

**‘DRAGGING SEVENTY LITTLE PLAITS OF HER
ACROSS THE LAND OF THE ALTAI’:¹
HAIRCARE, HAIRSTYLES, AND HAIR ORNAMENTS OF THE
SOUTHERN ALTAIANS FROM HISTORICAL AND CULTURAL
PERSPECTIVES**

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ABSTRACT: This study deals with haircare, hair ornaments, hairstyles, and hair-related rituals of the Southern Altaians (Altai Kizhi, Telengits) and their development over time. Haircare has played an important role in Altaian society for centuries. It has been a ritual symbol, an indicator of gender, age, marital or social status. In context, hair has played a significant cultural and social role across societies and historical periods around the world. For this reason, haircare has also been sometimes included among the so-called cultural or human universals, i.e. phenomena that are common to all known human cultures in time and space.

The source of information for this study was the authors’ own field research, relevant literature and visual sources documenting the broader context of haircare. The issue is viewed from historical and cultural perspectives, with the main focus on the current haircare of the Altaian people in connection with changes compared to the past. The study focuses on selected phenomena that proved to be the most important in the field research in terms of their existence and the role they currently play in Altaian society. It does not therefore aim to cover the full breadth of the topic, but leaves room for further research on sub-topics.

KEYWORDS: hair – hairstyles – hair ornaments – Southern Altaians – anthropology of the body

Introduction

Ever-growing hair has fascinated people since time immemorial. Before we analyse Altaian haircare, hairstyles, and hair ornaments in detail, it is important to understand why hair has been a crucial anthropological topic. The anthropologist C. R. Hallpike summarized the exceptional properties of hair, for which they play an important role in culture:

1 An excerpt from the Altaian heroic epic *Maaday-Kara; Altaisky geroichesky epos*, 1973, p. 417.

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1) as the nails it grows constantly, 2) it can be cut painlessly, 3) it grows in great quantity, 4) head hair is apparent on infants of both sexes at birth, 5) genital-anal hair appears at puberty in both sexes, 6) in some races, males develop facial hair after puberty, 7) hair on different parts of the body is of different texture, 8) in old age, hair often turns white and/or falls out, 9) hair is a prominent feature of animals, especially monkeys, man's analogue in the animal kingdom.³

In addition to Hallpike's work, classic studies of intercultural symbolism of hair include the work of the psychoanalyst Ch. Berg (1951) on the unconscious sexual symbolism of hair and E. Leach's influential study entitled *Magical Hair* (1958), which not only deals with the significance of hair in society, but also formulates a more general pattern of different hairdressing in different cultures. Hair is said to carry the message that: 'an astonishingly high proportion of the ethnographic evidence fits the following pattern in a quite obvious way. In ritual situations: long hair = unrestrained sexuality; short hair, or partially shaved hair, or tightly bound hair – restricted sexuality; close shaven hair – celibacy.' The latter is allegedly evidenced by numerous monk haircuts.⁴ The observation about the magical nature of hair is also valuable: the contrast between cared for hair, if 'vital' and full of energy, and 'dead' cuttings, which have both a negative and destructive power and become waste.

The sociologist A. Synnott, who coined the phrase '*Sociology of Hair*' (1987), also reflected on various hairstyles under the weight of social rules – especially in Euro-American society: 'Although [forms] of hair grow all over the body, there are only three zones of social significance: head hair, facial hair, and body hair'.⁵ He pointed out that there are four ways to handle and manipulate hair cover: its length, colour, style, and quantity.

Over the past three decades, professional studies on hair or hair ornaments have been on the increase, in line with the increased interest of sociocultural anthropology in the human body. Particularly inspiring are two scholarly collections devoted to the symbolism of hair in African⁶ and Asian cultures,⁷ and also two more general books on cultural history of hair⁸ deserve a mention.

Hair, although seemingly something completely common and ordinary, permeates social life on many levels. It is not surprising that the anthropologist G. P. Murdock included haircare and hairstyles in the list of seventy-three so-called cultural universals, i.e. manifestations that occur across all societies – in time and space.⁹ Various other

3 Hallpike 1969, p. 257.

4 Leach 1958, p. 154.

5 Synnott 1987, p. 382

6 Sieber and Herreman 2000.

7 Hildebeitel and Miller 1998.

8 Rychlík 2018; Sherrow 2006.

9 Murdock 1945, p. 124.

studies, metastudies, or databases supports the fact of the transcultural importance of haircare, grooming, or hair symbolism.¹⁰

This study deals with haircare, hairstyles, and hair ornaments of the Southern Altaians – Altai Kizhi and Telengits – living in the Altai Republic in the Russian Federation.¹¹ The field research was carried out in the form of semi-structured and unstructured interviews in the Ust-Kansky, Ongudaysky, and Kosh-Agachsky districts of the Altai Republic, as well as in the capital – Gorno-Altaysk in 2019 and 2020.¹²

The research also included an analysis of Altaian hair ornaments from exhibits of the collections of the National Museum of A. V. Anokhin, the collections of the Regional Museum in Ust-Kan, the collections of the Museum of Telengits in Kokoria in the Altai Republic, the collections of the Novosibirsk State Museum of Local History and Nature, the collections of the Russian Museum of Ethnography, St. Petersburg, the collections of the Museum of Oriental Art, Moscow. A valuable visual source, related to hairstyles and wearing hair ornaments in the past, was also the photo archive of School Museum Novy Beltir in the Altai Republic and the photo collection of the Peter the Great Museum of Anthropology and Ethnography (the *Kunstkamera*) in St. Petersburg.

Archaeological and historical evidence of haircare in south Siberia and adjacent areas

The oldest indirect evidence of ancient haircare in the area is provided by Palaeolithic figurines. So-called Venuses, female figurines, are well known not only in Siberia, but some of their variants indicate hints of prehistoric hairstyles (the localities of Kostenki, Avdeevo, Mal'ta, Buret', and others) – some of them from the Gravettian period have a short haircut, hair braided on the back of the neck or even lines indicating a possible braid curled on the chest.¹³

In addition to these indications of prehistoric hairstyles, the well-preserved mummified bodies in the Russian part of the Altai Mountains are a valuable testimony. These well-known discoveries from the localities of Pazyryk or Ukok are approximately 2,400 years old. Thanks to permafrost, remnants of hair are also preserved – including the so-called Rider or Warrior with long braids falling in the middle of the back.¹⁴ According to S. I. Rudenko, one of the Pazyryk mummies bore traces of scalping

10 Human Relations Area Files (HRAF) catalogue at www.hraf.yale.edu covers 'personal grooming' as an OCM subject number 302 with shaving, depilation, hair styles (e.g. cutting, parting, arranging), and care of the hair (e.g. washing, brushing). Apart from the Murdock's classical list (1945) haircare is included in other studies on cultural or human universals; see Hockett 1973, p. 275, Burger 1978, p. 438, Brown 1991, p. 140, Rychlík 2018, p. 20 etc.

11 In this study, we adhere to the division of the Altaian people, as established in Russian ethnography, into two basic groups, namely the Northern Altaians (Kumandins, Tubalars, Chelkans) and the Southern Altaians (Altai Kizhi, Telengits). The division of the Altaian people into northern and southern subgroups was based on significant differences between them in terms of origin, language, and culture.

12 In the mentioned period, information on their haircare, hairstyles, and hair decorations was obtained from a total of twenty-four informants (consisting of eighteen women and six men aged twenty-five to sixty-six years).

13 The Czech palaeontologist Libor Balák deals, for example, with the pictorial reconstructions of the possible forms of the wearers of the time – available at: <http://www.anthropark.wz.cz/venus.htm>.

14 Bahn 1997, p. 150.

– a custom also observed by the ancient historian Herodotus among nomadic cultures in the surrounding regions – ‘Scythians’.¹⁵ Additional evidence of scalping – and the symbolic importance of hair – comes from southern Siberia: the burial complex of Aymyrlyg in the Ulug-Khemsy District.¹⁶ Another mummy from the same period and area, the tattooed Siberian Ice Maiden, also known as the Princess of Ukok, probably from the 5th century BCE, had shorter hair, but part of the hairstyle was also a wig made of women’s hair, felt, and ornaments.¹⁷ In the Minusinsk Hollow, scientists discovered mummies from the Iron Age Tashtyk culture. An extraordinary discovery took place near Abakan in the area of the Oglakhty Range. In 1903, the archaeologist A. Adrianov discovered the remains of mummies, unusual stuffed figurines as well as lumps of tangled hair. Human hairpieces and braids were found in mummies and puppets, although archaeologists are still unsure who they belonged to.¹⁸ Due to the complexity of funeral rituals (mummies, corpse masks, trepanation to remove brains and bags stuffed with cremation ash), they in all probability had a magical purpose. An interesting fact concerns the dozens of mummies dating to 4,000 to 2,000 years ago found in the Tarim Basin, in China’s Xinjiang Province. They exhibit blond hair, and these findings contrast with the contemporary inhabitants of the region, who mainly have dark hair. For instance, an extraordinarily well-preserved man has stubble and a braid of auburn hair. One of the first mummies found was the so-called Beauty of Loulan. Her pale curls were about twelve inches long and tucked under her cap. Research has shown that she was very troubled by the lice she had at the roots of her hair, but also in her pubic hair, eyelashes, and eyebrows.¹⁹

In southern Siberia and Central Asia, braids, which have been worn in this area since the distant past, played an important role, as evidenced by archaeological finds and written sources. In ancient Chinese chronicles, the Tuoba are referred to as ‘braiders’.²⁰ The Tuoba were a Xianbei clan, where it was customary to plait hair in a single braid. Archaeologists have also found preserved and entangled braids, for example, in the kurgans of the Noin-Ula burial site in the territory of present-day Mongolia dating back to the 1st century BCE – 1st century CE. In *The Secret History of the Mongols*, the oldest surviving literary work on Mongolian history from the 13th century describing Genghis Khan’s line of descent, there are several mentions of braids. When one of the heroines, for example, refers to her brother Chiledü:

Chiledü is one whose tuft has never blown against the wind, whose belly has never hungered in the steppe. But how is it now? How fares he, with his two plaits tossing sometimes over his back, sometimes over his breast, now forward, now backward?²¹

15 Rudenko 1970, p. 104. For more information, see Murphy et al. 2002, p. 4.

16 The topic of scalping on mortal remains in Eurasia is covered by the work of M. B. Mednikova (2000, 2002).

17 Gottierová 2015, p. 44.

18 Bahn 2008, p. 183.

19 Mallory and Mair 2008.

20 The Tuoba (or Tabgach) were part of the Xianbei confederation, which emerged after the fall of the Xiongnu Empire (209 BCE – 89 CE). The Xianbei tribes inhabited southern Siberia, northern Manchuria and eastern Mongolia.

21 *Tajná kronika Mongolů* [Secret History of the Mongols] 2011, p. 14.

In 1644, the Manchu introduced a compulsory male hairstyle in the country: a shaved head with a braid. According to V. Sherrow, they kept this style for generations because they rode horses and, thanks to their bare foreheads, had a better view and used the curled braid as a 'pillow' or 'cushion' while sleeping. The braids of those who perished in battle were reverently removed and brought to their homes.²²

According to S. I. Vainshtein and M. V. Kriukov, who studied the appearance of the ancient Turks and analysed a large number of sources in this respect, the braids were one of the ethnic features of Turkic ethnic groups inhabiting large areas ranging from Eastern Europe to Central Asia.²³

Haircare of the Southern Altaians – tradition vs. the present

More detailed information about the haircare of the Altaian people, the traditional hair ornaments or ceremonies in which hair played an important role, is available mainly from the late 19th/early 20th century, as a number of Russian and Soviet ethnographic works were written about the Altaian culture in the given period.

Haircutting Ceremony

The Altaian people paid considerable attention to hair from childhood. The first haircut, called *chürmesh kezer* (чүрмөш кезер) – 'cutting the fringe' – in the Altaian language, was not done until after the first year, most often at the age of two. It was a very important ceremony in which the maternal uncle of the child played the main role. The preferred period for this ceremony was spring or summer, with the new moon days often being chosen. In the autumn and winter, when daylight waned, the first haircut ceremony was never performed. During the ceremony, a feast was prepared for the child's family – a sheep was killed and *araki* (аракы)²⁴ was made. The child's hair was cut slightly above the forehead, wrapped in a piece of cloth, and the uncle took it to his home. The hair was then kept there in a chest standing in a place of honour *tör* (төр) in the dwelling. After the ceremony of the first haircut, the uncle was not allowed to refuse any request from his nephew or niece. The child's hair was later picked up at his uncle's, and accompanied by a feast and shared gifts. The time when the hair had to be retrieved was not to exceed seven years. The child's first hair was then treated differently. It was either burned, taken to a remote place, or stored in a chest in the parents' house, where the children retrieved it after their wedding and kept it at home in the same manner.²⁵ Only the hair from the first cut was thus preserved, while the hair later combed out or cut was mostly burned²⁶ or stored for their whole life in a pouch, which after their death was placed under the head of the deceased.²⁷

The first haircut ceremony currently takes place most frequently in the first year of the child's life as it is performed simultaneously with the 'cutting legcuffs' ceremony,

22 Sherrow 2006, p. 82.

23 Vainshtein and Kriukov 1966, p. 181.

24 A distilled beverage made from milk.

25 D'iakonova 2001, p. 103.

26 D'iakonova 2001, p. 103.

27 Babrasheva and Bokonokova 2010, p. 6.

which also takes place at that age.²⁸ The first haircut ceremony can be performed, however, at any age until the child reaches the age of twelve. Just as in the past, spring and the new moon are still preferred for the performance of this ceremony. The role of the maternal uncle remains very important. As in the past, he participates in the ceremony and keeps the child's hair with him, does not refuse any of his/her requests, and when he returns the hair, gives a present, most often a sheep, a calf, and those who are wealthier even a cow or a horse – boys receive a stallion, girls a filly. The hair is usually collected at the uncle's place in the first two years of the child's life, with autumn being considered the most suitable period as it is when the cattle are well fattened. The parents then keep the child's hair at home. Retrieving the hair at the parents' home after the wedding is not entirely common. In some families, the hair from the first cutting ceremony remains with the parents permanently and sometimes they also burn it.²⁹

Traditional Altaian haircare

The haircutting care is manifested mainly in the protection of hair as an important part of the person. Some women take their hair home from the hairdresser's and usually burn it. They explain this by stating that it is uncomfortable for them to leave something that is part of their own body in a foreign place, and they see it as protecting themselves. We viewed this approach to cutting hair in hairdressing salons, especially with women who had suffered or were suffering from a serious illness. Hair of women and men who do not want to take it home with them is usually burnt by the hairdressers themselves.³⁰ Some women also recall their mothers, who kept their combed out or cut hair in a pouch, which was buried with them after their death, being placed under their heads.³¹ During her research, the Russian ethnographer V. P. D'iakonova noted that among Ulagan Telengits, the soul of the deceased had to gather his/her hair before reuniting with his/her deceased ancestors, which is very difficult if one had his/her hair cut far from home.³² As part of our research, we recorded a story with the theme of the need to keep the hair after one's death. It was the funeral of an old woman, who suddenly revived on the way to the cemetery and related that a higher being had asked her where her hair was. The woman did not have it with her so this higher being sent her back to the living to tell everyone that it was necessary to protect one's own hair and observe old customs.³³

In the past, women were advised not to cut their hair for their whole life. The criterion of beauty was its density and length. Braids were usually re-plaited once a month, or more often if the hairstyle was damaged in any way. Whey or soap, made

28 In the Altaian language 'tuzhak kezeri' (тужак кезери). During this ceremony, the child's legcuffs are symbolically cut and a blessing is given. The ceremony is to ensure a successful life for the child.

29 Data from field research, 2019 and 2020, informants: S. K. (woman, twenty-eight years old), N. S. (woman, fifty-four years old), Ust-Kansky District, A. V. (twenty-eight years old), ČH. (forty years old), Kosh-Agachsky District. In accordance with research ethics and the protection of personal data, the names of the informants are anonymous.

30 Field research data, 2020, informant: T. Y. (woman, fifty-eight years old), Ust-Kansky District.

31 Field research data, 2020, informant: N. S. (woman, fifty-four years old), Ust-Kansky District.

32 D'iakonova 2001, p. 107.

33 Field research data 2020, informant: T. Y. (woman, fifty-eight years old), Ust-Kansky District.

from ash of steppe plants, was used to wash the hair.³⁴ In accordance with the Altaian customs, the hair of a girl and a woman was also not supposed to be 'black', i.e. without ornaments, i.e. without protection.³⁵ It was also for this reason that the baby was presented with various ornaments: beads, silk tassels, mother-of-pearl buttons, cowry shells, which were later used as ornaments for the girls' hair. The greatest magical power was attributed to the cowry shells, which protected against evil; the buttons were believed to ensure long life and the beads many children and wealth. From the age of about three to eight years,³⁶ all young children wore the so-called *shaltrak* (шалтрақ) in the back – an amulet in the form of a square piece of leather embroidered with ornaments gifted at birth.³⁷

Age and status 'written' in hair

For girls, it was possible to tell their age and social status based on hairstyles and hair ornaments. Girls from about eight to fourteen years of age wore an ornament called *shymyrak* (шымырақ, шынмырақ), which was made from parts of a *shaltrak*. The hairstyle consisted of several braids, usually corresponding to the girl's age if the density of her hair allowed it. The shape of *shymyrak* was not strictly defined, the main goal was for the girl to have decorated braids. Popular girls' hair ornaments included braids with tassels *chach poosh* (чач пууш) made mostly of horsehair and decorated with cowries, coins, and buttons.³⁸ At about the age of fourteen to sixteen, when the girl reached the age of marriage, she also changed her hair accessories. At this age, she wore an ornament called *shanky* (шаңкы), usually consisting of five squares of fabric with cowry shells connected by vertical rows of beads. It was a long hair ornament running from head to heels. To prevent it from swinging too much when moving, it was fastened under the belt.³⁹ The last row of beads was completed with cowry shells or bells. When moving, the sound of bells or shells not only drove away evil spirits, but also notified the local inhabitants of the existence of an unmarried girl.⁴⁰ The *shanky* was worn by the girl until her wedding. If she did not end up getting married, she wore this ornament for the rest of her life.⁴¹

A married woman was distinguished by two braids (*tulun*, тулуң). The change from a single girl's hairstyle to a married woman's hairstyle was part of a wedding ceremony performed by two relatives, one from the bride's family and one from the groom's family. Some of the ornaments from the girl's hairstyle (beads, cowries) were usually given to relatives at the wedding. The bride's loose hair was soaked in milk with

34 The production of this soap is attributed to the Kazakhs. Steppe plants, used to make soap, included harmala, orache, and saxaul, which contain saponins (D'iakonova 2001, p. 106). Kazakhstan is currently returning to its production.

35 According to the Altaian saying: '*Kistin bazhin kara salbas*' (Кыстын бажын кара салбас) – 'A girl's head must not be black'. Awareness that the head should not be 'black' (not in terms of hair colour, but without ornaments, without protection) can be noted even today. It is generally necessary to protect the head, and for this reason it is a custom among the Altaians not to go out after dark without the head covered so the person is not endangered by evil spirits (field research data 2019, 2020).

36 The stated age is approximate, the age limit differed slightly locally.

37 Tadysheva 2016, p. 115.

38 Kliucheva and Mikhailova 1988, p. 120.

39 Potapov 1951, p. 44.

40 Babrasheva and Bokonokova 2010, p. 7.

41 Potapov 1951, p. 44.

juniper, and then the groom's mother usually rubbed it with butter. After the plaiting, the braids were decorated with a circular ornament *sakuzyn* (сакузын) with carnelians and corals, a pearl round ornament *tana* (тана),⁴² beads, and various tassels.⁴³ If the woman was widowed, the *tana* was removed, and the braids were plaited into one in the lower part or the braids were attached to the garment in the shoulder area. An unmarried Telengt woman or a woman who had an illegitimate child, plaited her hair in three braids.⁴⁴ Wealthy women of Altai Kizhi also wore a specific ornament on their braids called *kazhagai* (кажарай) made of cowry shells. Plaits with *kazhagai* were worn on the chest and usually joined together in the lower part.⁴⁵ The in all probability most popular ornament of married woman's braids, however, were buttons made of various materials, as evidenced by written and visual sources dating from the 19th and 20th centuries. In his book *Altaiskie inorodtsy*, for example, the missionary and ethnographer V. I. Verbitsky states that married women wore two braids, which were studded with copper military buttons along their entire length.⁴⁶

Between the 1920s and 1930s, the girls' hairstyle, originally consisting of many braids, was gradually replaced with a single braid. The slowest changes were made in the hairstyle of a married woman. Although the two braids were later seen on girls, certain rules were followed when they were plaited. Girls plaited braids higher than married women, who had their braids plaited behind their ears.⁴⁷ Girls and married women still adorned their braids with traditional accessories such as *chach poosh*, *tana*, or *kazhagai*, as evidenced by photographs of this period.⁴⁸ While hairstyles and hair ornaments gradually became more in line with the fashion of the majority Russian population during the Soviet Union era, in some areas certain traditions associated with hairstyles and hair ornaments were still preserved in the second half of the 20th century. Photographs of the Telengits from the 1970s from the Kosh-Agachsky District show that even at that time most Telengt women wore a traditional hairstyle in the form of two braids decorated with ordinary Soviet-made buttons, replacing the ornament *tana*, but also with cowrie shells [Figs. 1–2].⁴⁹

Hair ornaments

Traditional hair ornaments are very popular at present and made to order. The designers of contemporary hair ornaments try to preserve their original forms, but some elements and materials are naturally changed and modified and the overall design also shows an individual aesthetic feeling. With a range of various materials being available for

42 *Tana* ornaments could also be made of another material, such as bone, horn, or ceramics; Potapov 1951, p. 44, Kliucheva and Mikhailova 1988, p. 120.

43 Potapov 1951, p. 44, D'iakonova 2001, p. 105, Tadyshva 2016, p. 115.

44 D'iakonova 2001, p. 106.

45 Kliucheva and Mikhailova 1988, p. 120.

46 Verbitsky 1893, p. 10.

47 Babrashev and Bokonokova 2010, p. 6.

48 Kunstkamera, Collections online – photo collection, Inv. Nos. I 135-51, I 135-52, I 135-56, 4121-1, 4124-71, 4125-7. – available at: <http://collection.kunstkamera.ru/entity/OBJECT?query=%D0%B0%D0%BB%D1%82%D0%B0%D0%B9%D1%86%D1%8B>.

49 Photo archive of the Novy Beltir School Museum, without Inv. Nos. The authors of this study would like to thank A. A. Telesova for providing access to the photo archive and allowing them to publish the photos.

Fig. 1. Woman with buttons on braids, 1970s, Kosh-Agachsky District. Photo Archive of School Museum Novy Beltir, Kosh-Agachsky District, Altai Republic, Without Inv. No.



Fig. 2. Woman with cowrie shells on braids, 1970s, Kosh-Agachsky District. Photo Archive of School Museum Novy Beltir, Kosh-Agachsky District, Altai Republic, Without Inv. No.

their production, contemporary hair ornaments are usually very colourful.⁵⁰ There are currently quite a number of women in the Altai Republic who specialize in making traditional hair ornaments. Their number has increased especially in the last five years.⁵¹ They display their products on social networks, in craft workshops or in shops with Altaian souvenirs. The most popular are *kazhagai*, a braid decoration of a married woman made of cowrie shells and worn by some brides on their wedding day, which takes place according to Altaian customs at the time of the ceremonial braiding [Figs. 3–5]. The greasing of the bride’s hair with melted butter, as practised in the past, is now used more symbolically, for a completely practical reason, so that the butter does not drip from the bride’s hair during the official wedding at the local authority office.⁵² At present, *tana*, a circular ornament of a married woman, is replaced with richer braid ornaments consisting of a central medallion of various shapes and a curtain of



Fig. 3. Bride with a braid ornament *kazhagai*, present, Ust-Kansky District. (Photo: Suraya Kuldina).



Fig. 4. Braid ornament *kazhagai* made by S. Kuldina, present, Ust-Kansky District. (Photo: Tereza Hejzlarová).

50 The most frequently used are plastic beads of various colours, metal decorative connecting components, buttons, bells, cowrie shells, brocade ribbons, and silk tassels of Chinese, Russian, Kazakh, Kyrgyz, or Indian production.

51 Field research data 2020. This resulted from interviews with women specializing in the production of hair ornaments, as well as from a range of products in shops with Altaian souvenirs, from the production of craft workshops and from presentations on social networks.

52 The current Altaian wedding usually has two parts, one takes place according to traditional Altaian standards, in which traditional rituals are observed, while the other, the official one, then takes place at the local authority office. Field research data 2019, 2020, informants: E. P. (woman, thirty-six years old), Ongudaysky District, N. Sh. (woman, fifty-four years old), T. Y. (woman, fifty-eight years old), Ust-Kansky District. A. B. (woman, forty-six years old), L. K. (woman, forty-nine years old), Gorno-Altaiisk.



Fig. 5. Altaian woman in traditional clothing and a braid ornament *kazhagai*, present, Ust-Kansky District. (Photo: Synaru Oroeva).

beads and cowrie shells [Fig. 6]. Women specializing in the production of traditional ornaments also produce *shanky*, a long girl's hair ornament consisting of several squares of fabric, which are connected to one other by rows of beads [Fig. 7]. Some of these ornaments are colourful, while others are more moderate in colour. There is also considerable interest in the children's amulet *shaltrak*, which is currently mostly square or rectangular in shape with various ornaments in the form of beads, buttons, coins, cowrie shells, but also a depiction of the *tamga* – clan emblem [Figs. 8–9]. Every Altaian



Fig. 6. Current shape of *tana* braid ornament made by S. Kuldina, Ust-Kansky District. (Photo: Suraya Kuldina).



Fig. 7. Hair ornament *shanky* (on the girl on the right), present, Ust-Kansky District. (Family photoarchive of Mrs. Tatiana Yukubalina).



Fig. 8. Children's amulet *shaltrak* with clan *tamga* (Altaiian clan Todosh) made by L. Kukakova, present, Gorno-Altaiisk. (Photo: Tereza Hejzlarová).



Fig. 9. Children's amulet *shaltrak* made by S. Kuldina, present, Ust-Kansky District. (Photo: Suraya Kuldina).

clan has its own *tamga* and its presentation is very popular these days.⁵³ *Shaltrak* can also take other forms, e.g. a collar, the back of which is elongated and decorated.

Hairstyles and haircare in 'the modern era'

At present, girls and young women prefer long hair, which may be associated with the deep-rooted idea of long hair on girls and women as a criterion of beauty. Little girls' hair is usually tied in ponytails or plaited, usually in one or two braids, and decorated with commonly available ornaments. Young women most often wear their hair tied in a ponytail or bun. Older women usually have a shorter haircut, but even among them one can find women with long hair. In addition to commercially produced hair cosmetics, whey is also used for haircare. Traditional hairstyles, hair ornaments, and children's amulets are currently worn exclusively on festive occasions, family or national holidays when the Altaian people wear their traditional clothes. In these cases, differences in hairstyles and hair ornaments are usually observed, reflecting the age and marital status. In this context, we encountered the view of a married woman that if she decorated her hair with a girl's ornament, she could endanger her marriage, i.e. become unmarried once again.⁵⁴ Altaian women perceive the wearing of traditional hair ornaments in general as a return to the original Altaian traditions, i.e. to the traditions of their ancestors, which were suppressed in the past by state ideology and, above all, as a visual expression of their ethnicity.⁵⁵ Their original protective function is mostly perceived only in the case of bridal braids at a traditional Altaian wedding.⁵⁶

The hairstyle of boys and men consisted in the past of a shaved head and a single braid (*ked'ege*, *kejere*),⁵⁷ plaited from the hair left on the crown of the head, which was never cut. The braid was usually decorated with a button, silk, or cotton tassels.⁵⁸ V. I. Verbitsky states on this topic: 'I saw a Teles *zaisan*⁵⁹ with the end of his braid adorned with a large glass carafe stopper, which shimmered like a star and reflected the sun's rays with its edges.'⁶⁰

53 Displaying the *tamga* is popular not only on the children's amulet *shaltrak*, but also on adult clothing, such as custom-made vests, as well as on mass-produced T-shirts, or on small items such as keychains, etc.

54 Informant: S. K. (woman, twenty-eight years old), Ust-Kansky District.

55 In this context, it is worth mentioning that the Altaian people in the Altai Republic form a minority (Altaians – 33.9%, Russians – 56.6%). See Respublika Altai – available at: <https://www.altai-republic.ru/about-the-region/pasport/> (accessed 20 December 2020).

56 Field research data 2019 and 2020. All our informants agreed on this independently.

57 The term *ked'ege* (*kejere*) was also used when referring to little braids of girls. Braids of married women were called *tulun* (*тулун*), which reflected the social status of women in society, indicating a direct relationship to the institute of widowhood, which played a major role in the Turkic-speaking nations even in the 19th and early 20th century. (D'iakonova 2001, p. 106).

58 Verbitsky 1893, p. 10, Radlov 1989, p. 133.

59 *Zaisan* – the highest representative of the Altaian aristocracy. *Zaisan* was paid taxes, had jurisdiction, and commanded the troops.

60 Verbitsky 1893, p. 10.



Fig. 10. Man with a braid, present, Gorno-Altaiisk. (Photo: Tereza Hejzlarová).

This hairstyle was commonly worn by men in the 1920s, but as early as the 1940s a short haircut began to be popular.⁶¹

At present, boys and men mostly wear a classic short haircut. Longer hair on men is only seen rarely; in this case, they are mostly artists, musicians, or shamans. The traditional men's hairstyle in the form of a shaved head and a single long braid on the crown of the head [Fig. 10] can currently be seen especially amongst the worshippers of the so-called White Faith (Ak t'an, Ak jaŋ).⁶² The braid in this case is interpreted as a symbol of connection with the deity. Research into this phenomenon has shown

61 D'iakonova 2001, p. 106, Potapov 1948, p. 467.

62 The White Faith, or Burkhanism (in Russian ethnography), is a religious movement that originated in the Altai region in the early 20th century. It is usually understood as a syncretic phenomenon combining elements of Altaian folk faith, shamanism, Lamaism, and Christianity.

that at present, men's decision to wear such a hairstyle is usually due to a certain spiritual turning point in their lives. Unlike in the past, the braid is now maintained at a certain suitable length, i.e. it is trimmed from time to time, preferably during a new moon. The owner then keeps the cut hair amongst his personal belongings.⁶³ Although this hairstyle can be seen as gradually coming back, it is not yet widely popular with Altaian boys and men. Men wearing the classic short haircut accept this hairstyle contradictorily, even disapprovingly, and it is usually only attributed to worshippers of the White Faith movement.⁶⁴

Conclusion

Hair has played, and still plays, an important cultural role among the Altaian people. Some hair-related customs have survived from the past to the present, while others have disappeared and re-emerged after the collapse of the Soviet Union, when the revitalization of Altaian culture began. Those which have maintained a certain continuity include the ceremony of the first haircut, the plaiting of the bride's braids and, to some extent, care of the cut hair. Those that almost disappeared during the period of the Soviet Union and which are now popular again include wearing hairstyles with traditional hair ornaments corresponding to social status, although this is related to various holidays and celebrations. We are of the view that women are returning to older traditions more 'willingly' than men who in our interviews sometimes criticized the traditional male braid-style hairstyle and argued that it is worn only by worshippers of the White Faith. Further 'gender issue' research would therefore be needed to determine whether men were more affected in this respect by the ideology of the USSR than women.

The results of our research into current haircare among the Southern Altaians can certainly not be generalized to all areas or groups of the Altaian people. Regarding traditions preserved in the regions inhabited by the Southern Altaians, one can find those that the Altaians themselves consider 'more conservative' (e.g. Ongudaysky District) or those that are considered 'more modern' (e.g. Ust-Kansky District). There is also an awareness among the native population of a stronger preservation of traditions among the Telengits compared to the Altai Kizhi. There is also the approach of individuals, however, which plays a significant role in haircare. A perfectly 'modern' approach to haircare can also be found for this reason in 'more conservative' areas and vice versa.

Our findings indicate that the role of hair as a ritual symbol has not undergone significant changes in Altaian society and is, to some extent, maintained in rites of passage, such as the first hair cutting, after which children become fully accepted members of society, or the ceremonial plaiting of two braids for the bride, symbolizing a change in her status when a single girl becomes a married woman.

Traditional hairstyles and hair ornaments, in contrast, gradually disappeared during the Soviet era. Their gradual return began after the collapse of the Soviet Union. At present, traditional hair ornaments meet with considerable popularity. The results of our research indicate that this revival of traditional hair ornaments, which are currently worn mainly at social events, especially at local or national festivities, can be understood primarily as a visual demonstration or manifestation of Altaian ethnic identity.

63 Field research data 2020, informant: A. T. (man, forty-two years old), Gorno-Altaiisk.

64 Field research data 2020, informant: M. T. (man, forty-five years old), Ongudaysky District.

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