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Rice

Representations and Reality

Abstract

Japanese culture is more often than not presented as being a culture primarily based on the cultivation of rice (*inasaki bunka*). Although there are voices calling for a critical examination of this presentation, they are in the minority. Moreover, critical voices are often ignored not only by the general population but also by scholars. Yet, there are clear signs that suggest it would be useful to reinvestigate the significance of rice in Japanese culture in a way that would give more weight to diversity in the culture. In order to do this, it is necessary to reconsider the role rice has played in Japanese society and to pay attention to what this role was, or is, in comparison with the production of other cereals. The present article is intended to stimulate such a reconsideration not so much by presenting a new reading of historical documents concerning the use of rice (which, however, is necessary), but by paying attention to the lives and attitudes of its producers.

Keywords: Japanese mythology—rice—annual rites—dry-field crops—agricultural politics

EVEN if most Japanese today may no longer eat rice at every meal, rice is still not only their staple food (*shushoku* 主食), it is also *the* food par excellence. Unless they have eaten a bowl of rice, Japanese may not feel they have eaten to satisfaction even after having savored all the delicacies a Japanese meal can offer. Yet not every variety of rice suits the Japanese palate. Only the *Japonica* variety, it seems, is really considered tasty.

During the acute rice shortage following the crop failure of 1993 the Government imported rice from overseas, but consumers' reactions made it clear to everybody that even in such an emergency people were not prepared to do without their favorite brand as long as they could get hold of even a limited amount. News that mice were found in a shipment created a considerable uproar; also, people were convinced that eating foreign rice was hazardous to their health because, so the rumor went, foreign farmers made heavy, indiscriminate use of insecticides, and shipments were treated with strong chemicals to prevent deterioration of the merchandise. To a non-Japanese observer, such hysterical reactions may be difficult to appreciate; but if anything they demonstrate that, for many Japanese, rice is not *any* rice, and rice is not *mere* food. Many who argued that importing rice was an attack on the very foundations of Japanese culture as a "culture of rice" (*inasaku bunka* 稲作文化) were supported by the mass media, agricultural organizations, and scholars.¹

Since rice is an important crop in the ritual life of Shinto, it is quite natural that it comes up in discussions about that religion. It can also be expected that rice cultivation would be discussed when the relation or contribution of Shinto to ecology is considered.² For many years Tomiyama Kazuko has been campaigning for a reconsideration of how much traditional rice cultivation has shaped and contributed to the Japanese landscape (see, for example, TOMIYAMA 1993). In her paper she again emphasized the beauty of paddy fields. The conclusion would be that their maintenance per se is a vital contribution to ecology. If we further accept Kohori Kunio's statement that "Shinto is essentially in accord with Japanese life, work, and culture" (KOHORI 1997, 4), we may be inclined to

assume that Shinto in fact provides a strong stimulus for rice farmers to care for the environment.

However, does rice and its cultivation really stand for all of Japanese culture? And is its production just by itself a contribution to a healthy ecology today? As Emiko Ohnuki-Tierney mentioned in her paper at the conference, arguments for other constitutive aspects of Japanese culture have appeared in recent years. These arguments do not deny the importance of rice for an understanding of Japanese culture, but they make it increasingly apparent that the singular emphasis given to rice presents only a partial, and for that reason a biased, picture of Japanese culture. In the course of my fieldwork in a rice-producing mountain village of northern Japan, a number of questions occurred to me concerning the role of rice and the significance of the concept of “culture of rice” in the life of the villagers and in Japanese culture in general. In fact, I believe that the singular insistence on the importance of rice diverts our attention not only from certain social factors but also from ecological ones.

In what follows I intend to make three points. First, I will outline some of the historical background to symbolic representations of rice, both religious and secular, and their significance in relation to political power and social difference. Second, I briefly consider the situation in a particular village in order to delineate some problems that the connection of rice with political power creates today for the environment and farmers. And third, I will indicate the possible significance of the fact that farmers today see rice mainly as a commodity.

REPRESENTATIONS: THE SYMBOLIC SIGNIFICANCE OF RICE

Emiko Ohnuki-Tierney said in her paper that, for the Japanese, on a cosmological level nature is synonymous with the “country [i.e., Japan] of succulent ears of rice plants” (*mizuho no kuni* 瑞穂の国), and furthermore that rice is the symbol of self and nation, as well as of purity and the force of life.

Undoubtedly, rice is a powerful religious and social symbol. Among the food gifts offered to deities, rice is, along with *sake* and salt, a supremely representative offering, with its whiteness itself serving as an image of the deity and divine purity. Furthermore, when people offer cooked rice at the ancestor shelf, the *butsudan* 仏壇, it is taken from the family’s prepared food as a sign that those partaking of the same food share a common bond, one that binds together both the living and the dead, this world and the otherworld.

I remember having been deeply impressed years ago by this double symbolic function of rice in a ritual, *okonai* オコナイ, performed towards the end of winter in a mountain village north of Lake Biwa. The head of one of the households functioned as the priest for that year in charge of performing the ritual, but all the other households were represented by their heads, who, together, were

as much part of the ritual as the one chosen as that year's priest. The ritual's main part began with the pounding of steaming rice in the entrance hall of the house that served as the temporary resting place (*yado* 宿) for the participants, both deity and humans. When the young men had finished their pounding, they suddenly lifted the sticky lump of rice with their pestles and rushed to deposit it in a large wooden tray, where some of the household heads formed it with utmost reverence. They made it into a large *mochi* 餅 (round cake of steamed rice), and then carried it on the tray to the *tokonoma* 床の間 (alcove) in that house's main room. Then all the household heads present gathered in front of the *tokonoma* for a formal meal. The *mochi*, adorned with flowers made of paper, had become the material representation, the *goshintai* ご神体, of the deity. People stayed up late, and the priest slept in specially prepared quarters in the house until, before daybreak, the *mochi* was carried to the village shrine in a formal procession. There, after a rite, it was divided among the villagers, and later in the day, the head who would be priest the following year was chosen.

It is difficult to describe the intense atmosphere of the moment, but it was as if one could almost touch the divine presence that drew the household heads together into a single community, the village. The focal point where the community met with the divine was the *mochi*, i.e., the pounded rice. It represented the divine, and also the community, who first prepared and later shared it. In a similar, albeit less intense, manner, *mochi* is prepared for the New Year to be offered to the deity of the new year and later to be consumed by the family.

In some areas New Year rites exhibit features that seem to point away from rice to other products. At Hanayama, a mountain village in Miyagi Prefecture of northern Japan, where I do fieldwork, people prepare two kinds of decoration besides the usual two-layered *mochi* used as an offering. On one of the last days of the year they decorate some branches of *mizuki* 水木, dogwood, by sticking a great number of small bits of soft *mochi* onto them, and offer these to the *kami* of the new year (*toshitokujin* 歳徳神) and other deities of the house. These branches are called *mayudama* 繭玉, "cocoon." Although these richly decorated branches recall the image of a flowering tree and are, in fact, also explained as representing flowering rice plants and a good harvest, their name reminds us of a quite different product, namely the cocoons of the silkworm that feeds on the leaves of the mulberry tree, a once-important dry-field plant. A few days later, for the fifteenth of January, the so-called "Little New Year," people prepare other branches, this time of the chestnut tree, by pressing large, flat, oblong cakes of soft *mochi* onto their twigs. This decoration is called *awabo* 粟穂 (ears of *awa*). Under the weight of the heavy *mochi* the twigs bend and so resemble ears of rice, heavy with fruit. In fact, people say that these twigs symbolize the ripe and heavy ears of rice. However, again, their name does not refer to rice, but to millet (*awa* 粟), a dry-field (*hatake* 畑) cereal. It therefore seems to me that these

decorations, whose names recall dry-field plants, are of interest in several ways. On the one hand they are made of rice and are said to symbolize an abundance of rice flowers and rice grains. On the other hand, their names refer to dry-field products that now have fallen out of use, but are still remembered by older villagers as having been an important part of their food and their farm work.

During the last few decades a new line of research into the relationship of forms of agriculture with characteristics of Japanese culture has increasingly drawn attention to the role of dry-field agriculture. Whether slash-and-burn (*yakihata* 焼畑) agriculture can generally be considered to have been the main form of ancient agriculture before the introduction of wet-field rice cultivation (see SASAKI 1971, 1993, 1997) is a disputed question. However, the efforts of folklorists (Tsuboi 1982, 1987), anthropologists (SASAKI 1997), and historians (KIMURA 1996; TANAKA 1993) have clearly shown that the role of dry-field agriculture in Japanese culture needs to be seriously considered. Tsuboi, for example, has patiently accumulated a great deal of material concerning New Year customs in which people do not prepare *mochi* but avoid it, using other agricultural products such as taro (*imo* 芋) instead (Tsuboi 1979; 1982, 85–146; 1987, 67). For many Japanese today, this comes as a surprise because *mochi*, especially in the form of the two-layered *kagami mochi* 鏡餅, has become *the* symbol of the New Year in Japan and seems to be present everywhere.

The celebration of a new year includes two distinctly different ceremonial complexes: Great New Year (*ōshōgatsu* 大正月) and Little New Year (*koshōgatsu* 小正月). While Great New Year is celebrated in quiet solemnity, Little New Year, centered on the fifteenth day of the month, is a period of various activities related to farm work, such as the mimicking of the planting of fields. At Hanayama, for example, a farmer would mark an area in the snow as a “field” and “plant” it using the dry stalks or straw of beans, soba, wheat, hemp, and also rice. The intention is to foreshadow a good harvest. It is worth noting that the rite itself imitates the transplanting of rice seedlings, but the material used for that purpose is mostly the dry residue of plants grown on dry fields. The characteristic food for the day is *azukigayu* 小豆粥, a gruel made of rice mixed with small red beans, i.e., a mixture of wet- and dry-field products. Finally, the day is set off from the Great New Year by a simple rite wherein the characteristic New Year decorations—the sacred straw ropes, *shimenawa* 注連縄—are taken down and deposited at the shrine of the tutelary deity of the compound (*yashikigami* 屋敷神), or, as in many areas of Tōhoku, for instance, by referring to it as “Women’s New Year” (*onna no shōgatsu* 女の正月). Judging from these elements, it seems quite clear that although rice plays a certain role here also, it shares this role with plants from dry fields. The name *onna no shōgatsu* further suggests some kind of social distinction underlying the twofold celebration of the New Year season.

Tsuboi has argued that Japanese culture shows a double structure, comprising an outward or public stratum, and a basic or private stratum, respectively. He calls the first stratum the “culture of *ohomitakara*,” the culture as it has been formed under the civilizing influence of the emperor. Independently of imperial influence there developed a second, locally distinct, culture, the “*kuniwaza* culture.” According to Tsuboi, the double celebration of the New Year reflects this structure. *Ōshōgatsu* is of a public character, is dominated by men, and places great value on wet-rice cultivation. *Koshōgatsu*, on the contrary, exhibits a local and private character, dominated by women, and focuses on slash-and-burn agriculture (Tsuboi 1987, 64–72). As mentioned earlier, it is difficult to accept slash-and-burn agriculture as the only alternative to wet-rice culture, so I would prefer to include it, as a specialized form, within dry-field agriculture. In any case, the double celebration of the New Year and the characteristic use of or reference to certain food plants seem to suggest that two kinds of food are symbolically valued for different reasons, and that this valorization is the basis not simply for the selection of certain agricultural products for the occasion, but also for a distinction of social groups. In other words, rice and/or other products of the fields are not only used as religious symbols, but their discriminating usage also seems to say something about society and its structure. They are also secular symbols of social distinctions. In order to develop this point a bit further, it may be useful to begin with a look at the terms used for the different types of cereals, and then at mythology.³

The Japanese language has a single term for the main food grains: *gokoku* 五穀, i.e., the “five grains” of rice, millet (*awa*), Japanese millet (*hie* 稗), wheat, and beans. There is still another term, however, that introduces an interesting distinction: *zakkoku* 雑穀, translated as “miscellaneous or minor grains.” This term does not always cover the same grains, but it is generally understood to exclude rice and wheat, giving these two grains a special position among the cereals produced for food in Japan. Since *zatsu* 雑 in combination with some other term usually indicates a degree of deprecation, we may assume that the term *zakkoku* distinguishes the “minor grains” from rice and wheat by reference to their lesser value. The question is, then, whether such a distinction reflects mainly a predilection for the flavor of certain grains over that of others judged to be less tasty, or whether it possibly also suggests a social distinction, in the sense that rice and wheat, i.e., the specially valued grains, are grains meant for use by a certain class of (important) people? I believe that a hint to the answer to this question is given in the origin myths of rice.

The *Kojiki* and *Nihon shoki* contain two distinctly different types of narratives about the origin of grains, in particular that of rice. One type, found in a very similar narrative in both collections, tells how the goddess of food has been murdered and how the main food grains or plants grew out of her slain body.

Those plants were *awa* (millet), *hie* (Japanese millet), rice, wheat, and large and small beans (SAKAMOTO et al. 1967, 102; ASTON 1972, 33; KURANO and TAKEDA 1958, 85; PHILIPPI 1969, 87). The narrative of the *Nihon shoki* further relates that the deity Ame no Kumahito, whom Amaterasu ordered to look for the slain goddess, brought the grains to her. Overjoyed, Amaterasu decreed that these plants should be the food of humans and that, from now on, rice should be grown in wet fields (*ta* 田) while *awa*, *hie*, wheat, and beans should be grown in dry fields (*hatake*) (SAKAMOTO et al., 1967, 102; ASTON, 1972, 33).

The *Nihon shoki* contains a second narrative that mentions only rice. This story does not so much tell how rice came into being as how it was brought to this world. At the time of the Heavenly Grandson's descent to this world, so the story goes, Amaterasu presented him with a precious mirror and with rice ears from her own sacred fields on the Heavenly Plain to take with him when he descended to the peak Takachiho in Himuka (SAKAMOTO et al., 1967, 152–53; ASTON 1972, 83). The descendants of the Heavenly Grandson, let it be noted, are the members of the imperial line.

The two types of narratives clearly exhibit a difference in the significance and purpose attributed to rice and the other plants. In the *Nihon shoki* narrative about the murder of the food goddess, rice as well as the other plants are destined by Amaterasu's decree to be the food of all human beings. In the later story, however, Amaterasu gives her Heavenly Grandson some of the rice ears she grows for herself on the Heavenly Plain. Ōbayashi Taryō has drawn attention to this difference in the meaning of rice as food for all humans in the first type of story, and as food for the imperial descendants of Amaterasu in the other. He refers to a further story from the *Nakatomi no yokoto* 中臣寿詞, a text of the Heian Period, in which the ancestor of the Nakatomi is ordered to go to heaven after the descent of the Heavenly Grandson in order to fetch the water that is to go with the heavenly descendant's food. Ōbayashi concludes that the rice mentioned in these stories is not of the same kind. The one that originated from the slain goddess's body together with other grains is the food of the common population. The other is rice given explicitly to the Heavenly Grandson on his descent to this world. This means that for a sacred ruler, who originates from heaven, only food equally originating from heaven is appropriate (ŌBAYASHI 1984, 182–84). For the imperial descendants, rice is therefore a special kind of food, one that distinguishes them from the other beings on earth and stands in close relationship with their sacred rule. For them rice is both a religious symbol of their sacred authority and a secular symbol of their mission and power to rule the country.

The foregoing analysis allows me to point out two aspects important for the understanding of Japanese culture as a "culture of rice." First, Amaterasu's rejoicing when she received the various food plants, of which rice is just one,

underlines the importance of all of these plants, the *zakkoku* included, for the people (ŌBAYASHI 1984, 182). Second, although rice is food for the people as well as for the imperial descendants of Amaterasu, an important distinction is made, in the sense that for the latter rice is as much from the heavenly realm as they themselves are, and so it becomes a symbol of their distinct imperial authority and power. Here we are reminded of the fact that every year the emperor ritually plants and harvests a field of rice within the precincts of the Imperial Palace. This “imperial farmwork” is hardly of any economic significance, but it is of great symbolic value, placing the rice the emperor plants onto a different level from the rice his people plants. As a matter of fact, during the long history of its cultivation in Japan, rice has played an important role as a symbol of ritual and political power that ultimately rests on the emperor’s authority. The emperor does not consume a kind of rice different from that of his people, but for him, and those who wield power in his name, rice acquires a meaning that differs from the meaning it has for the people. In other words, the meaning rice has for those who have it produced *by* others is different from the meaning it has for those who produce it *for* others (TSUBOI 1982, 73).

The foregoing discussion does not mean to suggest that rice has religious or social symbolic meaning only for the rulers. I have already mentioned a few instances of the symbolic and ritual use of rice by the people. When we further consider the rites performed at various stages in the cultivation of rice we come to sense something of the religious meaning this plant has for the producers. Today it may be difficult to determine to what extent, if any, rice farmers are motivated by a belief in the presence of the field deity (*ta no kami* 田の神) in the rice field, for example, or belief in a spirit of the rice plant itself. Tsuboi suggests that it was this kind of belief about the religious significance of rice that, in the course of Japanese history, did not allow a choice between rice and other plants, but allowed only a choice of where to plant rice. As a result, they could not do otherwise but stick with their important plant, no matter where they eventually chose to live. Those controlling the production of rice, however, did not share, according to Tsuboi, the religious belief of the producers. For them rice was first of all a secular symbol of power and authority (TSUBOI 1982, 73–74).

It is not possible to elaborate on Tsuboi’s argument here with the necessary historical detail.⁴ Nevertheless, a few points should be mentioned by way of example. Tsuboi’s observation means that two quite different standpoints concerning the importance of a particular crop need to be taken into account when looking into the significance of this crop for Japanese culture. As his own research and that of others has shown, however, this fact has often been overlooked. Historical and folklore research have unraveled a large amount of documents that throw light on life in the villages, i.e., on the life of the producers of rice, but the question of who produced these documents did not receive due

attention. It is now known that the authors of these records had a vested interest in certain aspects of the producers' life, namely, those related to the production of the crop that was the focus of *their* interest: rice. For the producers of rice, however, a large and most significant section of their life as farmers, their pursuit of their own livelihood, had been for the most part ignored by official chroniclers. There can be no doubt that rice was, and is, a most significant crop, but it was not meant to be the basis of the people's livelihood, since with the exception of seeds for the next year it all had to be turned over to the government as taxes (SATŌ and ŌISHI 1995, 48). Given such circumstances, it should not be difficult to imagine that other produce was of much more vital significance for the farmers themselves than rice. This was the produce of the dry fields.⁵

In his research into the significance of dry-field produce for the village population, Kimura Shigemitsu outlines how for long periods in history, starting with the Ritsuryō in the seventh century, either rice is the only crop whose results are recorded or, later after Hideyoshi's land survey, when other crops were considered, their value was calculated in terms of rice (KIMURA 1996, 3–13 et passim). This means, as Satō Tsuneo remarks, that rice was the measuring rod by which it was possible to determine one's social status as ruler or ruled and one's economic standard (SATŌ and ŌISHI 1995, 48). If we look at rice from this angle, it becomes possible to appreciate better what it means to speak of Japanese culture as a "culture of rice" without any further qualification. Such a view is most likely to express, consciously or unconsciously, the standpoint of the rulers, for whom rice constituted the source of taxes and, therefore, the means of their government (see KIMURA 1996, 13).

Collected as taxes, rice was to find its way eventually into the bowls of the nonfarming population, in particular the population of the cities. Although it can be assumed that rice did not command the same place in the daily diet of all these people, it came to represent (at least ideally) their staple food. In the eyes of those who enjoyed the benefit of regular rice consumption, the villages quite probably appeared as a place characterized by this food. If, therefore, an artist like Hiroshige often takes up rice as a motif in his work, as Ohnuki-Tierney showed in her paper, it can with good reason be asked whether this is an expression of the feelings of all Japanese or rather of a particular section of Japanese society, that of the urbanites. Even if we accept the view that the cycle of rice growth became the "marker of the seasons for all Japanese," as Ohnuki-Tierney states, it is necessary to keep in mind that this had quite a different meaning for the population, depending on whether they were the producers of rice or merely those who consumed it.

In the light of the foregoing, a few further remarks can be made about some of the religious representations concerning rice. I have mentioned the celebration of *okonai* and pointed out that the large *mochi* that becomes the material

representation of a deity (*goshintai*) is also a symbol for the unity of the village community represented by the heads of the village's households. I did not mention, though, that these household representatives constitute a system of village organization known as *miyaza* 宮座. Focused on the village sanctuary, *miyaza* is an exclusive association whose members are households that often claim to be the founding households of the village and their immediate branches. This means that other households that joined the village later have no rights (or only very restricted ones) in the conduct of the village's religious and secular affairs. If, therefore, the *mochi* used for the village's most important annual celebration represents the unity of this group, its religious meaning gives particular weight to the group's authority in conducting village affairs. In other words, rice in this context is not only of religious significance, it also becomes directly linked with the secular authority wielded by the *miyaza*'s member households. Certainly, villages were not generally organized according to this system. Partly as a consequence of the land survey begun by Hideyoshi, however, a system was instituted during the Edo Period that gave certain landholding farmers, the so-called *myōshu* 名主, special authority in the village. Together with *kumigashira* 組頭 (heads of neighborhood groups) and *hyakushōdai* 百姓代 (representatives of landed farmers), the *myōshu* were on the one hand the representatives of the government who were responsible for the collection and delivery of village taxes. On the other hand they were also the representatives of the village population in the conduct of village affairs (SATŌ and ŌISHI 1995, 99–101). As a result, these farmers had a vested interest in rice as a symbol of their authority—something that cannot be expected of the common villagers, for whom rice was the means of paying the village's taxes, but not of providing for their own daily sustenance.

In order to conclude this section I wish to add one point. From a historical point of view I agree with Tsuboi when he points out that farmers had a religious attitude towards rice as the seat of a spirit and that this attitude was ignored by the holders of authority. Such belief found expression in a number of annual rites performed by the farmers until recent times. It strikes me, however, that many of these rites have either fallen into complete disuse or are performed in an abbreviated version. From my own fieldwork experience, I could say that this has happened within a span of ten to twenty years. When I spoke about this phenomenon with villagers, some would say “Since we now have fertilizers, pesticides, and machines, we can do without the help of the *kamisama*, the [rice] deity.” I am reluctant to accept this kind of *Entmythologisierung* as applicable to the modern Japanese farmer's attitude in general, but I think it indicates a significant trend among farmers to see rice as a commodity, much the same as their other produce, and not so much anymore as something with a special, perhaps even religious, symbolic meaning. In the eyes of the holders of government authority, however, rice still functions in various ways as a symbol

of their power. Some aspects of this situation will be the topic of the following section.

REALITY: RICE AND MODERN JAPAN

Contributions to the session “culture of rice” have presented a variety of viewpoints and insights. Emiko Ohnuki-Tierney spoke of the symbolism of rice and the significance of its production cycle for the Japanese view of nature. Tomiyama Kazuko underlined the beauty of rice fields in the landscape and the contribution farmers make to the conservation of a balanced environment. Kohori Kunio particularly stressed the contribution wet-field rice cultivation could be expected to make towards a balanced environment using as a point of reference the situation during the Yayoi Period. And Kaminogō Toshiaki proposed a daring solution to two problems at once: a huge installation to produce rice in the Sahara desert would make the desert fertile again and at the same time solve the problem of hunger in the world (HARVARD UNIVERSITY CENTER FOR THE STUDY OF WORLD RELIGIONS 2000). Although I could, at least in theory, accept some of the arguments that were put forward, I had the distinct feeling that these presentations were more concerned with offering an abstract or ideal picture of Japanese rice cultivation and its cultural meaning than with attempting an analysis that would begin with the actual situation of the people in the villages and towns that produce rice today. To me, these contributions seemed to demonstrate a particular view that tends to be shared by scholars and urbanites, but that is at times severely criticized by farmers as being out of touch with reality.

Describing the general attitudes of educated urbanites of the late Meiji Period towards village life and villagers, Carol Gluck identifies two quite opposite attitudes. One sees the village as a source and keeper of an ancestral tradition that can serve as inspiration in the search for laws suiting the new state and for an education that would prepare the population to be responsible members of a new nation; the other regards the village with disdain as the seat of backwardness (GLUCK 1985, 179–86). Today we might find a combination of the two attitudes in those who once fled the village because they found it to be too constricting for them to live in, but who return to it from time to time to praise its life as one free of stress, and to savor the natural taste of rice and vegetables that city food makes them forget. These are the people most likely to insist, in times of crisis, that provisions be taken to guarantee the supply of rice as *the* food for the nation’s population. But it can reasonably be asked whether their motives are identical with the motives and feelings of those that labor to produce rice.

For someone studying Japanese culture and its characteristics the term “culture of rice” (*inasaku bunka*) becomes something like a buzz phrase met with all

the time. When I first learned through an early study by SASAKI Kōmei (1971) of the existence of villages that have no wet fields but live on slash-and-burn farming, I could hardly believe what I read. Somewhat later I had a chance to visit such a village, Tsubayama, amid the steep mountains of Shikoku. Nowhere did I find any trace of a rice field; all I saw were patches of cleared mountain forest here and there that were made into dry fields. When, on one of the narrow village paths, I met an old woman, I tried to learn at least a little bit about the village and asked her what people would eat. I still remember how surprised I was when she told me that they eat rice “as every Japanese does.” This was entirely against my expectations. But her explanation astonished me even more because she said that until sometime during the last war they did not eat or produce rice, but that this food became available on a daily basis, oddly enough, as a result of the food rationing policy of the government.

For me this unexpected piece of information meant two things. First, it was proof that there were people in Japan who could still remember a time when they did not eat rice. Second, it was further proof that being in a position to eat rice or not is not necessarily a consequence of the environment where one lives; it can simply be the result of government policy, i.e., an act of authority. After my short encounter with that woman in Tsubayama, a latent awareness of some power play involved in the ups and downs of the handling of rice stuck in my mind as I gradually familiarized myself with the situation of a few villages in the course of my fieldwork.

The reason why people in Tsubayama and elsewhere came to eat rice regularly was the Staple Food Control Act (*Shokuryō kanrihō* 食糧管理法) of 1942. At a time when Japan’s war effort was about to reach its peak, the government issued this act in order to guarantee a sufficient supply of rice for its fighting soldiers and to provide for an equal distribution of rice to noncombatant citizens to keep them healthy. “Health,” however, meant more than just the physical well-being of the population; it also meant social stability. The act, therefore, was no charitable gesture; its purpose was, as Kawai Kazushige has pointed out, to keep the power base of the government intact and undisturbed, and with it the political system itself (KAWAI 1991, 110–11). In other words, the act served to ensure that Japan became a “culture of rice,” in the sense that the government delivered this cereal to everybody and so controlled the country. In contrast with the older system of collecting rice as tax payment, the Staple Food Control Act determined that the producers of cereals (in fact not only rice, but also barley, rye, and wheat) had to sell these at an officially set price to the government, which alone was authorized to sell the grains to third parties. Ten years later, in 1952, in a revision of the act, the government retained the exclusive right only to rice (KAWAI 1991, 112–13). This system had the advantage over the older one that the producers had a certain income guaranteed from their labor. On the other

hand, it also had the disadvantage that the government achieved a strong position whence it could influence even the details of rice production. This situation remained unchanged until the great crop failure of 1993 and the consequent liberalization of rice imports.

Here I will briefly introduce the situation of Hanayama, the mountain village mentioned before, without going into too much detail. Of the village's total area of 15,850 hectares, only 481 hectares are suitable for dry or wet fields, the rest being covered by extensive forest or being otherwise unsuitable for any agricultural activity. In the 1990s, two hundred households (about forty percent of the total number) consider themselves "rice farmers" (*inasaku nōka* 稲作農家), yet most of these (about ninety percent) do not farm full-time; they keep one or two cows, and they grow some fruit or vegetables, the last mainly for their own needs. Hanayama lies at the northwestern end of a large plain that extends north of Sendai, one of Japan's most famous rice-producing areas; the village, however, does not share in the region's bounty. Even so, the villagers are eager to produce the same kind of high-class rice as other farmers in the plain, despite the fact that the village's rough and unsteady climate makes the farmers' attempts to produce a high-class rice something like a poker game.

By the end of the war the village counted about four hundred farming households, of which only few owned a sizable amount of land. Most of the landowners had holdings of a modest size. In 1947 the total farming area was almost equally divided between dry fields and paddy fields (KNECHT 1973, 35). Even today older people in their seventies recall that around their houses there were no paddy fields but plenty of dry fields to grow especially winter wheat, beans, and mulberry trees.

According to statistics that list the total area of paddy fields and their yield for each year from 1926 to 1997, the average total paddy field area was, with minor variations, about 210 hectares until 1958, when it dropped by about thirty percent, to 151 hectares. This was the consequence of a dam that set the village's best paddy land under water. By 1966, however, the total area of paddy fields reached 220 hectares, then jumped the following year to an all-time peak of 260 hectares. This continued for three years until 1970, but by 1972, within only two years, paddy fields were reduced by 50 hectares. Soon the total area increased again, exceeding 250 hectares by 1975. Around 1980, plans for the construction of a second dam made a whole hamlet move out of the village, reducing the area of rice fields eventually to a level under 200 hectares. For 1997 the village lists 165 hectares in paddy fields, almost the same amount as it had in 1926. In early 1998, the village was ordered to reduce its paddy land further by thirty percent within two years.

What is behind these ups and downs? At the time of the promulgation of the Staple Food Control Act in 1942 the paddy area was 201 hectares, slightly

reduced compared with that of previous years; but this may have been forced by a lack of manpower since many young males from the village had been drafted into the army (only 188 hectares were planted in 1941, a year of a very bad harvest). A further drop in the years right after the end of the war may have been due to a lack of manpower again; people speak of these as bad and difficult years. The postwar introduction of a land reform did not produce a sizable change. Really significant changes occurred with the construction of the first dam. Its waters were to serve the fields in the plain, but the decision to build the dam was taken by the government without prior consultation with the village. While the construction of the dam was a local problem, government instructions to expand or reduce the area of wet fields affected not merely Hanayama but rice producers in all of Japan. When I arrived in the village the first time (1971), the second period of expansion had just begun after the first period of drastic reduction measures (*gentan* 減反) taken to reduce the stock of old rice in the government warehouses. Since the final years of the Shōwa Period (the second half of the 1980s) the village has experienced a steady reduction in rice fields under governmental “administrative guidance” (*gyōsei shidō* 行政指導). Besides buying up the rice crop at a price considerably higher than what consumers would eventually pay, the government also paid the farmers subsidies, at one time for reducing the amount of rice fields, at another time for increasing it. Since the villages had many voters who supported the conservative government, it is not difficult to see a connection between these subsidies and the government’s hope that recipients of its favors would reciprocate in votes. Furthermore, it cannot be denied that the government used its complete control over rice, the cash crop that could give farmers a somewhat guaranteed income, in order to have them comply with its “guidance.”

The villagers’ appreciation of this “guidance” is ambiguous at best. Because the government provided a secure income, “guidance” was supported, especially if favorable weather conditions resulted in a good crop. The government, however, could not foresee such variables as weather conditions and their effects, with the result that its policies might leave it with either a surplus or a shortage of rice. This meant, often enough, abrupt changes in policy, which the villagers see as “cat’s eye agricultural administration” (*neko no me nōsei* 猫の目農政) because it changes suddenly with the slightest change in circumstances. More substantial, however, is the criticism that government policies do not take into consideration the situation in the villages. As one villager who is responsible for making these policies palatable to his fellow farmers has put it to me, “The scholars and government officials who propose these policies...they never walk among the rice fields, they do not come into contact with farmers’ thinking and preoccupations, so they have no idea what their policies mean for the farmers.”

Some lasting effects of official “guidance” remain engraved in the village’s

landscape. When walking into the upper section of Hanayama's inhabited valleys, one cannot but notice ugly patches in the mountainside where the earth is exposed and gradually erodes with each rain. These are scars remaining from the time when the villagers were induced to increase their paddy fields. Bulldozers were used to cut into the mountainside and large fields were prepared on rather steep slopes, but the fast pace of construction did not allow the fields to settle and their ridges to harden sufficiently. As a result, rains during summer and frost in winter often caused the constructions to crumble. Now, many of these newly created fields lie uncultivated and unattended, a chaotic world of weeds and small bushes.

In the summer of 1991 I had the opportunity to take a group of the village's farmers to Switzerland for a study tour and an exchange of ideas with Swiss farmers. One of the experiences the Japanese farmers still talk about today is how they met a farmer in an Alpine village who explained why the mountain slopes around the village looked so neat. He said, "You may send the cows to the mountain or harvest the grass yourself, but you got to do something about it. If you leave these slopes to themselves, they become just deserts, but for us it is important that they be beautiful, because that is what the tourists who visit the valley are looking for." The Japanese farmers told me they realized that they had been more interested in the produce of their lands than in the wider effects their labor would have for the environment.

There is still another significant aspect to "administrative guidance" that needs to be briefly considered. The summer of 1993 was exceptionally cool and there was a lot of rain just when the rice plants were to bloom. The result was a disastrous crop failure over wide areas, more severe in its consequences than anybody ever experienced before. Hanayama's farmers had planted 186 hectares of paddy fields and harvested a total of merely seven tons of rice. (The year before was a rather ordinary one, but then they harvested 696 tons from the same amount of fields.) Villagers who use to think of themselves as being rice farmers had to depend on government-distributed rice for their own living!

The disaster was widely blamed on that summer's exceptionally cold weather, but Watabe Tadayo sees man-made reasons for the failure, in view of the fact that some areas had managed to have a reasonably good harvest. Besides climatic reasons he lists structural, administrative, and "brand" reasons (WATABE 1996, 89-91). As administrative reasons he quotes official policies to suggest alternative crops and to lower the producers' rice price, because such policies give the farmers less motivation to pay the necessary attention to the quality of rice production. Over the years administrative measures had pushed the farmers to expand or reduce their rice production, a policy that left the farmers often dissatisfied because it did not necessarily help them to make ends meet. After all, the vicissitudes of climate could undermine the influence of administrative

measures, so that the farmers' (and also the government's) expectations were not always met.

Administrative guidance is also linked to what Watabe called "cold-weather brand damage" (*meigara reigai* 銘柄冷害) (WATABE 1996, 91). Villagers say that the rice they formerly used to produce did not taste very good and did not yield large quantities, but it was resistant to wind and cold. Modern types are developed for their refined taste in order to suit consumer palates, but these sophisticated brands are easily affected by adverse climatic conditions. Since government subsidies heavily support these brands over the more resistant ones, naturally, farmers in areas where the production of these brands becomes a risky game also try their hand at it. If they succeed, the crop brings in a good income; if they fail, they still can rely on more resistant types for their own consumption, but they have to swallow a significant drop in income. The need to give their children a suitable education and the need to buy machinery and chemicals make the farmers extremely vulnerable to fluctuations in income. The high price paid for fancy brands fans the farmer's desire to produce them in the hope of a better income, but it provides no security when production fails.

The desire to secure a better income is prompted by many reasons. When I first arrived in the village in the early 1970s, there were still many houses thatched with miscanthus. Under their thick roofs these houses, it seemed to me, radiated a sense of calm security that is difficult to describe. Today, however, those houses are all gone. People who now sit in a warm room recall with very little nostalgia the past, when their rooms were dark and cold and one got blackened by the smoke of the hearth. Houses were not rebuilt so much because of the age or weakness of the old house, but out of a desire for a more comfortable life similar to that of the city people, and with it the hope that one of their children would find the house attractive enough to remain in the village. The same reasons might prompt farmers to sell off their animals or to buy a car, or it might be the need to purchase agricultural machinery so that they can tend their fields on evenings after work or over the weekend.

It is a general fact that most villages suffer from a severe shortage of people in their prime: most inhabitants are too young or too old. While older people talk about how they used to help their parents work in the fields, children today are not seen helping out. It may be that they are busy at their own occupations, but another reason is that, as a result of mechanization, their help is not really needed. Even elderly people or those pursuing other jobs during the week can maintain rice fields as long as they have the necessary machinery and use chemicals that relieve them of the labor of weeding the fields. As one villager told me, "Anybody can produce rice; that is very simple, you just follow others. If you want to produce vegetables you need a good deal of special knowledge and you have to attend to the plants. That is not needed for rice." I do not believe that it

is that simple in reality, but I think that his statement expresses a lingering sense of lost hope or lost purpose. One goes through the motions, but one does not expect too much to follow. The old people do their best, yet they lack the physical strength and energy to do the work as thoroughly as they did while they were young. The use of the modern means available to them makes rice growing possible under conditions that would have been unthinkable in their youth. They appreciate that things have become easier, but they also know that this easiness may conceal danger. As one villager said “When you turn over the ground with a tractor, it does not go as deep as when you plow in the old way. The soil is exhausted, and fertilizer and insecticides do not substitute for a thorough plowing.” This is the structural reason for crop failure mentioned by Watabe.

As Tsuboi has noted, there was a significant difference in attitude towards rice between producers and consumers. While rice was the object of certain beliefs for the producers, it constituted the basis of rule for those in power, who disregarded the producers’ beliefs (TSUBOI 1982, 74). This brings to mind an observation of Augustin Berque about the character of modernity. He says that modernity is marked by an “objectivation of the world” (*objectivation du monde*) because the (human) subject has retired from the world, robbing it of the values it had as a cosmos when it formerly included the subject as well. In this former world people were concerned with the reasons for their actions, while modernity has made them concerned only with the manner and functionality of their actions (BERQUE 1996, 23–25; 43–45). It seems to me that the statement of a villager quoted earlier, that machines and fertilizers have made the help of the *kami* obsolete, expresses a similar idea. For farmers and, even earlier, for consumers, rice has become a commodity that is to be produced by the method promising the best results. As a consequence, even for farmers rice has become isolated as *the* crop, to the detriment of other produce.

One may truly be impressed by the sight of layers of curved ridges extending like waves, of the quiet water in paddy fields reflecting the sky, and of the gentle colors of growing or ripening rice. One may also wish with Tomiyama to conserve such beautiful scenery, yet in villages depleted of their young labor force practical considerations come before beauty when it comes to making a decent living in a money economy. Since fields with curved ridges, and especially the terraced fields that attract the admiration of urbanites, make the use of machinery difficult, if not impossible,⁶ more and more fields are reshaped into large rectangular spaces that allow for the use of machines. Furthermore, the temporary beauty of planted fields and their quiet waters often hide a disturbing side. No weeds in the fields means that farmers are now relieved from weeding, their most arduous work during the hot summer, but it also means their exposure to dangerous chemicals. The quietness, too, is often the quiet of lifelessness: there are no loaches (*dojō* 泥鰌) to be caught, and only a few grasshoppers or

fireflies to be seen or frogs to be heard.⁷ The beauty of the fields that are cultivated takes attention away from the others that lie uncultivated and dilapidated, a monument to failed administrative guidance and an ugly scar on the environment.

Admittedly, even today people in these villages are grateful for their rice, a feeling they express by, among other things, offering it to their deities. However, though rice may still be produced according to ancient and ecologically friendly methods at venerable Shinto shrines, such methods serve as an ideal, but they do not answer the needs of the farmers. They do not constitute a viable alternative to the use of powerful and dangerous chemicals, nor do they protect the farmers against the consequences of opportunistic political decision-making.

CONCLUSION

Rice and its cultivation have undoubtedly played an important role in the shaping of both Japan's physical landscape and her culture. Still, it is exactly this role that rice played, or had been made to play, which reveals that it is not only food good to eat (for certain people), but also food that can be used to control (other people). I believe it is no exaggeration to say that rice, since early in Japan's history, has been a symbol of power—religious power, yes, but even more political power—and a symbol of social distinction between those who wielded power from those who were “guided” by that power.

Recently, scholars have become aware that a view of Japan's history that concentrates exclusively on the role of rice cultivation sides unilaterally with those who have a vested interest in it, those in positions of power. They feel that such a view is mistaken because it practically excludes the larger part of society, namely, those for whom other cereals than rice were the real basis of their livelihood. Although the forms in which rice was used as a medium for the expression of power relations have changed through history, rice is still a most political kind of food.

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NOTES

1. This article was written after the International Conference on Shinto and Ecology held 21–24 March 1997 at the Center for the Study of World Religions, Harvard University. My intention was to provide a sustained argument to back up the comments I made at that symposium. It was planned to be included in a volume on Shinto and ecology and then published in the series “Religion and Ecology.” However, to the best of my knowledge, the volume never was nor ever will be published. A Japanese version of the papers and comments presented at the symposium was published in 2000 by the Jinja Honchō (see HARVARD UNIVERSITY CENTER FOR THE STUDY OF WORLD RELIGIONS 2000). This version contains my comments made at the time. Since all attempts to find out whether the scheduled volume in English will eventually be published have failed, I have decided to accept the offer of the guest editors of *Asian Folklore Studies* to publish it belatedly in this journal. The reader should, however, keep in mind that the article was written in 1998 and that it therefore reflects the situation at that time. In the years since, some aspects of the situation in the village of my fieldwork have changed. Yet the changes are not of such a radical nature that they would make the argument presented here altogether obsolete.

2. Some participants at the conference apparently felt that my comments did not do justice to the circumstances under which they had prepared their contributions. I think, however, that it is at least part of a commentator’s duty to point to aspects of a problem that for some reason were not addressed by any contribution (KAMINOGŌ 1997, 128).

3. A good and detailed argument on how cereals were used to discriminate against people is offered by MASUDA 2001.

4. For in-depth studies about the social and political significance of rice and the other cereals, the reader is referred to the recent work of MASUDA (2001), and in particular, of VON VERSCHUUR (2003). While Masuda discusses the use of these cereals in modern times, von Verschuur’s work critically analyzes historical sources from the Heian Period and beyond about their use and significance.

5. When I discussed with the octogenarian grandmother of my host family in May 2007 what people of the village used to eat before everybody was able to eat rice daily, she said that they made *kade*. This was a dish that contained some rice, though mainly broken rice, but its main ingredients were radish (*daikon* 大根), wheat, or millet. The good rice was kept in order to be sold, and some of it was hidden to be used for festive occasions.

6. The evening edition of the *Asahi Shinbun* of 14 September 1995 ran a report on the front page on a summit conference of villages with terraced fields under the title *Tanada yo areru na!* 棚田よ 荒れるな [Terraced fields, do not fall into ruin!]. According to this report, the number of terraced fields in the village where the summit was held (Yusuhara Town, Kōchi Prefecture) had declined from 501 fields in 1972 to 220 at the time of the summit.

7. When I visited Hanayama in May 2007, I was pleasantly surprised to again hear the lively voices of plenty of frogs. I was told that it is now the people’s policy to use only the amount of pesticide that is necessary and to use it discriminately. On the other hand, the number of deserted fields has grown.

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