



FOLK PERCEPTIONS OF THE SYMBOL OF HAIR IN THE TRADITIONAL LIFESTYLE OF UZBEKS

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Abstract

This article explores the beliefs associated with the symbol of hair in the spiritual culture of the Uzbeks of the Fergana Valley. Particular attention is given to the historical roots of hair-related perceptions and to how this symbol is reflected in rituals connected with childbirth, child upbringing, marriage, and mourning ceremonies. The study analyzes the cultural and symbolic meanings attributed to hair within traditional practices and worldview patterns of the local population.

Keywords: Fergana Valley, Uzbeks, symbol of hair, ritual, childbirth, marriage ceremonies, mourning rituals, custom, tradition, ethnos.

Introduction

One of the most significant ethnographic features that distinguishes one people from another is its ritual system. A ritual is a social phenomenon that emerges in human life through material and spiritual needs and demands. Every ritual comes into existence and continues to function by embodying the fundamental characteristics of a particular stage in a people's historical development, reflecting their socio-economic, political, and cultural level of progress. In other words, a ritual is a life event structured around symbolically codified actions that are collectively recognized and socially sanctioned.

Family and domestic rituals serve as transmitters and preservers of ethnic cultural and everyday traditions. Ceremonies associated with birth, marriage, and mourning represent not only intellectual milestones but also deeply emotional and spiritual stages in human life. Many of these rituals, in terms of their origins, are



rooted in ancient beliefs and religious conceptions that have evolved over centuries.

Folk perceptions related to hair trace back to ancient times. Throughout the world, hair has consistently been valued and symbolically charged in many cultures, serving as an important marker of identity, beauty, vitality, and spiritual significance [1]. Beliefs related to hair are reflected at all stages of human life—infancy, adolescence, and old age—as well as in various family rituals such as circumcision ceremonies, weddings, and mourning rites. For example, among the Uzbeks of the Fergana Valley, the removal of a baby's first hair, known as the "womb hair" (qorin sochi), is celebrated as a significant ritual event. Our ancestors believed that a person's life force, strength, and magical power were embodied in the hair. For this reason, parents were often reluctant to cut the baby's first hair themselves. Instead, it was entrusted to a respected, elderly woman—often a mother of many children and regarded as blessed and prosperous—who would perform the act. The hair was then carefully preserved and buried beneath a fruit-bearing tree.

A similar custom is observed among Tajiks: the first lock of a child's hair is wrapped in cloth and hung on the branch of a fruit tree, with the symbolic wish that the child, like the tree, may grow and bear abundant "fruit" in life. In this practice, one can observe the symbolic connection between hair and the concept of life itself, as well as elements of fertility beliefs expressed through the act of burying or placing the hair near a fruit-bearing tree.

In many cultures around the world, the color of hair has also carried specific symbolic meanings since ancient times. Hair color has played an important role in revealing the essence of symbolic interpretations. For instance, dark brown or black hair has been associated with mystery and energy; golden or blond hair has often been linked to the sun; while in many European traditions, red hair was historically associated with Judas and thus symbolized betrayal. White hair, in most ethnic traditions, has been regarded as a symbol of dignity, wisdom, and reverence, whereas black hair has frequently been connected with the symbolism of night[2].

Kazakh ethnographer A. Toleubaev associates the particular care taken during a child's first haircut with the concept of partial (contagious) magic [3]. Such



customs related to hair have been preserved among many peoples of the world. According to the well-known ethnologist J. Frazer, primitive humans regarded their hair as an inseparable part of the body, that is, as something living. It was believed that a person whose hair was cut could lose their magical power. For this reason, hair was carefully preserved and protected from being trampled underfoot. Tribal leaders, priests, and shamans were sometimes forbidden to cut their hair throughout their lifetime, and a person with long hair was considered to be under divine favor [4].

The prominent Uzbek folklorist M. Jo'raev notes that such mythological beliefs served as the foundation for the emergence of magical customs among our people directly connected with hair, such as "soch to'yi" (hair celebration), "kokil to'yi" (braid ceremony), "haydar qo'yish," and "soch siypatar" [5].

In certain areas of the Fergana Valley, a special place is selected for cutting a child's hair. When a child reaches the age of three or five, they are taken to a designated shrine where their braid is cut. This task is entrusted to the sheikhs of the shrine, and it requires unused scissors and a piece of white cloth. After the sheikh cuts a portion of the child's hair, the remaining hair is cut by elderly respected women (kayvoni mothers). The cut hair is wrapped in white cloth and buried under a fruit-bearing tree [6].

Similar customs are found among other peoples of the world. For example, among the mountain Tajiks, the cut hair was buried under a willow tree [7]. A rooster or sheep is sacrificed on this occasion, and soup is prepared. The broth is first given to the child, then to the shrine's sheikh, and finally distributed among the participants of the ceremony. After the meal, the child is rolled inside the shrine's sacred chamber, and soil taken from that place is rubbed onto the child's chest and legs.

It should also be noted that such shrines in the Fergana region include Hobbuvva in Quduq village (Dangara district), Safarbuuvva in Tumor village of the same district, and in Buvayda district: Poshshopirim, Bostanbuuvva, Yigitpirim, Buvimozorbuvi, and Khizrbuuvva [8].

It should be acknowledged that among many ethnic groups of the world, abundant and growing hair has been regarded as a symbol of fertility and productivity [9]. Similar beliefs are also found among the Uzbeks of the Fergana Valley. In some



rural areas of the valley, girls with long and thick hair are treated with particular respect, whereas girls with short hair are sometimes disparagingly referred to as “relatives of the devil” [10].

Before wedding ceremonies, special attention was paid to the condition of the bride’s and groom’s hair. On the wedding day, girls traditionally braided their hair into two plaits, while young men not only cut their hair short but in some regions even shaved it completely [11]. The practice of braiding hair into two plaits symbolized a girl’s transition into womanhood and represented the sign of pairing. Moreover, among Uzbeks there existed a symbolic custom of tying the two braids together with decorative threads, expressing the wish that the newlyweds would always remain close to one another [12]. Interestingly, in many cultures around the world, including Europe, unmarried girls were distinguished from married or morally fallen women by the manner in which they wore their braids [13]. In our view, this historical-typological similarity reflects the universal character of hair magic across different cultures.

The connection between hairstyles and family life or everyday social status has, to some extent, been preserved to the present day. As girls moved from one stage of life to another—childhood to maidenhood, maidenhood to married womanhood, then to middle age and finally old age—each stage was accompanied by a specific hairstyle appropriate to that age group. For example, the “forty braids” (qirq kokil) hairstyle symbolized puberty but also indicated that the girl was still unmarried. Therefore, only unmarried girls wore their hair in forty braids, while married women never adopted this style.

Another important ritual attribute among Fergana Valley shamans is human hair. Hair, as a significant part of the human body, has long been attributed special functions. In many cultures worldwide, women’s hair has been interpreted as a symbol of temptation capable of leading a person astray. Beliefs about hair date back to ancient times. For instance, the ancient Sumerians used hair, wigs, and beards as protective means against evil spirits [14].

Furthermore, among many ethnic groups, fortune-tellers and practitioners of “hot-cold” magic employ hair as a powerful instrument capable of influencing its owner. Valley shamans consider hair to be a “pathway” into a person’s spiritual world [15]. It should also be noted that in certain areas of the valley, individuals



practicing magical rites make use of human hair, nails, horseshoe nails, cemetery soil, needles, pepper, small stones, and horsehair as ritual elements.

It should also be noted that the custom of wailing loudly, loosening one's hair, and striking oneself while mourning is characteristic not only of the Uzbek people but of the peoples of Central Asia as a whole, and its roots go back to very ancient times. Among the ancient Turkic peoples, not only the widow of the deceased but also close relatives would chant laments, tear out their hair, scratch their faces and ears, and cry in grief. According to Chinese historical sources, when a close relative died, Turkic tribes would bring sacrificial horses and sheep, place them in front of the yurt, and circle the yurt seven times while riding a horse. Before entering the yurt, they would cut their faces with knives and cry out loudly in mourning [16].

The practice of women loosening their hair and engaging in various forms of self-inflicted suffering during mourning is also reflected in archaeological findings from Panjikent and in the images discovered on ossuaries from Tok Kala. The historian Narshakhi described these customs as "the mourning of fire-worshippers" [17]. Indeed, it can be assumed that such practices originated in pre-Islamic religious beliefs, since Islamic law emphasizes silent mourning and the shedding of tears without loud lamentation.

According to the ethnographer L. Ya. Shternberg, hair and blood were regarded as primary symbols of life [18]. Therefore, tearing out hair and drawing blood during funeral rites symbolically represented the relatives' sacrifice of their own life force for the deceased or an attempt to revive them. Over time, however, the meaning of this act evolved and came to symbolize respect and deep sorrow for the deceased. In general, loose hair among Uzbeks has historically symbolized mourning, misfortune, or disorder and was associated with magical beliefs. As J. Frazer notes, in many cultures women loosen their hair while mourning in order to confuse or distract the spirit of the deceased [19].

In the Fergana Valley, cut or shed hair is not thrown into fire or water, as doing so is considered a grave sin. Instead, according to traditional belief, removed or fallen hair is placed into wall crevices or buried beneath a fruit-bearing tree [20]. Beliefs and customs related to hair are also present in funeral rituals. Among the Uzbeks of the Fergana Valley, before washing a deceased woman, her braided



hair was traditionally loosened [21]. In many cultures around the world, braided hair symbolized belonging to the world of the living, whereas loosened hair indicated that its owner now belonged to another realm [22]. Furthermore, in some parts of the valley in the past, women participating in funeral ceremonies would strike their chests, uncover their heads (especially widows, symbolically expressing that their “heads were left uncovered”), unbraid their hair, and wail loudly in grief [23].

In general, loose hair among Uzbeks has historically symbolized mourning, connection with the other world, misfortune, or moral disorder, and has been associated with magical beliefs. As J. Frazer notes, in many cultures women loosened their hair while mourning in order to distract or confuse the spirit of the deceased. When a parent or close relative died, men would shave their heads “for the merit of the deceased” and bury the cut hair in the ground. Informants explain that by doing so, they symbolically add their own good deeds to the scale on which the deceased’s merits and sins are weighed in the afterlife, thereby helping the deceased attain paradise [24]. In fact, this custom appears to have been rooted in ancient beliefs connected with the transition of the deceased from the human world to the realm of nature.

Overall, beliefs related to hair date back to ancient times and emerged as a result of the development of human perceptions of the surrounding environment. Hair was not merely a physical part of the human body but was also believed to possess magical properties. Although hair-related customs and rituals differ among the peoples of the world, most of them emphasize the careful preservation of hair and prohibit its careless disposal. In turn, such beliefs contributed to the formation and development of ecological awareness among younger generations.

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