

The Evolutionary Anthropology of Human Hair

James Giles

Human beings are primates, just like apes, monkeys, and lemurs. One of the striking physical features that set us apart from all other members of the primate family is the peculiar form and distribution of our hair. Thus, unlike our primate cousins, we have virtually hairless skin, pubic and underarm hair, and long head-hair. Although each aspect of our hair covering is distinctive, the human feature of head hair is particularly striking. This is because, unlike other instances of human and even mammalian hair, head hair can grow to excessive lengths. Although there are many anthropological theories about the origins and significance of human hair, most of these are, I feel, inadequate. This is especially so for those that try to explain human hair as being selected for because of its survival value, as, for example, in the view that hair is adapted to protect us from the sun. Rather than use space to examine these accounts, I will simply argue for what seems to me the best explanation, namely, that human hair took the form it did because of our bipedalism, or walking on two feet, and did so primarily as a sexual adaptation. Other factors, however, may have worked in conjunction with these.

There is, unfortunately, no way we can go back to the past to observe what happened. Further, there is little in the fossil record that could directly answer this sort of question. Nevertheless, answers to such questions can be suggested by trying to arrive at the best explanation that fits with the data we do have. Proceeding this way, I would argue that the evolution of head hair probably had its beginnings in bipedalism. This is suggested by the fact that long head-hair would have made it next to impossible to climb effectively through the trees or even to walk on all fours, as other primates usually do. The head being at the front of the body would mean that any long head-hair trailed on the ground just in front of the limbs used to walk. This would have the result of the hair being continually caught under the hands and feet for any quadrupedal primate, making it trip and yanking at the hair. Male lions and horses also have something resembling long head-hair and manes at the front of their bodies. But in both cases these animals' manes stop growing well before they reach the ground. With human beings, however, head hair can grow to the ground. But this long growth of head hair is only possible for an upright creature. Of course, it can still get in the way of various activities and, as I shall suggest, cause other problems. But in basic walking and

running it would tend to fall down the back to the ground and so not present an unsolvable problem for simple bipedal locomotion.

This explains why long head-hair was able to develop, but not why it developed. To arrive at this explanation one must look at the function of head hair. The first thing to notice is that females are far better than males at having head hair. While females generally maintain a thick head of hair for most of their lives, hair loss and pattern baldness among males is relatively common, occurring sometimes as early as in a man's 20s or 30s. This suggests that head hair is essentially a female trait that was passed on to males. Males having head hair is therefore much like males having nipples, for nipples are also a female trait that was incidentally passed onto males. It is this dimorphism in male and female hair and male hair loss that suggests it was sexually and not naturally selected for. There is no reason, for example, why males should require less sun protection than females.

But why is it that head hair evolved as an essentially female adaptation? The obvious answer is that female head-hair was selected for because it sexually attracted males. Ancestral males' head hair might also have had some attractive value for ancestral females. But this value would have probably been far less. Again, this is suggested by the high prevalence of male hair loss. If male hair was as important as female hair in attracting a sexual partner, then it seems that males, who can reproduce well into old age, would also have adapted a full-head of persisting hair.

But why should long female head-hair be sexually attractive for males? There are, it would seem, several reasons for this. The first reason would be simply that males tend to find females sexually attractive and, further, that long hair is good at attracting attention. In a normal environment, movement is always something that catches our eye. When someone with long hair walks, the hair swings and bounces. When there is wind or a breeze the movement is greatly amplified as the hair flutters, sweeps up into the air, and then floats down again. In this way, long head-hair, which is at the top of the body, is much like a flag waving in the wind at the top of a flag pole. And just as the movements of a flag in the wind serve to catch our attention, so does the movement of hair in the wind. When the person starts to run this movement is even more exaggerated. As anyone who has watched a runner with long hair knows, swinging pony-tails or hair rippling back and forth in the wind cannot help but capture one's attention. Hair can also be purposively tossed, flicked, swept back with the hand, groomed, and played with. All of this would have easily worked to catch an ancestral male's attention, which would then also turn to the female herself.

A second reason for the sexual attractiveness of head hair is its softness and silkiness, features that make it enjoyable to touch and feel against one's skin. Because these features of hair are

experienced through intimate contact with the hair, head hair presents itself to the viewer as almost calling out to be touched and stroked. This presentation of hair is naturally reinforced when the person whose hair it is grooms or plays with her hair. This is because in observing the person touch her own hair the observer is naturally brought to the idea of touching the hair himself. And the more hair there is, the more hair there is for the enjoyable experience. With ground-length hair there is an abundance of hair that presents itself in this way and so works powerfully to rouse in the viewer the idea of touching, stroking, or fondling the hair.

A further reason ties in with the hairlessness of naked skin, skin that for our first human ancestors would not have been covered by clothes. For it seems noteworthy that long head-hair does not just tumble to the ground, but that in doing so it fans itself out over a naked body. It thus partially obscures the naked body. Thus, when seen from behind, a naked female with ground-length hair would have her buttocks partially hidden by her long hair. As she walked her hair would swing back and forth while rippling in the breeze, giving the viewer fleeting glimpses of her naked buttocks just under the hair.

Similarly, when seen from the front, any hair that fell forward would tend to obscure her breasts and genitals in the same way. Since, as is well known, revealing women's clothing that both hides and yet gives glimpses of parts of the body works to increase sexual interest, it seems likely that long head-hair covering naked skin would have operated in much the same way. It is interesting to note here that long hair spread out over naked skin has an uncanny resemblance to a see-through dress or blouse. Of course, a naked female body itself will tend to rouse a male's sexual interest. But having it slightly hidden in a way that allows fleeting previews can be even more enticing. In this way, long head-hair might well be considered the first human clothing.

One can imagine that as the first ancestral females became bipedal and therefore stood upright, the hair on their heads, being at the highest point, easily drew attention in these ways. Those ancestral females with slightly longer head hair would have thus attracted more sexual attention. This would have set sexual selection pressure in process where females with slightly longer hair would have been seen to be more attractive and thus had a slightly better chance of passing on their genes for long hair. It was this pressure for longer and longer hair that finally led to ground-length hair.

The importance of long head-hair in human evolution is also indicated by the fact that such hair actually made human ancestors more vulnerable. Not only did it attract the attention of a sexual partner, but it also would have attracted the attention of a predator. It would have also made it more

difficult to flee from a predator. Trying to escape a big cat while having one's hair obscure one's vision, or getting it caught in the bushes, or even clawed and grabbed by the animal, would not have been helpful in the individual's struggle for survival. This, however, was compensated for by long hair's immense reproductive value. In this sense long head-hair is much like the elaborate tail feathers of a peacock. For although they render him sexually attractive to the peahen, they make him less agile and easily spotted by predators.

None of this is to say that the sexual meanings that we today place on hair are in any sense instinctual. I would argue rather that these meanings are existentially and culturally-based. However, existential and culturally-based meanings like those I am here considering have their roots in our early evolutionary situation. Understanding these situations helps us to see why we might have been left to deal with such meanings once our instincts were left behind.