

When I first lived in Indonesia in 1971, I was often approached by people curious to ask about life in the US. Initially I was uncomfortable when strangers asked personal questions, but before long I came to cherish the warmth of this characteristic style of offering friendship and to appreciate the way it pushed me to extend myself in turn. Despite the diversity of people I encountered, the questions they asked were so similar I could often predict them. First came questions aimed at establishing who I was and why I was there. “Are you on your own?” “Are you married?” “Where is your family?” “What is your religion?” Then I was asked about famous people from America, subjects typically broached with a single interjected name: “Nixon!” “Muhammad Ali!” Or, in later years as American popular culture became more widespread through the medium of television: “Tyson!” or “Madonna!” One line of questioning, though, always took me by surprise, because it didn’t seem to represent a very compelling subject: “What is your staple food?” “Can you eat rice?”

It baffled me that these last questions were not just a quirk, but were asked over and over by everyone I met. I didn’t really feel I had a staple food, as I was equally happy with potatoes, or bread, or pasta. And of course I could eat rice. When I was growing up in New York State, a few times a year my mother would buy rice in the supermarket, where it was sold in one-pound plastic bags, long grain or short. She would cook half the bag for our family of five and store the rest in a Mason jar she kept for this purpose, where it would remain for several weeks until we were ready to eat rice again.<sup>1</sup>

Years later I began to fully understand the significance of these questions about rice and why they were asked. By that time I had heard many stories about the Indonesian rice goddess Dewi Sri and her divine consort (and brother) Joko Sedana. I had also seen what a grandmother in Borneo had told a friend of mine while she was doing her fieldwork there: “If I lived in the West . . . I would surely die. Because Westerners can’t eat rice. There isn’t any rice there. But if I couldn’t eat rice I’d certainly die. I wouldn’t want any other foods. They wouldn’t be right for me.”<sup>2</sup> And I had a few anecdotes of my own, such as the time an intern from Kupang who had been sent by his government to work in my office in Los Angeles rushed in one day and excitedly proclaimed “I’m still alive!” I looked at him in dismay, fearing he had contracted some terminal illness. “I haven’t eaten rice for a whole week,” he said, “and I am still alive!”

When I lived with a family in East Java, I was always called to the table for the midday meal with the phrase “*Mas, makan nasi*” (Brother, eat rice). Near the end of the meal, I was invited to “*Tambah ikan*” (Have some more fish). One day I looked around the table at the array of delicious dishes: chicken, beef, tofu, tempeh, eggplant, and a number of relishes and crispy snacks, but there was not a bit of fish in sight. “Where is the fish?” I asked. Everyone giggled. Rice, they explained, was the main component of the meal. Everything else was the “fish,” merely side dishes to accompany the rice. In the late afternoon, though we stuffed ourselves with cassava chips and fried bananas, we were not “eating” because it was not rice.

Rice, it seemed, was far more than an ordinary commodity in Indonesia. It was a sacred food, given by the deities to humankind to sustain us in a way no other food can. In many Indonesian versions of the creation story of the sacred grain, the first rice plants grow from the corpse of the rice goddess after she has been slain in



## USING ART TO TEACH CULTURE

# RICE IN ASIA

By Roy W. Hamilton

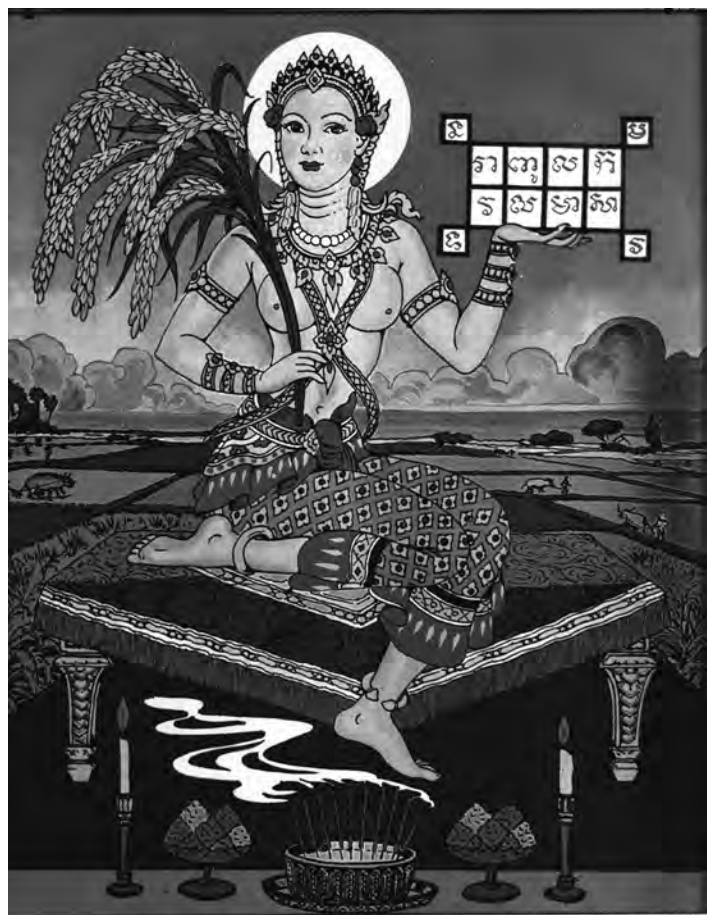


Figure 1: Mae Phosop, the Thai goddess of rice. Thailand. Circa 1980. Commercial print. H: 27 cm. FMCH X98.14.14.



**Figure 2:** Agriculture and Sericulture Illustrated (Gengzhi tu), detail. China, Qing dynasty, reign of the Qianlong Emperor (r. 1736–95). Stone tablet prints on a scroll. Collection of Alan Kennedy and Kokoro Oriental Art.

some manner (which recalls for me the Christian rite of partaking of the body of Christ). The rice plant, and the grain itself, is said to possess a soul or spirit in the same way that humans do. And as sacred food, rice is the perfect offering to the deities in a wide variety of ritual offerings.

As I began to travel more widely in Asia, I saw that similar ideas could be found throughout the vast rice-growing region that stretches from India and Sri Lanka through all of Southeast Asia and extends northward into China, Korea, and Japan. Rice deities, nearly always goddesses, were found in all of these countries. A woman in southern India showed me how she brought her freshly cooked pot of rice every day to her prayer room, where she keeps a small statue of the goddess Annapurna (whose name means “everlasting food”). There she asks the goddess to bless the rice. Only after the goddess partakes of the essence of the rice, thereby sanctifying it, is it taken out to be eaten by the family. Together, then, the family members and the deity share their meal.

In a shop in northern Thailand that sold Buddhist religious paraphernalia of all sorts, I came across a poster of Mae Phosop, the Thai goddess of rice, shown sitting in her rice field, with offerings of incense and rice cakes placed before her (fig. 1). This image is based on the pregnancy ritual that Thai farmers traditionally hold for the goddess when the rice plants begin to swell with grain. The same offerings are presented to pregnant women in the traditional Thai seventh-month pregnancy ritual. Throughout Asia’s rice-growing lands, the fertility of the rice plants is often equated with the fertility of the goddess and of women in general. In many cultures, women play a special role in rice agriculture and ritual. For example, it is frequently the most experienced senior women of the community who have the task of passing through the field at the beginning of the harvest to select the best heads of grain as seed rice for the following season’s crop.

Using these skills of seed selection, subsistence rice farmers have developed an astonishing 120,000 varieties of the rice plant *Oriza sativa*. “Dry” rice varieties grow in hillside fields, watered only by rain. “Wet” varieties grow standing in water. Wet-rice landscapes include not only terraced and irrigated fields, but also rain-fed lowland fields surrounded by bunds (or dikes), river banks or lake shores that flood seasonally, and the unusual “deep-water” rice, which bears its grain above the surface of the water on stalks up to twenty feet long. Rice varieties also differ in their culinary characteristics: long-grain, short-grain, red rice, black rice, glutinous (“sticky”) rice, and so on. Each community has its

favored varieties, which may differ from those of the next village down the road, across the river, or over the mountain path. The local cuisine has developed together with the local varieties of rice. To put it another way, you can’t make sushi with basmati!

This diversity is the heritage of generations upon generations of Asian farmers. In many cases, differences in farming systems represent diverse cultures as well. For example, in the mountain valleys of Southeast Asia, often one group of people grows wet rice in the fertile bottomlands while another grows dry rice on the surrounding slopes. Although archaeologists still hotly debate the location and time period of the first domestication of rice, people in farming communities throughout Asia have intuitively felt that their own rice was developed in their own lands by their own ancestors, both human and divine. Maintaining these ancestral varieties may be seen as a sacred obligation to their ancestors.

As I documented rice-related festivals in a number of different Asian countries,<sup>3</sup> what struck me most was how the basic cultural ideas underlying rice agriculture came to be expressed through prevailing local religious traditions. Asia is the most religiously diverse part of the world—Hinduism in India, Buddhism in Thailand, Islam in Indonesia, Roman Catholicism in the Philippines, mixed Taoism and Confucianism in China, Buddhism and Shintō in Japan, and so on. In all of these traditions, I found related ideas about the sacred nature of rice, its divine origin, and its special place in human life. Rice culture clearly predates the religious diversity that later became superimposed across the region.

In 1966 the International Rice Research Institute (IRRI) introduced IR8, the first modern high-yield variety of rice. This was the kick-off of the “green revolution,” a sustained period of agricultural development that brought a shift from subsistence to commodity production in many Asian farming communities. This remarkable expansion has allowed Asia’s most populous countries, once perpetually on the brink of famine, to become net exporters of rice. Because of the special place of rice in Asian life, the green revolution was not limited to agriculture: it brought profound changes to social, economic, and cultural aspects of community life. Modern

varieties now account for about ninety percent of the rice grown in Asia. Many rituals associated with rice agriculture are in decline or have been abandoned altogether. Even in modern urban society, however, the special sacred nature of remains close to the surface.

For several years I have directed a project that resulted in the exhibition *The Art of Rice: Spirit and Sustenance in Asia*, which opened at the Fowler Museum of Cultural History at UCLA in October 2003. The exhibition draws upon more than 200 works of art from thirteen Asian countries to explore the significance of rice for Asia's peoples. A 550-page book accompanies the exhibition (Hamilton 2003, available from University of Washington Press). Through school tours and the development of a curriculum guide for teachers (Avins and Quick 2004, available from the Fowler Museum), the Fowler Museum's Education Department has brought the exhibition alive for thousands of school-aged children. A "suitcase" filled with family activities was also developed for use in the exhibition gallery.

In the fall of 2004 the exhibition can be seen at COPIA: The American Center for Wine, Food, and the Arts, in Napa, California, and in Winter 2005 at the Honolulu Academy of Arts.<sup>4</sup> In the remainder of this article, I present a few of the objects from the exhibition and describe how the exhibition uses them to tell us about the sacred grain's place in the cultures, religions, and histories of Asia.

#### FIGURE 2

This is one scene from the *Gengzhi tu*, a series of twenty-three illustrations of the stages of rice agriculture, accompanied by similar depictions of sericulture and silk weaving.<sup>5</sup> These famous scenes were painted first by Lou Chou (1090–1162) during the Song dynasty, but his original paintings are no longer extant. During the Qing Dynasty (1644–1912), the *Gengzhi tu* was reproduced in many forms, most notably as bound volumes of woodblock prints. The Qianlong Emperor had a version of the *Gengzhi tu* inscribed on stone tablets in the garden of the summer palace outside Beijing, probably in 1753. The prints on this scroll were made from those tablets and are one of a very few remaining copies printed in this way.

Several Qing emperors composed their own poems to accompany the editions released during their reign by the imperial printing house. Why did each successive Qing emperor produce new editions of these illustrations, more than 500 years after they were first painted?

On a practical level, provincial agricultural officials used printed editions of the *Gengzhi tu* to promote imperially-sanctioned farming methods that lead to increased production of irrigated rice. More importantly, the illustrations had symbolic value. Because they emphasized the regularity of the routines of rice agriculture and sericulture, the *Gengzhi tu* became a metaphor for well-ordered Confucian society. Each successive emperor recognized an opportunity to use the *Gengzhi tu* to promulgate Confucian values, the keystone of the imperial system. By adding new poems, he put his own stamp on the *Gengzhi tu* while at the same time evoking the dynasty of his imperial predecessors. The



Figure 3: Dakiniten. Japan. Eighteenth century. Carved and painted wood, silk cord. L: 41 cm. Collection of Lynn S. Gibor.

version shown here was produced during the reign of the Qianlong Emperor, the fourth Qing emperor, and contains not only his own poems but also those of the two preceding emperors, Kangxi and Yongzheng.

Some illustrations further emphasize Confucian values by depicting social relationships integral to the agricultural process: a landlord overseeing work in the fields, for example, or a woman bringing food to male workers.

#### FIGURE 3

The Japanese deity for rice, Inari, is worshipped in many different forms. One is an old man who carries sheaves of rice on a pole over his shoulder. Another is the Buddhist bodhisattva Dakiniten, depicted riding on a fox. As Inari's messenger, the fox is closely associated with rice agriculture. For example, foxes are said to gather at sacred spots on New Year's Eve, where their number, as demonstrated by the appearance of the eerie phosphorescent lights known as "foxfire," predicts the success of the harvest in the year to come (this is the subject of a famous woodblock print by the artist Hiroshige).

This figure was once owned by a family who maintained a tradition of honoring Dakiniten dating back to the eighteenth century. The family originally obtained the image from an Inari shrine, where the spirit (*kami*) of the deity is formally enshrined. For a fee, the shrine officials will conduct a ritual to "divide" a portion of the spirit of the deity and re-enshrine it in a portable altar or a figure such as this one. The family can then return home with a sanctified image in which the spirit of the deity resides.

In modern Japan, Inari is also known as a patron deity for corporate success and Inari shrines are found throughout the country, even in major cities. The link between rice and corporate wealth is not coincidental. Wealth, now measured primarily in bank accounts, stock options, and dividends, was once measured in Japan in sacks



**Figure 4:** Annapurna (center) gives rice to Shiva (left) and his two assistants, Bhringy (right) and Nandy (front). Gourishankar Bandopadhaya. Kolkata, West Bengal, India, 2003. Unfired clay, paint, metal, cloth, plant fiber, wood. FMCH TR2003.8.1–5.

of rice. During the Edo Period (1603–1868), Japan’s political system consisted of an urban warrior (*samurai*) class ruling over village farmers, based on the collection of a thirty to forty percent tax on their rice harvest paid directly in grain.

#### FIGURE 4

These figures were made especially for the exhibition by a Bengali artist named Gourishankar Bandopadhaya, whose family maintains a tradition of worshipping the goddess Annapurna. According to Mr. Bandopadhaya, “the worship of Annapurna originated in the distant past when all food disappeared from the earth and all living beings were consequently in danger of perishing. They appealed to Lord Brahma for help. Brahma consulted with Lord Vishnu and then decided to awaken Lord Shiva from his ritual sleep (*yoganidra*) and give him responsibility for restoring prosperity. Shiva invited the goddess Annapurna to the earth and begged her for rice, which he then distributed throughout the world.”<sup>6</sup>

In Bengal, the worship of Annapurna is a private affair practiced among certain prominent land-owning families. In Mr. Bandopadhaya’s family, the Bannerjees, the practice is traced to the time of the artist’s grandmother, Saraswati Devi, who in 1908–09 experienced some serious financial reverses. She made a promise to Annapurna that if the family’s financial troubles could be resolved, she would establish the worship of the goddess in her family. The family’s procedures involve the making and worshipping of a group of figures composed of Annapurna, Shiva, and the attendant deities Nandy and Bhringy. In the Bandopadhaya family the worship is performed on an auspicious day during the month of Baishakh/Jaistha (May–June). On this day, the traditional Hindu



**Figure 5:** Trám village festival of Trò Trám. Photo by Nguyen Anh Hieu, 2001.

religious text known as *Chandi* is recited from early morning. Cooked rice and other foods are offered to the goddess, and then this *prasad* (food that has been sanctified by offering it to a deity) is distributed among the family members. When the worship is complete, the figures are released into the River Ganges.

#### FIGURE 5

Trám village, surrounded by fertile rice fields in Vietnam’s Red River Delta, hosts a boisterous festival known as Trò Trám on the eleventh through the thirteenth days of the first month of the Vietnamese lunar calendar (in late January or early February). The festival honors the quasi-historical local heroine, Ngô Thị Thanh, who, according to legend, taught the people of the village how to grow rice. The festival includes diverse elements, including performances of skits rooted in the historical and social relations of the community, and a midnight fertility ritual of simulated sexual intercourse that links the fecundity of the rice crop with that of human society.

In the final event of the festival, a sacred bundle of seed rice is carried through the village on a red and gold palanquin. The rice stalks that make up the bundle were individually selected from a special plot planted with the seed from the previous year’s bundle—with only the most vigorous heads of grain chosen. This process of seed selection, at least in theory, preserves and improves the community’s original strain of rice handed down from the ancestors (and Ngô Thị Thanh).<sup>7</sup>

#### FIGURE 6

Ifugao farmers conduct their post-harvest rituals in the presence of their bulul figures and then return the bulul to their granaries, where they are intended to prevent the supply of grain from becoming depleted. Many bulul are named and their individual stories are known to their owners, including legendary tales of their origin and exploits. Since early in the twentieth century, however, the figures have also been made for sale to outsiders by skilled Ifugao carvers—the same carvers, in fact, who make bulul for local use, making it very difficult to draw a clear distinction between the two categories.

The bulul normally consist of a male and female pair, but this particularly striking set is unusual in that it includes an infant. This work of art, then, serves as a reminder of the link between the fertility of the rice crop and the reproductive capability of humans. To those of



**Figure 6:** Pair of granary figures (*bulul*). Ifugao peoples. Kababuyan, Luzon, Philippines. Carved wood. H: 46.2 cm. Collection of Thomas Murray.

us living in industrial societies this may seem a tenuous connection, but it's a widely held belief in Asian subsistence farming communities. On closer examination, it can be seen to be literally true: human society in these communities cannot reproduce and flourish without a successful rice harvest, and the rice in turn cannot yield without human attention to the needs of the growing rice plants.

**FIGURE 7**

In Bali, the rice goddess is formally known as Betari Sri Dewi and her consort is Betara Sedana. This divine couple is the focus of a great deal of Balinese ritual, extending from the rice fields to the most sacred temple in the land, Pura Besakih. There an annual “wedding” is held for Betari Sri Dewi and Betara Sedana to seek an ample rice harvest and a bounty of material wealth. Their union thus symbolizes sufficiency and completeness of the material requirements needed to sustain a good and proper life.<sup>8</sup>

In these rituals and others, Balinese deities can be invoked to take up temporary residence in sacred vehicles, including life-like figures made of coins. The figures can be used for different deities, and technically without being “inhabited” they are nameless, but a male and female pair like this, known collectively as the Rambut Sedana, is in practice strongly equated with Betari Sri Dewi and Betara Sedana.

This Rambut Sedana was collected in the 1930s by the American dancer Katharane Mershon who was well versed in the ritual life of the community of Sanur, where she lived. Fully dressed and perhaps resembling play dolls to Western eyes, the figures are actually among the most revered objects in Balinese religion.

**FIGURE 8**

Japan is often cited as an example of rapid modernization, but the pace of change in South Korea has been even more striking. In the



**Figure 7:** Coin images of deities (Rambut Sedana). Bali (probably Sanur), Indonesia. Copper alloy coins, cotton fabric, silk fabric, plant fiber, wood, skin, imitation gemstones, metallic thread, gold leaf, lacquer, paint. H: 45 cm. FMCH X61.77 and 78. The Katharane Mershon Collection of Indonesian Art.

1970s the government began a program of rural redevelopment known as the Saemaul Undong (New Community Movement), which resettled rural residents into modern village housing and brought about many changes in the economic, social, and religious aspects of village life. At the same time, within the span of a single generation, South Korea was transformed from a predominately agricultural country to a predominantly urban one. The severity of these dislocations precipitated the *minjung* movement, a collective reaction against the repressive regime that eventually led to democratic reform. *Minjung* artists sympathetically depicted scenes from rural life and highlighted the plight of rural communities.

The painting has been one of the most provocative works in the exhibition, with lively discussions about its meanings often taking place in front of it. School children have had immediate and perceptive reactions, like the fourth-grader who said, “They built a freeway across the man’s rice field!” Adults have reacted more to the subtleties of the painting, invoking issues of change and aging. The painting is suffused with an overwhelming sense of nostalgia, inevitability, and loss. The old men left alone working in the fields, the luxury car whizzing along the dike . . . blink once and they will be gone. How, it asks us to consider, will South Koreans of the future form a new identity when their former identity as rural rice farmers has been completely swept away? ■



**Figure 8:** *Mr. Rhu in Eunhang Dong*. Lee Chung-gu (1954–). Korea. 1991. Acrylic on a printed paper rice sack. H: 138 cm. Collection of the artist.

**NOTES**

1. Per capita consumption of rice in the US in 1971 was 3 kg/year (it has now risen to 9). In contrast, per capita consumption in Burma in 2000 was 206 kg/year—more than half a kilogram of rice *per day* (measured in *uncooked* rice). <http://www.irri.org/science/ricestat/pdfs/Table%2017.pdf>
2. Helliwell 2001, 45.
3. Funding for the festival documentation project was generously provided by the Getty Grant Program.

4. Major funding for the exhibition and book was provided by the National Endowment for the Humanities, the Rockefeller Foundation, and the Luce Foundation.
5. I thank Dr. Francesca Bray for drawing my attention to the *Gengzhi tu*. For further details, see Francesca Bray, “Images of Rice in Imperial Chinese Culture,” in Hamilton, 2003.
6. I thank Dr. Sohini Ray for overseeing the commission of Mr. Bandopadhaya’s work and for gathering information related to it.
7. In reality, the strain has been replaced as new modern varieties have become available.
8. From David Stuart-Fox, “Sri and Sedana in Pura Besakih,” in Hamilton 2003.

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**Editor’s Note:** A review of Hamilton’s book and accompanying curriculum guide, referenced on page 23 of this article, appears on pages 56 and 57 of this magazine.

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