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Phantasy and Symbol: Studies in
anthropological interpretation

Pythagoras in America

Claude Lévi-Strauss

TO RENDER TO George Devereux homage to his measure, one would have to prove oneself at once ethnologist, Hellenist and psychoanalyst, to be able, like him, to do research simultaneously in these three disciplines and even to discover transitions and links between the three. This I shall not attempt to do but will content myself with presenting here some remarks on a problem which transcends my competence and which I do not pretend to solve; but it offers at least the advantage of being situated at the conjunction of the first two of these domains and, in the opinion of some, also of the third. The problem concerns the special place which people – remote from each other in time and in space – assign to the seeds of this or that plant of the family *Leguminosae*, subfamily *Papilionaceae*.

The recent studies of Marcel Detienne (1970; 1972, pp. 96–100, pp. 110–114) sum up the controversies to which, ever since antiquity, Pythagorean traditions have given rise, and of which his studies offer a brilliant interpretation. However, the ethnologist cannot but pay attention to the recurrence of the selfsame beliefs and rites not only in the ancient world and outside the school of Pythagoras, but also, in a more general way, in the Old World and, as I intend to show here, in the New. For the comparative ethnologist, the views propounded by the Pythagoreans on the subject of beans (broad beans, *faba*) thus represent a particular example of probably earlier ideas and practices, whose geographical distribution seems considerably greater

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than an enquiry limited to the ancient world would suggest. Nor is that all: for, even in the ancient world, beans were the object of diametrically opposed beliefs.

In Greece, not only the Pythagoreans but also Orphic traditions and the Eleusinian rites proscribed beans. According to various sources, foremost that of Plutarch, this prohibition was the rule for whoever wished to lead a life of purity. Outside Greece, according to Herodotus, the Egyptian priests enjoined themselves neither to eat beans nor even to look at them; in Rome, the Flamen Dialis could neither eat this vegetable nor utter its name. On the other hand, still in the ancient world, there were also occasions on which the eating of beans was peremptorily prescribed. In Attica boiled beans were eaten during the feast called Pyanopsia; the Romans sacrificed beans to various deities as well as to the dead during the Parentalia, the Feralia and the Lemuria. According to Pliny (XVIII, xxx), they put beans – as luck-bringers – amongst objects sold at public auctions.

Thus, though the Pythagoreans execrated beans, in some circumstances the opposite view prevailed. That the former attitude was, in fact, the more frequent of the two is made evident by one of Pliny's comments. After noting that the Pythagoreans forbade beans because they served as an abode for the souls of the deceased, he adds, "For that reason . . . beans are employed in memorial sacrifices to dead relatives", which explains why (he continues) "There is also a special religious sanctity attached to the bean; at all events it is the custom to bring home from the harvest a bean by way of an auspice, this being consequently called [the brought-back bean]" (*referiva, refriva*).

The short survey just made shows that the Pythagorean prohibition was but one aspect, amongst others, of the attitude of the ancients towards beans. It is not possible to account for this attitude by looking only at its negative aspect. If an interpretation is to seem plausible, it would be necessary to find a single principle which would render comprehensible why, according to the context, beans inspired horror or respect; why eating them was now forbidden, now recommended; why, in a word, in one sense or another, beans had, in the eyes of the ancients, the character of a highly charged term.

One finds in America something like an echo of these beliefs, though there they do not concern the broad bean (*faba*), which is a Eurasian plant, but the New World legume which most resembles it: the true (American) bean. The Pawnee, agricultural Indians of Mis-

souri, tell in their version of a myth which corresponds to the myth of Orpheus and Eurydice and which is very widespread in North America, that, after having torn his young wife from the world of the dead, the hero stopped at the place of a supernatural protectress, whom he had already visited on his outward journey. She gave him red beans which, she said, he should cause the people of his village to eat, "so that they would receive power to communicate with the dead spirits". According to a variant of this myth, these same red beans would serve, on the contrary, for bewitching the living (Dorsey, 1906, p. 413, p. 537).

This episode brings to mind the Lemuria, as described by Ovid (V, 436 ff.). Each paterfamilias, his mouth full of black beans, went through his house spitting them out behind him: "... the shade is thought to gather the beans, and to follow unseen behind . . . and [he] asks the shade to go out of his house." Equally reminiscent of the American rite is the Setsubun, a mobile feast celebrated in Japan just before the coming of spring: "Beans are scattered about the house on the evening of this day in order to scare away demons." (Chamberlain, 1905, p. 161.) Thus, be it in order to establish or to interrupt communications with the beyond, the seeds of the *Papilionaceae* play a role in the thought of very diverse peoples. One can even broaden the paradigm if, beside the *Papilionaceae*, one makes a place also for plants of the family *Fumariaceae*, genus *Dicentra*, which the Onondaga Indians believed to be the food of the dead and called "ghost or spirit corn" (Beauchamp, 1898, p. 199). The fruit of these wild plants, cousins of the Bleeding Heart of our gardens, *Dicentra spectabilis*, is a longish pod filled with seeds which, when ripe, splits open right down to its base, thus resembling the haricot bean.

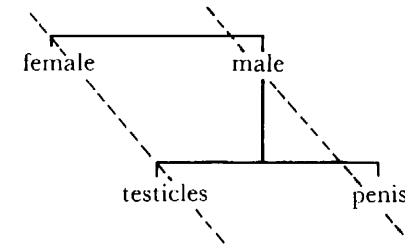
Do the mythical views of American Indians help to understand the role of intermediary between the living and the dead which these Indians assign at times to the bean and to fruits with a similar appearance? In America, the bean and the maize are often viewed as a sexed pair, but it so happens that, from one tribe to another, the sex ascribed respectively to each plant is reversed. For the Iroquois, maize is male and the bean female. They planted the bean very close to the maize when the stalk of the latter was about fifteen centimetres high, and let them grow up together – the rigid stalk of the maize plant served as a support and the beanstalk wrapped itself around it. By contrast, the squash extends its vine along the ground and seems to

flee from the nearest maize plant. That is why, according to myth, Maize married "the Maid Bean" in preference to her rival (the squash) (Beauchamp, 1898, pp. 196–197).

But the Tutelo, who belong to the Sioux linguistic family, even though they lived in contact with the Iroquois (and, be it noted, perhaps precisely for that reason), took the opposite view: they made the maize female and the bean male, because, as they put it: "The men depend upon the women, as the beans cling on the corn [stalks] when growing." (Speck, 1942, p. 120.) The Iroquois symbolism reappears in Mexico and in Guatemala, where the Indians often plant maize and bean in the same hole (Pennington, 1969, p. 59; Vogt, 1969, p. 54). Both for the Chorti of Guatemala and for the people of the Mitla region in Mexico, the maize spirit is male and the bean spirit female (Wisdom, 1940, p. 402; Parsons, 1936, pp. 324–329). It cannot be asserted, however, that those American Indians who treat the bean as female, view – as do certain people of New Guinea (Berndt, 1962, p. 41, note 8) – Mother Earth as a kind of pod producing many seeds: New World myths concerning the origin of cultivated plants describe them as born from various parts of the body of a being who is sometimes female and sometimes male. To take only one or two examples – according to the Iroquois, the Huron, the Creek and the Cherokee – maize came from the breasts, from a thigh, from the stomach or from the vagina of a woman, and the bean came from her forelimbs (according to the Iroquois from the fingers), from the other thigh, or from her armpits. By contrast, the Kaingang of Southern Brazil chose for such purposes a male being: his penis became maize, his testicles beans, his head a squash (Ploetz and Métraux, 1930, p. 212).

This last system of correspondences evokes two others: one which resembles it, and one which, seemingly, contradicts it. In the fertility rites of ancient India a grain of barley symbolizes the penis, two beans the testicles (Indradeva, 1973, p. 37); but in Japanese mythology, the beans (*Soja* and *Phaseolus*) emerged from the genitalia of the goddess Ukemochi (Aston, 1896, vol. I, p. 33). Such divergences – of which it would be easy to give other examples – could be overcome if it were to be assumed that, of the sexual organs of the male, the penis, congruent with the stiff stalk of the maize and of cereals, is relatively more "male" than are the testicles. The opposition – common in America – between maize (male) and beans (female) would then follow from an implicit relationship of equivalence in terms of which the male prin-

ciple stands to the female principle – with respect to sexuality – as the penis stands to the testicles with respect to masculinity.

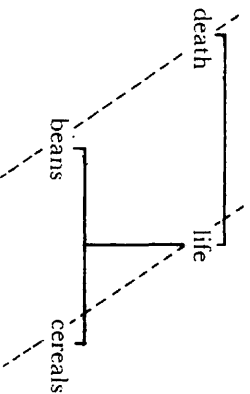


Though postulated for America, such a conception is directly verifiable in New Guinea, where various groups view the fruit of the coconut tree and that of the areca palm as a sexed pair, but each term of which is itself ambivalent, save only that a diachronic ambivalence amongst the Orokaiva (where each plant, originally endowed with one sex, subsequently acquires the opposite sex) appears as synchronic amongst the Tangu. Nonetheless, and in spite of the geographical distance between these two groups, coconuts symbolize for both of them, at one and the same time, breasts of women and testicles (Schwimmer, 1973, p. 169; Burridge, 1969, p. 190). Areca nuts, at first male and then female, according to the Orokaiva (Schwimmer, 1973, pp. 168–170), symbolize simultaneously for the Tangu both testicles and nubile young girls (Burridge, 1969, pp. 251, 306). Thus, data of this type indicate clearly that the testicles, the least ostensibly male part of the male organ, occupy in mythical representations from several regions of the world an ambiguous position between opposite categories.

These findings bring one back to Greece and to the controversies, which have been going on since antiquity, over the food prohibitions of the Pythagoreans. Diogenes Laertius (VIII, 34) records that Aristotle took into account, as one explanation among several others, the similarity between beans and testicles. Aulus Gellius went even further: he wrote, "*Kúamous hoc in loco testiculos significare dicunt*" (IV, xi), denying that the prohibition ascribed to Pythagoras and enunciated by Empedocles concerned food. He cited Aristoxenus in order to prove that beans were one of the favourite dishes of Pythagoras – a good example, be it noted in passing, of the ambivalence of beans, here centred upon the person of the founder. A modern author glosses

the Greek name of this legume: "*Kiánoi* [beans] . . . eggs, vessels of seed, of generation, and connected with *kuáin*" (Onians, 1954, p. 112), which means "to swell, to be pregnant" – a surprising convergence of views between the ancient Greeks and the Tangu. As a matter of fact, George Devereux himself tells me that the ancient Greeks saw a connection between the broad bean (*faba*) and nubile girls; the same word, *kiános*, denotes both that vegetable and the swelling of the breasts at the onset of puberty. Furthermore, in an important paper, Devereux (1968) has disclosed the unconscious equation prevailing in the minds of some patients between testicles and breasts.

If one dared to suggest that – as we hypothesized for America and were able to verify for New Guinea – the testicles are recognized in a fairly general way as a mediating term between opposite sexual categories, it would seem less strange that in the alimentary register, corresponding to the category of life, beans, symbols of the testicles, should also be – in contradistinction to cereals – relatively closer to the opposite category, that is to say, to the category of death. Between these two formalisms, in fact, a clear-cut homology may be observed:



Hence, perhaps, the ambiguous position of beans between life and death upon which Deienne (1970, p. 153) so strongly insists and which, either in the same or in different cultures, predisposes beans to be given, according to circumstances, either a positive or negative connotation, as intermediaries charged either with the task of opening communication between the two worlds or, on the other hand, of interrupting it.

It may be added that the same ambiguity is manifest also on the culinary level. Beans, which the Romans believed to be the oldest cultivated plant, may be eaten raw when young; otherwise they can be eaten only when boiled in water or previously soaked. Herodotus (II,

37) takes care to distinguish between the two ways of eating beans, by emphasizing that Egyptian priests neither chew them raw nor eat them boiled. On the other hand, the earliest way of preparing cereals might have been to parch the grains on the fire, in the manner of "popcorn" (Braidwood, 1953, pp. 515–526). In contradistinction to cereals, which a quick roasting renders edible, the *Leguminosae*, oscillating between the categories "the raw" and "the boiled" (which is also, as I have shown elsewhere, the category of the rotten) would thus be situated on the side of nature and of death.¹

Let it not be forgotten, however, that these brief reflections took their point of departure from American data, and that they cannot be incorporated into one's material without reservations. For the value of the Americanist contribution will remain uncertain as long as the problem created by the friezes of Mochica ceramics which sometimes represent half human, half bean personages (Hissink, 1951) remains unsolved. For the time being, and despite the efforts of the exegetists, it is possible that these motifs have not yielded up, as yet, all their secrets.

¹ It is true, however, that in the above-mentioned Japanese rite (p. 35) each paterfamilias scatters roasted soybeans. According to information obtained in Japan, roasting soybeans is not part of the normal cuisine. It is therefore tempting to assume that soybeans so prepared and destined for the inhabitants of the beyond (described in ancient Japanese mythology as the world of the rotten) might have, precisely because they are different from the normal diet, an added appeal.

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