The hairs of your head are numbered

The Quern-Dust Calendar — Raghnall MacilleDhuibh

"A PERSON should not comb his hair at night, or if he does, every hair that comes out should be put in the fire. Otherwise they will meet his feet in the dark and make him stumble. No sister should comb her hair at night if she have a brother at sea.

"If the hair is allowed to go with the wind and it passes over an empty nest, or a bird takes it to its nest, the head from which it came will ache.

"No person should cut his own hair, as he will by doing so become an unlucky person to meet. If the hair, when thrown on the fire, will not burn, it is a sign the person will be drowned."

These three fascinating little paragraphs appear under the heading "Combing the Hair" in the Rev. John Gregorson Campbell's book "Superstitions of the Highlands and Islands of Scotland" of 1900. They represent some of the vestiges in our own society of a massive superstructure of taboo erected by custom all over the world upon the cutting of hair.

Sir James Frazer (a Glasgow man, like me) discussed the origins of such beliefs in his "Taboo and the Perils of the Soul" of 1911, the second part of his monumental anthropological work "The Golden Bough". By way of explanation, he pointed to the twin dangers of disturbing what he calls "the spirit of the head" and of enabling others to work magic against a person through "the sympathetic connexion which exists between himself and every part of his body . . . even after the physical connexion has been broken".

Campbell's examples show that such magic can be performed accidentally, and indeed Frazer cites some of them in support of his argument. Let's look at them one at a time, and try to understand them by comparing them with similar traditions from other places – what Frazer calles "the comparative method".

First, "a person should not comb his hair at night, or if he does, every hair that comes out should be put in the fire. Otherwise they will meet his feet in the dark and make him stumble." This relates closely to an entry in the "Dictionary of Superstitions" by Iona Opie and Moira Tatem. Taken from "The Crofter and the Laird", by John MacPhee from Colonsay, it states: "When a young woman combed her hair at night, she put every loose strand in the fire. If the hair did not burn, it meant that she would one day drown." MacPhee's last sentence is almost identical to Campbell's: "If the hair, when thrown on the fire, will not burn, it is a sign the person will be drowned."

It's as if the night belongs to the devil, who, represented by the flames, requires his little gift. Otherwise he will find the hairs and use them to bring the person down, either by tripping him up in the dark or by coiling around his legs in the shape of weed or other entanglements when swimming or crossing a ford.

In the general context of haircutting traditions the idea of burning surplus hair is daring but understandable. Frazer cites examples of non-Christians who have been afraid to have their hair cut because they believed that their soul resided in it, and of Christians and non-Christians alike who were afraid to have it cut for fear of witchcraft. These examples include kings of the Franks, chiefs of Ponape in the Caroline Islands, Aztec priests, and the men of the Tsetsaut tribe of British Columbia. There are also examples of people (Christian and otherwise) who have been afraid to destroy or throw away cut hair because they would be expected to account for it at the Resurrection. Usually it is buried, but in Ireland they put it in the thatch instead, for, as Matthew and Luke both say, "The very hairs of your head are all numbered."

Campbell says, secondly: "No sister should comb her hair at night if she have a brother at sea." Opie and Tatem offer a short section headed "Hair: combing after sunset" which applies directly to this. Both the quotations in it come from the east coast of Scotland. The first is from Rosehearty near Fraserburgh: "If a woman has any relations or friends at sea she must on no account comb and dress her hair after nightfall. Such an act brings disaster upon them." The second is from "East Coast of Scotland" by Peter Anson: "No fisherman's wife would venture to comb her hair after sunset if her 'guid man' was at sea."

This is a wonderful example of accidental sympathetic magic. Note that the categories vary, yet whether it's the woman's brother, relations, friends or husband, the effect is the same – she has a relationship with them of intimacy sufficient to transfer the storm-like effect

of combing and dressing her hair to the vessel in which they are sailing.

To help us comprehend the mindset that could produce this idea, it's worth turning to another of Opie and Tatem's sections, the one headed "Nails and hair, cutting: at sea", because here we find a much more ancient authority for something similar – Petronius's "Satyricon" of about AD 65. "They say that no living man has a right to cut his nails or his hair on a ship; that is, unless the wind is blowing a hurricane . . . Lichas went white with anger . . . 'You don't say that somebody aboard this ship has had a crop . . . Haul the villains aft at once, so that I may know whose blood I must shed to purify the vessel!'"

Cutting hair and nails is suggestive of bits breaking off the ship, and especially of the sails being torn. The only reason I can think of as to why it should be acceptable to cut the nails or hair if the wind is blowing a hurricane is that little or no sail would be carried in those circumstances. In other words, the cutting of hair and nails is being directly linked to the deliberate striking, lowering or reefing of sail, which suggests that we may see the combing of the hair as equivalent to the filling of the sails and the consequent lurching and tossing of the ship. The hair is not the waves but the sail.

A sidelight on this is offered by Francis Grose in his "Provincial Glossary" of 1787 where he says: "A principal passenger shaving himself at sea will procure a favourable change of wind." If the hair is the sails, what is the beard? The rigging? Or is the key word not "shaving" at all but "passenger"? Do the passengers symbolise the wind – here today, gone tomorrow, mostly unseen, only half known, always changing? Perhaps a big passenger is a big wind, and when he shaves he reduces himself slightly, smartens up, and becomes a little less rough.

Perhaps that is too modern an interpretation, however, for Frazer actually offers some evidence that cutting hair was thought to affect the weather. In New Zealand a spell was uttered during haircutting to avert thunder and lightning. Witches in the Tyrol were supposed to use cut or combed-out hair to make hailstones or thunderstorms with. And Thlinkeet Indians have been known to attribute stormy weather to the rash act of a girl who had combed her hair outside the house.

Campbell says next: "If the hair is allowed to go with the wind and it passes over an empty nest, or a bird takes it to its nest, the head from which it came will ache."

Two things emerge from this which paint a picture of how our forefathers lived. The first is that it used to be more common to cut hair outdoors than it is now. If hair is cut in a breeze, it will fly away. The second has to do with waste disposal. There used to be no such thing as a bag or a bin for rubbish. If the hair was cut indoors, you could sweep it into the fire or out the door, or you could take it to the door and throw it on the dunghill. All in all, the chances of your hair taking flight or being seized by birds were quite high, especially if you felt uneasy about burning it but didn't want to go to the trouble of burying it.

When Campbell talks about hair that "passes over an empty nest" he means, I take it, that the hair arrives in the nest by itself instead of being brought to it by a bird. If you lived in a world full of birds like corncrakes, and if you also believed in a cosmos governed by physical laws which involved like being drawn towards like, all neatly organised by God's will, it would not have seemed so strange to you as it does to us.

As for getting a headache, this is as simple as it sounds. Your cut hair is still part of you. It contains a bit of your soul. It will return to you on the Day of Judgement. If a bird picks it up in its beak, it's the same as if it had jabbed its beak into your head. And if you don't believe me, just consider Frazer's examples. "The Huzuls of the Carpathians," he says, "imagine that if mice get a person's shorn hair and make a nest of it, the person will suffer from headache or even become idiotic.

"Similarly in Germany it is a common notion that if birds find a person's cut hair, and build their nests with it, the person will suffer from headache; sometimes it is thought that he will have an eruption on the head. The same superstition prevails, or used to prevail, in West Sussex. 'I knew how it would be,' exclaimed a maidservant one day, 'when I saw that bird fly off with a bit of my hair in its beak that blew out of the window this morning when I was dressing; I knew I should have a clapping headache, and so I have.'"

Frazer here quotes Campbell, then adds: "The Todas of southern India hide their clipped hair in bushes or hollows in the rocks, in order that it may not be found by crows."

It thus becomes clear that our ancestors had worked out an explanation for headache which is probably as good as any your GP could come up with today. And this brings us to

the last statement of Campbell's which remains to be considered: "No person should cut his own hair, as he will by doing so become an unlucky person to meet."

Why should this be? Well, the example of the Sussex maid lies before you. It's clear from the beliefs of peoples all over the world that haircutting was always considered far too fraught to be left to DIY freaks. Human hair was everywhere the most powerful agent used by witches and wizards to work their magic with. In some parts of New Zealand the most sacred day of the year was the one set aside for hair-cutting; in Fiji the only sure way to avoid this danger was human sacrifice, and the chief of Namosi in that island always ate a man as a precaution when he had had a haircut.

The man who had to cut his own hair was presumably an unlucky person to meet because there were no witnesses to reassure you that he had taken all possible precautions against witchcraft. What if someone had thrown his hair over a cliff? He would fall down a cliff too, and you might die trying to save him. Equally, what if a person had got some of his hair and was keeping it to blackmail him with, just as Hanun shaved off half the beards of David's servants in 2 Samuel 10: 4?

You couldn't trust a man like that.

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