



TEACHING A CLASSIC: JANE RICHARDSON HANKS' "REFLECTIONS ON THE ONTOLOGY OF RICE"

Introduction by
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A glance at the globe reveals continents and oceans, or the patchwork that nations make, but were we to map the ecology of people and plants, we'd see how rice breeds local worlds. As rice draws neighbors together in a rhythm of rituals and exchanges, the countryside becomes a mosaic of small communities. Jane Hanks captures one such local world.

How should we place that world? In space, it's the flood plain of the great Chao Phraya River, Thailand's heartland; in time, it's the 1950s, long after a global rice economy but well before contemporary consumerism; and in culture, the area is Siamese, although Mon neighbors, Chinese traders, and Khmer customs are close at hand. Households are dispersed along the waterways, only occasionally clustered in villages. Here and there are Buddhist temples, invitations to a great tradition.

Everywhere—even within the temples—popular tradition embraces the very cycle of birth and death the Buddha escaped. In this folk religion, people and rice have the same flighty soul-stuff, *khwan*. Losing bits of this inner life force brings weakness or death. To stay healthy, a person requires the *khwan*-calling rites of benevolent others. So too Mother Rice: keeping her soul-stuff in seed, field, and granary requires the farmer's sympathetic rites. Growing rice thus mirrors how a good person cares for others and acts honorably. As Jane's title has it, rice is a way of being, the nature of reality.

Today's reality differs. Not only is Jane's village gone, swallowed up by Bangkok, but farmers now grow whatever the market demands, not just rice. Yet the past lives on. Just as Puritan beginnings still shape the United States, rice-bred values continue to color how Thai and many Asian cultures adapt to globalization.

Can Thai rice farmers speak to American youth? My students love Jane's portrait. I hand out a copy at the end of one class to read for the next. At that session I set the scene briefly and then divide the class into small discussion groups, giving each a different question. Urging them to focus on specific customs and beliefs, I ask how is (1) the person, or (2) gender, or (3) society constructed or imagined? And what are such a lifestyle's (4) ecological or (5) moral implications? After roughly twenty minutes in small groups we reconvene. Going around the room, as each group reports its findings, we build a collective picture. I conclude by recognizing insights, finding themes in their various answers, and placing the reading in the course as a whole.

As a teacher, I want my students to think reflectively as well as cross cultures appreciatively. Thanks to Jane's gifts as a writer and ethnographer, one reading fosters both. Once students see how the Siamese wove life around rice, many then wonder at the axis of our own lives. When such thoughts collapse into caricature—contrasting their generosity and cooperation with our greed and competition—I refocus them with a critical question: where, I ask, does the Siamese/American difference lie—is it in how each society actually is, or in how each imagines itself to be? As we go back and forth, looking more closely at rice farming as well as at their lives, students get beneath the surface of two worlds. The more we examine, the more Jane's apt and eloquent portrait reveals. The fruit of fieldwork, her gift from the Siamese to us begs the return that only close and thoughtful reading can give.

Reflections on the Ontology of Rice

By Jane Richardson Hanks

In a small, rice-growing community of central Thailand,¹ when a supply of the new rice for the family's meals is first withdrawn from the bin, the mother selects an auspicious moment, then lights the candles and incense of her offering. Every step in the growth of the grain—plowing, planting, transplanting, and harvesting—has been accompanied by rituals shared or monopolized by women. Ordinarily a woman boils the milk-white grains over a wood fire in the kitchen and brings them in the big pot to the eating-space of the house for the elders, the men, and the children. The individual plates are buried under great mounds of rice. Each person dips with his fingers or a spoon into the heap before him, after mixing a portion of it with a few bits of spiced fish or vegetables from one of the little dishes in the center. The cook tends to the needs of others before she serves herself. At the end of the meal, each person may make a little gesture of thanks before leaving.²

Rice itself is considered drearily tasteless, and the hot and spicy fish and vegetables are only to add flavor to help one consume as large a quantity of rice as possible. In privation rice may have to be eaten alone, but “famine” in this abundant land consists in going without rice, even when fish and vegetables abound. What makes these people gorge themselves on this admittedly vapid food? We also ask about the woman's role. Women all over the world cook and serve others before themselves. But, when ordinarily field work and rites in agricultural societies are delegated to men, why do women in Thailand assume such an important role?

Let us consider what a person is. A human body is but the perishable harbor of a *khwan*,³ that indestructible soul-stuff which is born, eon after eon, as man, animal, insect, or other, until at last, by reaching *Nibbhan* ('Nirvana'), it is freed from the cycle of rebirth. Just as a man must be fed and cared for by a woman throughout life, so must this separable entity that is the (or his) *khwan*. *Khwan* are delicate and flighty; many are the ceremonies to restore them. At rites passage, or on return from a long, debilitating ordeal like military service, a candidate is given a large ceremony (*tham khwan*) to strengthen his *khwan*. Delicious food is offered, on which the *khwan* is known to linger and feed. The candidate also eats bits of this food for the benefit of his *khwan* as well as his body.

Between earthly existences, the tiny *khwan* lives in a tree under the care of a female spirit, *Maeae* ('Mother') *Syy*. Like a “fairy godmother” she continues her protection for a short time after the *khwan*'s birth, until it is well incorporated in its human frame. Food is meager in the tree, for the only sources are the occasional offerings by people “to the ancestors,” as at a water libation ritual (*truad nam*), at a wedding, or a funeral. Since there is more food during a human existence, the *khwan* is eager to be reborn. A woman alone can implement its reincarnation. She has no obligation to do this, for every *khwan* is an independent entity unrelated to all others, responsible for its own fate. Yet in mercy alone a human mother begins a role of lifelong care by receiving the *khwan* into her womb at conception. To raise it she subjects herself to tedious food taboos and endures the pain of childbirth. After birth, she nurses with her milk “which is her own blood, purified to a pure white color.” Thus, though the *khwan* of her child is not related to her, its body is part of her body. Some women have this female capacity to nourish to an unusually large degree. Their character (*nitsaj*) and ample milk supply enable them easily to bear and raise child after child. They are known for and as *liang dii* ('feed [another] well').

Thus the *khwan* is sustained by, and its incarnation grows from, the physical nourishment of a woman's body. What is to sustain it after a woman's milk gives out? Rice, because rice, too, is nourishment from a maternal figure. “Every grain is part of the body of Mother Rice (*Maeae Posop*) and contains a bit of her *khwan*.” When weaning is to rice, there is no break in female nurture for body and *khwan*. Actually there is a cluster of

female deities “concerned with our bodies,” including *Maeae Thorani* (‘earth’), *Maeae Nam* (‘water’), and the Mother of the Fish. Mother Rice is the most important of these to the rice farmer, yet he is indebted to all of them to produce the sustaining grain.

A cardinal tenet of Thai life is that for every gift there must be a return, and so the nurture of a mother must also be reciprocated. A human mother is accorded lifelong obedience and respect, and, in her old age, food and care. Similarly one must reciprocate the care of the Rice Mother with gifts of food and feminine luxuries, and a place in the farmer’s house during the hot, dry season. Women alone conduct these rituals because the men are said to be too easily captivated by the Mother’s beauty, and might elope with her.

The idea that to nourish is to give life has been socially translated to a general feeling that a gift of food is especially acceptable, important, and appropriate. On a multitude of occasions foods are prepared, arranged with care, and offered to others. Most of the activity on any occasion of ceremony revolves around food preparation and serving. There is tremendous satisfaction not only in giving a feast, but in serving one’s family the daily meals. A reputation for generosity with well-cooked foods is an integral part of leadership. Buddhist precepts have reinforced the importance of food giving. A major source of merit⁴ is to give the priests their daily meals as well as to feed others, especially the poor. Offered food may not be refused lest one sinfully deny to the donor the opportunity of acquiring merit.

What are the interrelations of merit and rice? If a person has a store of merit he is successful in all his undertakings. For a woman, there is no merit in merely having a child, but she knows she has merit if she has an easy time in childbirth. A fine crop of rice is viewed by the farmer as indirect evidence of his merit. Merit allows a *khwan* to enter a rich instead of a poor family and a person to be skillful, wise, and lucky in life. If he is wisely attentive to the Rice Mother, she is pleased and gives him a large crop which is a means to acquire more merit. The less wise, less courteous get a smaller crop. But frequently Mother Rice manifests her mercy by giving a good crop to persons of apparently less merit, such as the poor and the wicked. In this sense, the mercy of the Rice Mother may mitigate the inexorability of the moral law that governs an individual’s approach towards *Nibbhan*.

What, then, is the ontology of rice in Thailand? As each person partakes of rice, he demonstrates that he (or at least someone) has reciprocated his obligations in the past, and by eating it contracts new obligations to reciprocate. Rice nourishes his soul, which is eternally dependent on feminine mercy.

Notes:

1. This data comes from Bang Chan, a community in central Thailand now under study by the Thailand Research Project of Cornell University, to which I am indebted for the opportunity of field research.
2. The gesture, a *waj*, was not observed at meal-time in Bang Chan. It is reported by Praja Anuman Rachadhon in southern Thailand.
3. To be sure, the complete person is recognized to have other aspects than body and *khwan*, e.g. *winjaan*, *cetaphud*, *phii*, but these aspects need not concern us here.
4. Merit, acquired by good works and beliefs, raises an individual successively nearer to his goal of *Nibbhan*. A *khwan* also desires rebirth so as to increase its store of merit.

From: *Primitive Views of the World*, ed. by Stanley Diamond. New York: Columbia University Press, 1964.