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The Fava Bean in English Folklore

WITHIN THE PAST TWO DECADES some ethnologists and physical anthropologists interested in problems pertaining to the European area have evinced an intermittent concern for the fava bean *(Vicia faba)* and its rather peculiar role among some European cultural and human biological phenomena. As long ago as 1949, A. C. Andrews in "The Bean and Indo-European Totemism" pointed out the plethora of bean stories and superstitions and attempted to explain these as being an adjunct of an original Indo-European totemism. Andrews drew almost exclusively on Classical sources of the Greeks, Romans, and other closely related Mediterranean peoples.

W. C. Boyd (1949), in a brief note inspired by Andrews' analysis, points out that among certain Mediterranean European populations with a hereditary partial immunity to malaria, there is also partially associated a severe hereditary allergy to fava beans. The victims of this disease, *favism*, suffer illness, hallucinations, dreams, and even death when they have ingested these beans or their pollen. What is more, this partial immunity to malaria sometimes correlates with a possibly sex-linked anemia (thalassaemia), which is similar to the better known African sickle cell anemia. This sex-linked inheritance follows the same pattern as that for color blindness, resulting in these rather peculiar diseases being frequently associated together in those European and North African areas where malaria and the appropriate genetic immunity and its consequences exist. Boyd suggests that these curious phenomena, rather than totemism, accounted for the disproportionate emphasis of Classical superstition, folklore, and belief about fava beans, since the central and eastern Mediterranean is where these conditions exist most endemically.

The ethno-historical and biological lines of evidence have been considered by Eugene Giles (1962) who suggests that since the sex-linked inherited susceptiblity and correlated diseases passes from mother to son in matrilineal, sex-crossing fashion, the early patrilineal Indo-Europeans would not have noticed this hereditary relationship, but would have only perceived an apparently haphazard manifestation of these weird and sometimes dangerous, sometimes partially beneficial, phenomena. Giles further points out that the most favored original homeland of the Indo-Europeans is north of the Black Sea, which is not only where malaria is endemic, like the eastern and central Mediterranean, but the northernmost of such areas in Europe.

THE FAVA BEAN (VICIA FABA)

THE FAVA BEAN THRIVES in a cool, moist climate and grows well even in relatively poor soil. The plant itself is very stiff and erect, reaching heights up to four feet and producing long pods containing black, dark brown, or white seeds. Although not known very early in the Near East it has been found as early as Dimini times in northern Greece and apparently became rather widespread in Europe during the second millenium B.C. and was especially common during the Iron Age (Clark 1952: 114; Helbaek 1963: 176-177). Certainly during the cooler and wetter Sub-Atlantic climatic phase, more or less contemporaneous with the Classical period, whence comes

most of Andrews' data, the value of a bean which thrived under cooler conditions would have been appreciated. Interestingly, these same climatic conditions would have produced more swamps and marshes, good breeding places for malaria carrying mosquitos.

FAVISM, THALASSAEMIA AND THE ENZYME DEFICIENCY

THALASSAEMIA IS AN ANEMIA, genetically inherited, which operates to reduce malaria. In areas where thalassaemia occurs, it has a high correlation with an enzyme deficiency and this deficiency causes favism. However, it is medically possible to have thalassaemia without the enzyme deficiency. Indeed, if a person has both thalassaemia and the enzyme deficiency there is less of a tendency towards favism for thalassaemia raises the enzyme level. Further, if a person possesses both thalassaemia and the deficiency, he is also more susceptible to malaria (Siniscalco, Bernini, and Motulsky 1961: 1179-1180).

If a person possesses this enzyme deficiency, he or she is primaquine sensitive. That is, if quantities of this or a chemically similar drug are ingested an acute haemolytic anemia results. The fava bean apparently possesses these drugs and is capable of producing a severe attack of anemia and even death.

A case history indicates the trend of the anemic condition:

"The onset of favism was marked by malaise, nausea, and vomiting associated with headache, vertigo, and even pain in the lumbar region. In one patient the symptoms appeared within minutes of inhaling the pollen. After ingestion of the beans, symptoms were delayed up to 24 hours. Later from 24 to 48 hours, the specific symptoms due to meamolysis appeared: jaundice and hemogolbinuria. Since the anemia was accompanied by jaundice the skin has been described as a pale green color and this was regarded as a diagnostic feature of favism". (Davies 1961: 478-479).

The abnormality is seasonal, the highest incident rate occuring between April and May when the pollen is in the air and beans are fresh.

Statistically, the island of Sardinia has the highest incidence of favism with an average of five cases per thousand. The second highest incidence of favism occurs in Iraq, but there are very high occurences of favism in Italy and Sicily as well as Sardinia. Other high rates occur in the Mediterranean basin in general — in Greece, the Levant, Algeria and the Balearics (Siniscalco, Bernini and Motulsky 1961: 91).

FAVA BEAN FOLKLORE

THE EARLIEST AND MOST ABUNDANT mention of bean superstition comes from the Greek city states. Andrews (1949) provides a number of examples illustrating that Plato, the Orphic communities, as well as other individuals and organizations possessed strong beliefs regarding the power of beans. Perhaps the most famous and fre-

quently cited case of apparent favism is the extreme aversion to beans attributed to Pythagoras. While being pursued by armed guards, he forfeited his life rather than escape through a bean field.

Other references to the power of beans occurs in Roman literature. As with the Greeks, a Roman deity, Corna, was associated with beans but the number of Roman bean tales are fewer and the awareness of unusual effects from bean ingestion less evident.

Since Andrews and his commentators have relied almost exclusively upon Mediterranean data, it would be interesting to see if other Indo-European groups emphasized fava bean superstition and mythology in their folklore. Actually, it is difficult to separate "traditional" bean stories from those that may possibly be associated with fava beans and/or favism. In this regard, such proverbs and non-"favistic" folktales about beans occur all over the world. For example, the American Indian had a number of stories relating to beans, but these were quite different species and not fava beans at all. For many people beans have been a staple crop, and it is natural that stories would grow up around the unusual protein-rich plant which in no way should be connected with favism.

The selection of tales becomes further hindered when one considers that several species and genera of beans were grown by Old World horticulturists. In many instances a magical bean may be mentioned, but one cannot implicitly assume that the fava bean is the referent. Since several species may have stories revolving around them and even the fava bean may have stories pertaining to it which do not have this magical or supernatural aspect, the analysis of the folklore runs into serious difficulties.

However that may be, it seems fairly clear that in English folklore, at least, there are unmistakable references to the magical effects of fava beans — or at times their deleterious ones. Although there are many other bean stories, such as the Coal, Bean and the Straw, and other bean superstitions where it is impossible to say if fava beans are intended, some are so clear as to leave no doubt. Perhaps the most transparent is Ralph of Coggershall's story of the Green Children. These are children who eat beans, turn green (apparently as with haemolytic anemia), die, and eat the beans as the food of the dead (Briggs 1957: 280).

Another which almost certainly refers to fava beans is one of the most persistent favorites of the English speaking world —Jack and the Beanstalk. There are minor variations in England as to whether the boy or the mother first obtained them (Chase 1943: 31-39), but there can be no doubt that fava beans are involved as the beans are said to be 1) very large and 2) the stalk is tall and strong.

There are also several physical affects supposedly caused by consuming beans:

1. There is a popular idea in England that during the flowering of the bean more cases of lunacy occur than at any other season (Dyer 1894: 292). This is probably related to the inhalation of the pollen of *Vicia faba* during the spring months.

2. Bean blossoms are not usually found in houses. They have a bad reputation among miners, especially in the collery districts of the North and Midlands. It is sometimes said that accidents in the pit occur more frequently when they are in bloom than at any other time (Chester 1960: 205).

3. In England there is a saying — "Sleep in a bean field all night if you want to have awful dreams or go crazy" (Dyer 1894: 107).

4. Eating beans harms one's senses of smell and vision.

5. After eating beans one's blood is corrupted (Skinner 1911: 61).

In English folklore we have an emphasis on bean stories that undoubtedly point to the fava bean and its effects. Indeed, these references are contained in some of the most persistent of English folktales. This is surprising in view of the virtual absence of malaria in England. Correlated with it is a series of reported incidents of favism in England, many of which, however, are supposedly to be explained by traceable Mediterranean ancestors.

This high incidence of fava bean stories and superstitions cannot be attributed to an island situation with an inbreeding population, for Scots and Welsh do not have many such stories, nor can it supposedly be correlated with a high frequency of malaria under present day conditions. Do the English stories referring to a genetic condition of extreme infrequency suggest that at an earlier epoch malaria and perhaps the genes responsible for thalassemia and favism were rather more common? Or do they indicate merely the survival of folktales and beliefs from the Roman occupation? But strangely, the Celtic speakers of Great Britain have fewer such beliefs than those of a more Germanic post-Roman origin. It would be interesting if other bodies of non-Mediterranean continental European folklore were examined in detail for possible evidence of tales and beliefs relating to the favistic effects of *Vicia faba*. Would such tales relate only to the area of occupation of the Roman Empire, or would they relate to common traditions of Indo-European speakers, hinting that the original homeland really was in a malaria area? Or would they only indicate the distribution patterns of formerly malaria infested areas in Europe? In any case, the problem of fava bean folklore provides a considerable basis for much future research illuminating ethnic and genetic conditons in Europe.

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STEWART F. SANDERSON

Sheep-washing in the North of England

THE PRACTICE OF WASHING SHEEP in rivers or ponds in order to remove the winter's accumulation of twigs, mud and grit before shearing is one of many which have virtually disappeared from the British farming scene in the twentieth century. In the mid-1930's Professor Sigurd Erixon, in the course of what he affectionately used to refer to as "my great tour of England", witnessed one of the last of the traditional North-country "tubbings", as they were called — occasions of co-operative seasonal work and social festivity which were at one time common throughout the country from the Sussex Downs to the hill-farms of Scotland. Unfortunately, prodigious though his energy and scholarly output were, Erixon found no time to publish on this topic himself. But he always found time to encourage the younger scholars whom he befriended; and these notes for his memorial volume are accordingly offered by one of them with gratitude and affection, though only as a marginal comment on the more central themes of European ethnological research to which he devoted the major part of his attention.

In 1965 a sheep-washing was organised by some sheep-farmers in the village of Thornton Rust, near Aysgarth in Wensleydale (Yorkshire North Riding), in order that a photographic record (both ciné and stills) and sound recordings could be made for the Institute of Dialect and Folk Life Studies in the University of Leeds. The principal farmers concerned had taken part as young men in the last sheep-washing at Thornton Rust in 1935; and although the authenticity of the record is open to the criticism that attaches to all "revivals" of traditional customs, they themselves are satisfied that all was done in the proper way. The spontaneous development of the occasion into one of general social festivity in the village — a feature mentioned by earlier writers — and the observance of another traditional practice to be mentioned hereafter '*scauping*' seem to corroborate this.

The tubbing was carried out on the southern edge of the village, where a road leading up to the fell pastures crosses a small stream, the Outgang Beck, by a ford only three or four inches deep in a normal summer. Just below the ford on a steep bank stands a stone sheep pen, entered from the roadside and with an exit overlooking the beck and some three feet in height above water level. The course of the beck is restricted by two upright stone slabs, one jutting out from the lower end of the pen and the other from the opposite bank. A barn door was placed across the gap between them and tamped with sacks and earth divots in order to dam the outfall of the beck. As the water level rose, a pool about three feet deep and fifteen to twenty across was formed below the pen.

Two men stationed themselves in the pen to pass the sheep one by one to a third man at the exit. He in turn lowered each sheep into the pool where the sheep-washer had taken up his position about six feet away. The sheep-washer thoroughly immersed each sheep, worked both hands vigorously through its fleece, and then released it to swim towards the ford. Here two other men with dogs gathered the washed sheep on the road. For the sheep-washer the work is physically very hard, and cold even in the month of June: he undoubtedly earned the customary glass of whisky and hot food brought by his wife when he emerged after two or three hours in the water.

It was observed that the sheep-washer examined each sheep's head carefully and usually performed some kind of operation on it with his thumbs. This on enquiry