

Care of the head in Japan. Alan Macfarlane

The Japanese paid particular attention to the head and hair. From birth, the head was kept completely bare. Infants and young children had their heads completely shaven. Hearn wrote that 'it is the custom to shave the heads of very small boys and girls.'¹ Morse notes that 'Shaving the top of the head since childhood has doubtless contributed to the difficulty of making the hair lie properly.'² He sees such shaving as a form of decorative art. 'The decorative impulses of the Japanese run to everything, and even a baby's head is not exempt from this impulse, as one notices the adroit way it is shaved...'³ This art form is described by Chamberlain. 'The Japanese custom is to shave an infant's head on the seventh day after birth, only a tiny tuft on the nape of the neck being left. During the next five or six years, the mother may give rein to her fancy in the matter of shaving her little one's head. Hence the various styles which we see around us.'⁴ Gradually the ratio between shaven and unshaven changed. 'Newly-born infants are shaven; but as they grow up, a little circle at the crown is left untouched. At first the circle is small, but it grows larger with years; and at six or seven, boys let all their hair grow and crop them when too long, just like their elders.'⁵ The motives include fashion, art, decorative expression. The effects on health may have been considerable. On the negative side, as we have seen, it may have led to severe skin infections, and this would have been damaging. On the positive side, the dangers caused by infected lice and nits, which often cause children considerable illness, would have largely been avoided.

As children reached three or four the hair styles of the genders were differentiated. Of a girl, Bacon wrote 'at the age of three, the hair on her small head, which until then has been shaved in fancy patterns is allowed to begin its growth toward the coiffure of womanhood.'⁶ Men continued to be half-shaven, but the area with hair was increased. The complex system of 'queues' or tufts of hair which were an important social and cultural marker began to develop. The men's hair styles were described by Morse. 'I came across a Japanese book in which were some remarkable studies of queues; also a series of sketches illustrating the various modes of dressing the hair for boys and men - old styles of a hundred

¹ Hearn, *Glimpses*, o, 338

² Morse, i, p.398

³ Morse, *Day i*, p.22

⁴ Chamberlain, *Things*, p.93

⁵ Inouye, *Home*, p.110

⁶Bacon, *Japanese Girls*, 19

years ago and the present styles.' The old styles, however, were disappearing rapidly because of western influence. 'Consider the bother of having the top of one's head shaved every two or three days and the queue waxed and firmly arranged on the bald spot. To keep it in place night and day must have been a burden. The fishermen, the farmers, and classes of that kind still adhere to the queue...⁷ Yet this constant attention to keeping most of the head bald, and carefully grooming and waxing the other part, may well have had a considerable effect in keeping down the number of head lice.⁸

Furthermore, not only was the head largely bald, but the Japanese appear not to have worn hats, except on special occasions. Thunberg had early noted that 'These people never cover their heads either with **hats** or **caps** to defend them against the cold or the scorching heat of the sun, except on journies, when they wear a conical hat, made of a species of grass, and tied with a string.⁹ Likewise Oliphant noted that 'The Japanese seldom wear anything on their heads, except when riding.¹⁰ As Inouye wrote, 'In the old times a majority of the people went bareheaded; and even now hats are often worn for appearance rather than from necessity. Except in very cold weather, there is little difference in the temperature within doors and without, and one does not feel it necessary to wear a hat in the open air.'¹¹ This struck Morse as strange, given the extreme heat, at times, in Japan. 'The absence of sunstroke is another interesting fact, for the people go bareheaded under the hottest sun, and the men have the tops of their heads shaved.'¹² This fresh air and sun on a largely bald head may also have been healthful.

If men's hair styles were elaborate and orderly that of women were even more so. There were numerous different styles, appropriate to age and marital status; pre-pubertal, young women, courtship, marriage, young married, old married, widowed and so on; social rank, region and other criteria also varied.¹³ Each major type was split into many sub-types. There are twenty to thirty ways of doing up each one of these types and though very likely we should observe no difference the Japanese detect it at

⁷ Morse, i, p.397-98

⁸ see pictures of styles in Morse, i, p.397

⁹Thunberg, Travels, iii, 276

¹⁰Elgin, Mission, 157

¹¹ Inouye, Home, p.129

¹² Morse, i, p.24

¹³see Kodansha, Japanese Hair Styles

once.¹⁴ The head was a sort of name card for a woman; other women and men could know a great deal about her immediately from 'reading' her hair style.

An enormous amount of effort was put into perfecting and maintaining the elaborate styles. 'The method of dressing the hair from infancy to old age is a source of interest and wonderment to a foreigner. How a child can manage to preserve her elaborate coiffure for an hour, not to say three days, is past comprehension.'¹⁵ Some of the styles required extra, false, hair to add to the composition. It was almost as if one were making a garden or arranging a bowl of flowers on the head. 'Both the **shimada** and the **marumage** are heavy as they require false hair. The hair needs also to be well oiled. The hair is done once in three or four days, but is seldom washed, not more than once a month. The head is consequently heated and a headache is often the result.'¹⁶

The rest of the head must be kept absolutely free of hair. 'Not a particle of hair is ever allowed to appear upon their faces.'¹⁷ 'The Japanese woman does not allow any hair or even down to grow on her face, and from time to time shaves the whole face like the other sex. We are not a hairy race, and our women have on the whole very smooth faces.'¹⁸ Married women often even plucked out their eye-brows. Special tweezers were used to pluck out hair from the nostrils, chin and elsewhere.¹⁹ (xxx). The arrangement of the hair was so elaborate that special sleeping rests had to be used by women, as by men, and hats were again out of the question. 'Women wear nothing on their heads except in mid-winter for fear of deranging their elaborate coiffure.'²⁰

In order to reach perfection in this delicate art of hair arranging, women needed the finest of tools. Japanese women's combs are famous and highly prized. From the health point of view they are notable for the length and fine intervals between their teeth. With their gentle curve, they were perfectly formed

¹⁴ Morse, Day ii, p.108

¹⁵ Morse, Day ii, p.108

¹⁶ Inouye, Home, p.113

¹⁷Elgin, Mission, 157/78

¹⁸ Inouye, Home, p.119

¹⁹Rakago, 91

²⁰ Inouye, Home, p.130

to comb out small insects.²¹ The combs used for combing the side-hair are wider at one end than at the other, while those for gathering in stray locks are only about an inch wide, close-toothed, and with a long, pointed handle, and for removing scurf fine-toothed double combs are used.²² Thunberg had described how 'The wood of the **Myrica Nagi**, was called **Nagi**. This wood is very fine and white, and is used for combs and other similar articles.²³ Many women, at least in the middling groups upwards, spent much effort in combing and oiling their hair. This may have been, in terms of head hygiene, almost as good a solution as the men's shaven and waxed treatment of the head. Thus the one area which was not daily immersed in hot water was as carefully tended as the rest of the body.

Given everything else we know about Japan, it seems likely that the care of teeth was of considerable interest and may have been unusually good. Firstly, as we have seen, the drinking of tea may have had a considerable effect on the micro-organisms in the mouth. Secondly, it would appear that the tooth brush and cleaning of teeth may have been widespread. Thunberg at the end of the eighteenth century wrote: 'A shrub grew here to which I gave the name of **indera**; its wood is white and soft, and the Japanese make tooth-brushes of it, with which they brush and clean their teeth, without injuring either the gums or teeth in any shape whatever. These are sold as common as matches in Europe.'²⁴ Morse noted that many people carefully washed their teeth. In a village where he saw the poor washing their faces in the early morning, he saw them 'cleaning their teeth also.'²⁵ He describes the Japanese tooth-brush; 'a few Japanese tooth-brushes made of wood; a slender strip of wood, one end sharp and the other split up into the finest brush. These are thrown away after once using.'²⁶ Inouye writes that 'Though the common bristle tooth-brush is now largely used, the old form made of a little bit of willow-wood, pointed at one end and frayed into a tuft at the other, is still found handy. As it is very cheap, it is thrown away after a few mornings, and is especially when we have a visitor who stays only for a day or two.'²⁷

²¹cf Arts of Asiaxxx; the type of fine comb needed for nits is described in Busvine, *Insects* (xerox), 268

²²Inouye, *Home*, 115

²³Thunberg, *Travels*, iii, 216

²⁴Thunberg, *Travels*, iii, 161

²⁵Morse, i, 246

²⁶Morse, i, 246

²⁷Inouye, *Home*, 139

We are reminded that 'Numerous studies have firmly established the primary etiologic agent in periodontal disease as 'plaque'. Plaque is a colourless, soft, sticky film, of bacteria that constantly forms on the teeth.²⁸ If a substance could be found that would kill these bacteria, a primitive form of toothpaste, it might well prevent periodontal disease. The custom of blackening teeth may have had this effect. Chamberlain wrote, 'This peculiar custom is at least as old as A.D. 920; but the reason for it is unknown.'²⁹ It is a custom found among other mongoloid peoples, for instance, the Nagas of Assam, who say that since wild animals, especially dogs, have white teeth, to blacken the teeth is a sign of culture. (refxxx). It may once have been a mark of status. Inouye wrote that 'In ancient times men of rank and position blackened their teeth; it was a sign of good birth, and the expression "white teeth" was synonymous with plebeianism.'³⁰ Later, according to Chamberlain, 'Every married woman in the land had her teeth blackened.'³¹ The blackening was also a mark of marital status. 'Her teeth are blackened, often during the engagement period, but certainly at the wedding.'³² It seems to have been done to men as well as women, for Chamberlain wrote that 'It was finally prohibited in the case of men in the year 1870.'^(REF XXX)

Detailed accounts of how the blackening liquid was made and applied gives some clues as to whether the procedure added protection to the teeth. Thunberg's early account of what happened shows how powerful the mixture was. 'The black which is used for this purpose is called **Obaguso** or **Canni**, and is prepared from urine, filings of iron and sakki; it is foetid and corrosive. It eats so deeply into the teeth, that it takes several days and much trouble to scrape and wash it away. It is so corrosive, that the gums and lips must be well covered while it is laid on, or it will turn them quite blue.'³³ Morse described how 'The other day I had the opportunity of sketching a woman - the wife of the man who looks after my little house - in the act of **blackening her teeth**. She told me that she had to do it every three or four days. A special copper vessel is used in which to discharge the rinsings of her mouth; a metal shelf rests across it, upon which are two brass vessels, one a box in which are nut galls pulverized and resembling

²⁸Kiple (ed), *Diseases*, 924

²⁹Chamberlain, *Things*, 63

³⁰Inouye, *Home*, 120

³¹Chamberlain, *Things*, 63

³²Pompe, 50

³³Thunberg, *Travels*, iii, 78

ashes; in the other a fluid containing iron in solution. This solution she makes herself by soaking a piece of iron in vinegar, using an old jar for the purpose. The brush used is a small piece of wood frayed at one end, the ordinary Japanese toothbrush. This she dips into the iron water, then into the nut gall, and rubs her teeth as if she were cleaning them, rinsing her mouth now and then from a bowl of water at her side, and at times taking up a mirror to see if her teeth are sufficiently blackened. It is said that the operation is good for the teeth.³⁴

A slightly different recipe is quoted by Chamberlain, again including the main constituents of iron and 'gall-nuts'. The 'wine' he refers to is **sake**, and gall-nuts', or 'nut-gall' is 'an excrescence produced on trees and especially the oak...Oak-galls are largely used in the manufacture of ink and tannin, as well as in dyeing and in medicine.'³⁵ Mr. A.B. Mitford, in his amusing **Tales of Old Japan** gives the following recipe for tooth-blackening, as having been supplied to him by a fashionable Yedo druggist - 'Take three pints of water, and, having warmed it, add half a tea-cupfull of wine. Put into this mixture a quantity of red-hot iron; allow it to stand for five or six days, when there will be a scum on the top of the mixture, which should then be poured into a small teacup and placed near a fire. When it is warm, powdered gall-nuts and iron filings should be added to it, and the whole should be warmed again. The liquid is then painted on to the teeth by means of a soft feather brush, with more powdered
gall-nuts and iron, and,
after several applications, the desired colour will be obtained.'³⁶

Morse had reported the belief that 'the operation is good for the teeth'. This could have been the case as a result of the bacteriostatic, or antibiotic constituents of the mixture. 'Oak galls' are well known as a disinfectant, having been used for instance, as a cure for dysentery.³⁷ Urine is known to contain some powerful disinfectants. The iron filings I am not so sure about. Although, as Thunberg pointed out, the teeth were corroded, at least they were likely to be free of plaque!

³⁴Morse, ii, 339-40

³⁵OED s.v. 'Gall'

³⁶Chamberlain, Things, 63-4

³⁷cf Chambers, Encyclopedia, s.v. 'diarrhoea'