. Second (1981:34, 44-46), he believes that the matted hair adorning the head of his female ecstasies makes manifest a state of mind ('I am connected to God's power; possessed by his *sakti*') that is actually experienced by those doing the expressing.

Obeyesekere not only looks at Medusa; he talks to her, about her family

life and her life history. From that interview material he makes his case for the special suitability of matted hair as a symbol of god's power and he traces the interconnections between the state of mind expressed by Medusa's hair and the state of mind experienced by Medusa. He shows, for example, that for Medusa to make manifest through her hair a connection to god's power is to personally assert a denial of castration (i.e., a denial of powerlessness) (1981:33, 36, 38), and that the snake-like matted hair on the head of a female ecstatic communicates to its wearer, and can be used by its wearer to communicate to others, a conviction not to yield to the demands (e.g., sexual demands) of local authorities (e.g., a husband) (1981:64).

Finally, Obeyesekere suggests (1981:45, 77, 91) that to express through body symbolism a state of mind has significant intrapsychic consequences (e.g., eliminating unconscious feelings of guilt), as well as interpersonal consequences. The body not only expresses a state of mind, the expression of which has public effects; the body doing the expressing is also experienced personally as a state of mind by the person whose body it is.

In my view, it is not Obeyesekere's substantive interpretation of the meaning of matted hair that makes *Medusa's hair* an important book. What makes it an important book is that Obeyesekere defies conventional wisdom, which is the wisdom of conventionalism (1981:14-15, 102). He tries to integrate an understanding of how states of mind are expressed by means of the body, with an understanding of how expressions by the body are actually experienced (by the body) as a state of mind. He defines a class of expressive performances for which to express a state of mind while in no way experiencing that state of mind is, by definition, an impossible thing to do; then he documents the existence of that class of expressive performances. In so doing he contributes three fragments to our modern legend of unpetrified viewing: (1) the personal symbol, (2) the universal unconscious, and (3) the cultural construction of what counts as fantasy and what counts as reality. To those fragments I think we need, in good faith, to add a fourth, (4) the idea of an unpetrified text. Each fragment shall be discussed in turn.

Obeyesekere's notion of a personal symbol, properly understood, refers not to a type of symbol, but rather to the conditions definitive of a special class of expressive performances. That class of expressive performances has the following defining conditions: 1. Optionality; nothing in the culture mandates that the person must get involved in the expressive behaviour (1981:140); 2. Local rationality; the culture defines the state of mind made manifest by the symbol as real, objective or normal and does not define the state of mind expressed as unreal, subjective or fantastic (1981:34-35, 101-102); 3. Psychological relevance; personal involvement with the expressive behaviour can be shown to be psychologically useful, giving expression to, and thereby lending a sense of reality and objectivity (local rationality) to actual states of mind, which if left unexpressed would be psychologically dysfunctional for the person (1981:45, 91, 102, 104, 165).

Obeyesekere's focus on so-called personal symbols is a strategic methodological move in his battle against the full-blown doctrine of conventionalism. Much of the anthropological discussion of the meaning of hair has fixed on a somewhat different and special class of expressive performances, those that are mandated on ritual occasions. A distinctive condition of ritualised or stylised or mandated expressions of a state of mind (e.g., tearing at your hair to express grief at a funeral, or on a stage) is that very little can be deduced about the actual state of mind (i.e., subjective experience) of a person, from the fact that the person expressed herself or himself in that way at that time. On ritual occasions, the subjective experience of a person might be consonant with his or her expressed state of mind, yet it need not be.

Obeyesekere introduces the notion of a personal symbol, and searches for examples of it. He does that precisely because he recognises that on ritual occasions (or on any other occasion where there are substantial interpersonal consequences to expressing a certain state of mind) one cannot assume any close fit between the expression of a state of mind and the subjective experience of it. Indeed, he flatly rejects the postulate, characteristic of some classic formulations in culture and personality theory, that ritualised expressions of a state of mind will only become part of a cultural tradition if they are concordant with, or express, a parallel state of mind in the psychological make-up of a people (1981:119-120,136). Thereby granting that the relationship between public expression and private experience is indeterminate for the case of ritualised expressions of a state of mind, Obeyesekere pins his critique of the generalised doctrine of conventionalism on the existence of a class of expressive performances known as personal symbols.

By definition, expressive behaviour with a personal symbol resolves psychological difficulties for the individual (the psychological relevance condition) while validating the collective sense of reality of the group (the local rationality condition). According to Obeyesekere the display of matted hair by his female ecstasies fits the definition. The snakey hair makes manifest a locally rational state of mind (possession by a god or spirit, and connectedness to his power), yet the expression of that state of mind is functionally related to an actual state of mind (anxiety over powerlessness or castration; guilt over a desire to rebel against subordination to the rule of local authority figures?) in the private world of the Medusa. The punch line of *Medusa's hair* is something like this: since (a) the idea of a personal symbol is, by definition, inconsistent with the assumptions of conventionalism, and (b) personal symbols exist; therefore (c) not all expressive behaviour can be assimilated to a doctrine of conventionalism.

It is to be expected that there will be some controversy about the definition and existence of personal symbols. All three conditions definitive of a personal symbol are in some measure problematical. The optionality condition is, perhaps, the least important of the three, and I shall quickly put it to the side.

I think I know what the optionality condition means. It means that growing matted locks is not a mandatory form of expressive behaviour for someone of Medusa's status, and that in choosing to grow matted locks there are no 'external' payoffs that might motivate her to express a state of mind that is not her own.

I also think I know when the optionality condition does not apply. It does not apply if growing snake-like matted hair is done solely to avoid social stigmatisation or solely to avoid displeasing your parents or solely for the sake of any other interpersonal consequences (e.g., growing matted locks solely in order to discourage your husband from making sexual demands).

I find it much harder to know when the optionality condition does apply. For expressive behaviour is never devoid of interpersonal consequences, and it is always conceivable that the interpersonal consequence might be the sole motivation for the behaviour. Perhaps the optionality condition applies only when it is possible to show that, in addition to an interpersonal payoff, the expressive behaviour has an intrapsychic payoff, as well. If that is so, it would appear that expressive behaviour is optional to exactly the extent that it is psychologically relevant; and, thus, we really only need two conditions to define a personal symbol, psychological relevance and local rationality.

Freud is the inspiration for Obeyesekere's theory of psychological relevance (1981:114, 132, 194). He takes from Freud several things: 1. The idea that there are 'deep motivations', that is to say, universal unconscious states of mind (the desire to rebel against, or do harm to, authority figures; self-reproach over the desire to rebel against, or do harm to, authority figures; the desire to be taken care of; fears about being powerless or 'castrated') which, if left unexpressed, would be psychologically dysfunctional; 2. The idea that it can be therapeutic to make manifest a deep motivation, especially so, if the expression of that unconscious state of mind leads to that state of mind, now expressed, a sense of objectivity, reality or normalcy; 3. The idea that there exist universal unconscious mental processes, such as identification, projection, free association and various mental procedures for the defense of the psyche against anxiety; 4. The idea that early childhood experiences (e.g., 'infantile fixations on significant others') are especially decisive for the formation of unconscious states of mind.

Making use of those ideas Obeyesekere tries to bridge the gap between the public expression and subjective experience of a state of mind. He links, for example (1981:26-27, 132-133), the matted locks of one Medusa to her castration fears or feelings of powerlessness, and the fire walking and hook swinging of another Medusa to her masochistic desires, all the while tracing the origins of deep motivations to childhood events — lengthy breast feeding, ambivalence to mother, severe inhibitions of sexual and aggressive desires, etc.

Out of respect for the practice of fire walking I won't rake Obeyesekere over the coals for his acceptance of Freud's mythic vision that deep motivations are

pervasive and enduring and that they have their origins in early childhood experience and family life practices. Far more important than Obeyesekere's particular appropriation of Freud to establish the psychological relevance of expressive performances is his more general thesis, which I 'whole-heartedly' endorse. That there may be a universal folk psycho-biology lending personal and public significance to the human body as a vehicle for expressing and experiencing states of mind is a thesis that must be taken seriously, even as we disagree about how much of folk psycho-biology is universal or about how the universals are to be described.

In my view Freud's theory has appeal and fascination because it is a special instance of a more abstract psycho-biological theory, widely distributed among the cultures of the world. Doctrinal variations on that abstract theory can be found, not only in the writings of Freud, but also in the folk psychobiologies of ancient Greece, and among Zoroastrians, Hindus, Orthodox Jews and New Guinea Highlanders (for relevant illustrations along those lines see Boyce 1977; Grunfeld n.d.; Meigs 1984; Parker 1983).

The theory, in skeletal form, posits the human body as an abode for the self or as a temple for an in-dwelling spirit or soul. So fundamental is the belief that the self, spirit or soul is 'normally' connected to the body, that the dignity and sanctity of the self is managed, experienced and made manifest through the body, its parts, its erogenous zones, and its exuviae. And while, in folk theory, it is recognised that souls may wander and selves may become detached or depersonalised, so intimate is the link of self and body that bodily boundaries are used to give expression to the very idea of the subject (e.g., through metaphors for subjectivity like 'internal', 'inside the head', 'interior'), and physical manifestations, such as illness, are thought to be related to the moral career of the person. Indeed, on a world-wide scale, one of the more popular ideas about illness is that it is caused by mismanaging one's body (mouth and genitals) with regard to food and sex and failing to show the proper attitude of identification or respect (Oedipus comes to mind) to things that are superior and good (e.g., parents, elders and gods). Violating food taboos causes illness. So does adultery. So does blasphemy or defamation. Or so it is widely believed in folk psycho-biology (Murdock 1980).

The folk theory, in abstract, posits two complementary processes for managing the dignity of the self. One process involves casting out of the body what is bad or below the self; the other process involves incorporating into the body what is good or above the self. Each process has numerous analogues and extensions.

For casting out of the body the bad and lowly there are, according to folk theory, various rituals of extrusion: washing off dirt, defecating waste, vomiting or spitting out what is toxic, starving or bleeding or sweating out impurities, beating or driving out evil spirits, scapegoating your sins, projecting or repressing malevolent impulses. Successful extrusions are associated with

feelings of dignity, purity, well-being and relief. Feelings of dignity are also sustained by various avoidance practices, which deny entrance to the body to things that are dirty, disgusting, undignified, polluting or evil (unthinkable deeds, unspeakable thoughts, untouchable objects, unviewable events, tabooed foods). There are, of course, complementary rituals of incorporation of the good and of the elevated: swallowing, touching, looking, inhaling, embracing, identifying, internalising; and they are also associated with feelings of dignity, purity, well-being and relief.

That 'bare-bones' theory is about all the theory one needs to see psychological relevance in the hair growing, spirit possession, fire walking and hook swinging of the female ascetic-ecstatics at Kataragama. Each Medusa uses her body to express a state of mind (e.g., the feeling of being connected to god's power); and the state of mind expressed through the body is part of a project of self- or soul-maintenance, sustaining a sense of personal dignity or purity by extruding (e.g.) evil 'spirits' (*pretas*) and incorporating the *śakti* of god.

That sense of personal dignity could not be sustained, however, unless the state of mind expressed also satisfied Obeyesekere's third condition for a personal symbol, the condition of local rationality (see e.g., 1981:137). For while it is definitive of a personal symbol (e.g., matted hair) that, by means of its very expression, the state of mind expressed becomes psychologically functional (e.g., at maintaining personal dignity), that effect will not occur unless the state of mind expressed is interpreted by members of your community as proportionate to, or commensurate with, reality.

Obeyesekere powerfully documents cross-cultural variations in local rationality. In Sri Lanka, for example, given local understandings of penance and the expiation of sin, it is credible to express a desire to nearly starve yourself to death; and, given local conceptions of what is real and what is unreal, there is some plausibility in the belief that one's body has been invaded by an ancestral spirit or possessed by a god.

It seems to me beyond doubt that there are significant cross-cultural variations in the extent to which expressed states of mind are viewed as normal. There are also significant cross-cultural variations in which states of mind remain unexpressed and get pushed to some mental fringe, because, if expressed, they would be diagnosed as abnormal or strange. Feelings of superiority are not easy to express in some sub-cultures in the United States; while in many parts of South Asia you can look someone in the eye and say 'I am better than you are'. Feelings of selfishness are not easy to express in many parts of South Asia; while in some sub-cultures in the United States you can look someone in the eye and extol self-interest as a virtue. In some subcultures today in the United States it is even possible to enhance your sense of dignity by expressing the belief that god, sin and the devil do not exist. If you did that in England in the 16th century you risked being branded an enemy of reason, perhaps even diagnosed as suffering from delusions.

Neither reality nor fantasy is independent of our version of it; and while every culture draws a distinction between what is objective versus subjective, real versus unreal, perceived versus imagined, there is not always cross-cultural consensus in cultural doctrine about whether such things as devils, evil ancestral spirits, or deep malevolent unconscious motivations are objective and real or subjective and imagined.

Obeyesekere displays brilliance, insight and sensitivity in the way he uses the psychological relevance and local rationality criteria to illuminate the expressive performances of his Medusas. Nevertheless, I do not think he presses the local rationality criterion quite far enough. Pressing the local rationality criterion far enough means never absolutely privileging your own local conception of rationality when giving an account of the expressive performances of others. I do not think Obeyesekere completely avoids that pitfall, although it remains an open question whether the pitfall is avoidable.

The arguable difficulty with *Medusa's hair*, as I read it, is that Obeyesekere himself does not believe that (e.g.) malevolent ancestral spirits (*pretas*) and possessing gods in fact exist as external agents in nature. He believes they are anthropomorphised entities 'created anew by individuals' (1981:117). And, on the basis of that secular view of what is objective and what is subjective, he invites us to view Medusa's expressed state of mind (I am possessed by a god: I am being harmed by a malevolent ancestral spirit) as a psychologically useful fantasy, and to view public cultural discourse about ancestral spirits and possessing gods as part of a mythic or magical world view (1981:86, 100-101).

Obeyesekere is eloquent when he describes what is lost by demythologising and disenchanting the world, in a secular society devoid of ghosts, gods, spirits and other functional fantasies. Nevertheless, throughout *Medusa's hair* we are theoretically primed to view her through the lens of our own secular conception of what is real and what is fantasy; and we are never encouraged to escape from the perception that female ascetic-ecstatics in Sri Lanka, with their matted locks, spirit possession, fire walking and hook swinging derive their psychological benefits by confusing fantasy with reality, while remaining innocent of their innocence.

Obeyesekere assumes that ancestral spirits are illusory, and that culture has imposed a meaning that lends an air of local rationality to a fantasy whose public expression thereby has psychological benefit. Yet, strangely, Obeyesekere's Medusa herself encourages the reader to imagine another possible perspective from which to view her. That alternative perspective is to start with the assumption that malevolent ancestral spirits (*pretas*) do exist and they can get into your body, that they are experienced, and that the cultural representation of their existence and a person's experience of their existence lights up an aspect of reality, which has import for the management of the self.

Culture, from this latter viewpoint, is then not so much 'a set of meanings

that human beings impose on the world' (Obeyesekere 1981:110), where the emphasis is on the imposition of meaning, and the world on which meanings get imposed is either left undefined or is predefined (e.g., ancestral spirits do not exist; 1981:117). Rather, by this view, culture is a version of the natural world as presented and illuminated by an interpretive scheme, where the emphasis is on the illumination of reality and where the most pressing question is, how is it possible for an interpretive scheme to present us with a world that is more or less livable and meaningful.

Given the assumption, Medusa's assumption, that (e.g.) *pretas* exist, there are two ways for interpretation by an outside observer to proceed; and which way you go depends on your answer to the question: Is the natural world in which I live already a world in which (e.g.) *pretas* exist? If the answer is 'yes', then, in that instance, local rationality is not so local, and what looked like a real difference in conception of the natural world can be dismissed as merely a difference in the idiom used to express a shared idea. If the answer is 'no' then it may be time to cast some new light on the natural world and to engage in some 'unpetrified viewing', a process of realities hopping that I shall momentarily describe.

Is the natural world presented to us by our own interpretive schemes of a world in which there exist malevolent ancestral spirits who can enter your body and wreak havoc on your life? The answer to that question is not as obvious as it may seem, and in this instance, I find it surprisingly difficult to make up my mind. I find it difficult to make up my mind because I find it so easy to think of what we call the 'unconscious' as an alien force within the body that can drive behaviour to self-destructive ends; and it is commonplace in some circles to imagine that the alien force is the shadowy trace of the persona of your relatives. In which case, reference to spirit possession and reference to a destructive impulse from the unconscious mind may simply be different ways of speaking about the same real, non-mythic, non-fantastic thing.

The alternative is to interpret *pretas* as real things that have not yet been fully represented in the natural world given to us by our own interpretive schemes; and to try to reconceive our interpretive assumptions so that we can light up reality in a somewhat different way. Goodman (1984:284) is on to this alternative when he notes: 'One might say there is only one world but this holds for each of the many worlds' (also see Shweder 1986 on the idea of multiple objective worlds and divergent rationalities).

What does that alternative mean when it comes to the expressive behaviour of female ascetic-ecstatics in Sri Lanka? I think it means we try to see things within the terms of an interpretive scheme that presents us with a natural, non-mythic, non-fantastic world in which the unwelcome spirit of an ancestor can hover about causing illness and misfortune, and the welcome power of a god can, under special circumstances, be put to use in the service of personal dignity and self-management. If we succeed at illuminating

the natural world as it is for the interpretive community at Kataragama, then their local rationality is the only rationality we need, and the states of mind experienced and expressed in that natural world (being in connection with god's power; being under possession by an ancestral spirit) will be no less psychologically functional or dysfunctional for also being real.

Thus, in the end, for me, the power in *Medusa's hair* does not derive solely from Obeyesekere's announced perspective on expressive performances: the perception of a Medusa in the grip of a psychologically pleasing fantasy, which we, as outside observers, can distinguish from reality. Rather, the great appeal of the book is that, in having to look at Medusa, Obeyesekere's perspective on Medusa leads us beyond itself to other ways of seeing her.

In other words, the *śakti* in *Medusa's hair* is the power of an 'unpetrified text' read by an 'unpetrified viewer', who keeps shifting perspective so that neither the reader nor Medusa is frozen into stone. And while it is certainly true that Medusa's ideas about reality can momentarily be viewed as mythic, it is only for a moment; for Medusa's so-called mythic ideas invite us to reconsider our very distinction between myth-fantasy and reality and thus she leads the unpetrified viewer to see the natural world in a somewhat different light.

Here I need to say more about unpetrified texts and unpetrified viewing. If the reading of *Medusa's hair* can put us in an unpetrified state of mind, perhaps we should try to understand better that rather special, and legendary, state of mind.

The Legend

Modern legend, which I associate with the legend of an existential ego capable of detaching itself from or transcending any fixed point of view, tells that there exists a special class of texts, 'unpetrified texts'. Here by a 'text' I mean any object or event that is a vehicle of meaning, and by 'meaning' I mean all the implications and suggestions to which one ought to be led in comprehending a text. There are two features definitive of unpetrified texts: (a) meaning many things is what the text means; and (b) it is through every attempt to make the text mean only one thing that an unpetrified viewer is led more and more deeply into the text's multiplicity of meanings. When an unpetrified text is viewed by an unpetrified viewer every attempt to bind in a self-contained meaning drives the interpretation of the text into another semantic territory. There is also a moral to this fragment of my version of the legend: unpetrified texts deserve unpetrified viewers.

Technically speaking, the attempt to bind in a self-contained meaning, to make a text mean only one thing, can be referred to as a homonymic test. The attempted application of the homonymic test is not only an inevitable feature of interpretation; it is an indispensable procedure for distinguishing petrified from unpetrified texts. Petrified texts pass the homonymic test; unpetrified texts do not.

It is definitive of the homonymic test that one treats the text, rather than the meaning of the text, as multiple. Homonymic entries in dictionaries are exemplary of the procedure. The basic idea is to treat as merely apparent the unity of a text with multiple meanings, by dividing up the text, not into versions of the same text, but rather into independent texts, one text for each meaning.

Thus, for example, the sound pattern 'gross,' a text in English, easily passes a homonymic test. Instead of one unpetrified text, whose meaning is its multiplicity of re-activating implications, 'gross' is a petrified text, reasonably interpreted as three separate texts (gross 1: revolting, vulgar, crude; gross 2: an aggregate of twelve dozen things; gross 3: total earnings exclusive of deductions), each text with a single self-contained meaning that does not activate the others. Petrified texts are readily assimilated to a homonymic procedure. Unpetrified texts resist such homonymic separation, as each of a multiplicity of meanings leads on to the next.

There is probably no general standard for judging the relative worth of petrified vs. unpetrified texts; both types of texts exist and play their different parts in our way of life. It was once commonplace to argue that for a text to be properly scientific its meaning must be petrified (fixed and unitary), although that view is no longer so common or well-placed. In the Christian cultural tradition the *Book of Job* is a worthy exemplar of an unpetrified text, and so is the story of Medusa and her hair. Each interpretation of the text activates yet another and the process of shifting perspectives is not meant to ever come to an end.

Yet resist as they may, unpetrified texts can, by brute force, be terrorised, and turned into stone. Petrified viewers invariably petrify unpetrified texts, either by ignoring significant details of the text or by failing to ask precisely those questions that might flood the text with other meanings. Remember the moral: unpetrified texts deserve unpetrified viewers. Petrified viewing is fine for petrified texts.

One of the joys of an unpetrified text is that getting all the facts aligned with any one perspective or theory is an impossible thing to do, and every attempt to do so leads on to another perspective or theory, which is the point of the exercise; to keep talking without ever putting things to an end. Indeed, arguments among unpetrified viewers who study the meaning of things sometimes go something like this.

I think people who are afraid of snakes are afraid because a snake reminds them of a penis.

I think not: people who are afraid of snakes are not afraid of penises.

I still think so: people who are afraid of snakes are afraid because a snake reminds them of a penis, but not just any penis; it reminds them of a penis that has been severed from a body. It reminds them of a castrated penis, and it is the idea of castration that makes them anxious and is made manifest by the presence of a snake.

I still think not: people who are most afraid of snakes are nearly always women, and it is men, not women, who ought to be most anxious about potential castration, for it is men who have the most to lose.

I still think so: potential castration is not as anxiety-provoking as actual castration, and from an anatomical point of view women are castrated men. A snake reminds a woman of what she has lost, for to look at a penis without a body is to think of a body without a penis. And what is a body without a penis? It is body with a vagina, a degraded form, which women loathe and think of as dirty or polluted.

I still think not: it would be strange to say that monkeys experience castration anxiety yet monkeys are afraid of snakes, and those women who are terrified by snakes are also terrified by other animals, like birds, or frogs or spiders.

Here the argument carries on, with retorts like 'what do monkeys have to do with people, for they may both be afraid of snakes, but not for the same reason' and 'what do frogs have to do with snakes, for they may both be objects of fear, but not for the same reason.'

Disagreements of that sort are not meant to be settled; and the fact that they do not get settled does not bring, and should not bring, discussion to an end. Unpetrified texts are the textual analogues of a Necker cube. The more you stare at it the less stable it becomes, and each time you think you have a fixed view of it, it switches face. Yet you keep looking precisely because through looking you are led out of one perspective on things and into another. Or so it is told by the modern legend of unpetrified viewing; which is, it turns out, the legend of cultural anthropology.

The story of Medusa and her hair is an unpetrified text, and it deserves an unpetrified viewing. Historically, many frozen glances and fixed interpretations have fallen on Medusa and her sisters; yet taken together, and placed side by side, the various interpretations activate one another without destroying the integrity of the text. In one viewing, by Apollodorus (Hamilton 1942), the focus is upon the anomalous figure of the Gorgons, with fish-like scales, bird-like wings, reptile-like hair and the face of a human; and the terror comes from looking at their mutant form, 'each with wings and snakey hair' for Apollodorus stoney means dead.

In another viewing, by Freud (1955), the focus shifts to the decapitated head of Medusa; and the horror comes from looking, not at the mutant form of an intact Gorgon, but rather at a partial form, Medusa's head, severed from its body, and so reminiscent of a penis after it has been castrated. In Freud's viewing the meaning of Medusa is the castration anxiety (fear of powerlessness?) suggested by the severed head. The snakey hair, because it is still attached to the head, mitigates the horror, by representing an uncastrated penis. Stoney means becoming erect or stiffening; it is the consolation of knowing that you still have a penis.

In Ovid's viewing the meaning of Medusa turns to shame, and the idea of

turning away of the eyes. Alone of all the Gorgon sisters it was Medusa who had snake-like hair. And why?

She was very lovely once, the hope of many an envious suitor, and of all her beauties her hair most beautiful — at least I heard so from one who claimed he had seen her. One day Neptune found her and raped her, in Minerva's [Athena's] temple, and the goddess turned away and hid her eyes behind her shield, and punishing the outrage as it deserved, she changed her hair to serpents... (Ovid 1955).

For Ovid it is the snakes that are horrifying, and they are meant to frighten away from Medusa's body those who would do evil. A Gorgon head we are told in one viewing (*Encyclopaedia Britannica* 1984, 4:637) protects against the evil eye, or what amounts to the same thing, evil intentions. A free association comes to mind: those who looked on Medusa did not hide their own evil intentions towards her, and perhaps, because of their cruelty and lack of compassion, they turned hard-hearted into stone.

Bulfinch (1942) adds a touch of envy, the envy of the goddess Minerva or Athena; that perhaps all too helpful goddess who guided the hand of Perseus as he cut off the head of the unsuspecting Medusa, asleep in her home. Medusa 'was once a beautiful maiden whose hair was her chief glory, but as she dared to vie in beauty with Minerva, the goddess deprived her of her charms and changed her beautiful ringlets into hissing serpents.' Placing those interpretations side by side it becomes apparent that there is more to an unpetrified text than meets the eye from any one perspective, and that it is by shifting perspectives that we learn how to see.

Unlike Obeyesekere, the famous Perseus never looked at the face of Medusa, nor did he try to comprehend her inner life. Instead, eyes averted, he simply killed her. It was a border-line cowardly act. The plot is well-known. First, through intimidation, Perseus extorted from the Gray Women information leading him to Medusa's far-away island abode. The Gray Women looked upon the world with a single eye, which they passed from forehead to forehead; Perseus stole the eye and used it as a bribe. Then, heavily armed with expert methodology, the shield of Athena (which functioned as a mirror), the sword of Hermes, a magic bag, winged sandals and a hat of invisibility, our 'hero' stole up on a sleeping Medusa, cut off her head, and gave it to Athena, who used it to petrify others.

Modern heroes may seem more cerebral than Perseus, and, perhaps, less methodical, but certainly not less noble. Obeyesekere did not kill or decapitate his Medusa. Instead, gazing in anxiety at her ugly face and snake-like matted hair he tried to see through to the less visible world of her subjective life, so that later we might look at things horrible (Medusa) and awesome (the Baba) without turning into stone.

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