

# Rice: Rooted in Mythology

By Tsuneo Yatagai

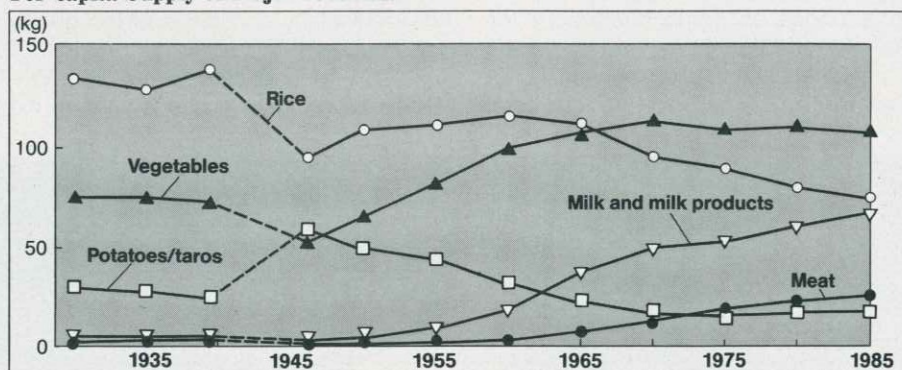
After World War II, there were suggestions that eating too much rice was bad for one's health, physically and mentally. It was even suggested that Japan's rice-centered diet was one reason for the nation's defeat in the war. This theory, whether or not sparked by America in an attempt to increase demand for its surplus food products, appears to have had an effect. The Japanese began to switch to a Western-style diet, consuming more bread made from American wheat and powdered skim milk. The demand for rice plummeted in due course (see graph).

Later, however, Americans themselves began to take a second look at rice, especially after they noticed that the average lifespan of the Japanese had increased to become the longest in the world—probably thanks to their rice-based diet. America therefore began to increase its own production of rice, and now it is nagging Japan to liberalize its imports of the product. There is a huge gap in the cost of producing rice in the two countries. After all, the average size of a farm in the United States is 150 hectares (1982), nearly 190 times larger than the Japanese figure of 0.8 hectares (1985).

Japan has very little extensive flat land, and arable land accounts for only 17% of the country's total area. But it has a temperate climate and a large rainfall, with almost no areas getting less than 1,000 millimeters of precipitation in a year. So rice is ideal as the principal crop. The yield of rice per hectare of land is relatively large, repeated cultivation is possible, and a delicious cereal can be prepared simply by processing it with heat. Archeological discoveries show that rice has been cultivated in Japan for more than 2,000 years.

Japan employs a unique method of cultivating rice based on irrigation and transplantation. This method places the emphasis not on the development of agricultural equipment but on soil amend-

Per-capita Supply of Major Foodstuff



Source: Osamu Soda, *Kome wo Kangaeru*, Iwanami Paperback, p. 126.

ment. Hence there was almost no change in the equipment used from 2,000 years ago until the recent development of farming machinery. The advanced development of agricultural machinery leads to a conflict between humankind and nature, but no such conflict emerges with soil amendment, which involves the skillful utilization of natural conditions.

## Diligent toil

Since Shinto, Japan's indigenous religion, taught that the cultivation of rice was sacred labor, the Japanese people for generation after generation toiled diligently to preserve the productivity of their paddies. The Japanese nation and Japanese culture were fostered through this close relationship with nature.

The Japanese have a deep attachment to their hometown. Every mid-August, the residents of large cities flock back to their hometown for the Bon Festival, when the souls of the dead are believed to return to their homes. Until recently, there were paddy fields in many of these hometowns. The paddies have a special place in the hearts of the Japanese; they are at the root of the Japanese people's fondness for their hometown.

The Japanese method of growing rice involves nurturing rice shoots in a flooded seedbed until they reach a certain

height, then transplanting them into flooded fields. There are several reasons for flooding the seedbeds and fields: It protects the crop from the cold, prevents the growth of weeds, makes it possible to distribute fertilizers by water, prevents the surface of the land from being blown away by the wind, and makes it easier to handle the mud, which hardens when it dries. The process of transplanting the shoots makes it easier to manage them, increases the effective use of limited water in the period before the rainy season, increases the number of ears of rice, and makes it easier to prevent weeds from growing.

In the prewar years the Japanese were brought up to respect the importance of rice and not to waste a single grain. Children were taught that the Chinese character used to mean rice represented a compound of the character for eight written twice. In other words, the cultivation of rice involved 88 tasks, so it was important to show gratitude to farmers.

Because the water must be maintained at a certain level, it is not possible to enlarge the plots of land used for rice cultivation very much. Ridges are difficult to build and require constant care, which necessitates the formation of a commune to do such tasks as fixing stakes in the river to create a dam so that an adequate supply of water can be obtained and ad-

justing the height of the dam so as to allot water to each farmer. In years of drought, the distribution of water would lead to sometimes bloody disputes among the communities located along a river.

The transplantation of rice shoots is called *taue* in Japanese. Even today some shrines hold imitation *taue* rites at New Year's, when they offer prayers for an abundant harvest. The real rice transplanting takes place in May, when a religious festival was held in the past and still is in some places today. Noh drama has its origins in this festival.

The task of transplanting rice has now been mechanized, and each farming household undertakes it independently. Until recently, however, farming households often would gather together and carry out the task jointly. Because it involved so many tasks that required voluntary cooperation, rice cultivation served to make Japanese farmers diligent and group-oriented.

## Imperial rites

On November 12, 1990, Emperor Akihito was officially enthroned as the emperor of Japan. Receiving the imperial regalia (sword, sacred mirror and curved jewels), the emperor proclaimed his accession to the throne. The enthronement ceremony alone, however, does not make the emperor completely qualified to sit on the throne. He also must acquire the soul of an emperor. For this purpose, another ceremony, called the Daijosai, is held after the enthronement. Simply

speaking, the Daijosai, which takes place only once in an emperor's lifetime, is a thanksgiving ceremony in which the emperor partakes of meals together with the imperial ancestors.

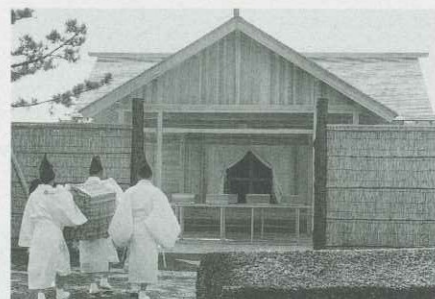
According to folklore, at a time when many other races of people lived in Japan, the ancestors of the imperial family, who had descended from the Sun Goddess, appeared from beyond the sea carrying rice. The Daijosai, in which rice plays a major role, is related to this myth.

The Daijosai takes place around the time of the winter solstice. In the case of Emperor Akihito, it took place from November 22 to 25. The emperor performed the religious ceremonies in two simple structures, the Yuki Hall and the Suki Hall, both of which were specially built for the occasion with unshaved wooden pillars and thatched roofs. In these halls the emperor offered food and *sake* to the imperial ancestors and partook of them himself. The rice used for the ceremonies in each hall came from two different parts of the country: from Akita Prefecture in northeastern Japan for the Yuki Hall and from Oita Prefecture in southern Japan for the Suki Hall.

The Daijosai consisted of three parts. In the first part, at 10 p.m. on the day of the winter solstice, when the power of the Sun Goddess is at its weakest for the year, a meal for the emperor and the deities began in secret in the Yuki Hall. The imperial ancestors descended to the seat of the gods in the hall and were offered the new rice, *sake* made from the new rice, marine products and cakes. By partaking of the supper with his ancestors, the new emperor entered into spiritual communion with the gods. At the same time, the ceremony served to rouse the weakening spirit of the sun.

The emperor then entered the Suki Hall at 4 a.m., waited for the recovered sun to rise, and then partook of another meal, this time breakfast. Then, together with the recovered sun, he emerged as the real emperor—a newborn child of the spirit of rice.

In the second part of the Daijosai, the emperor joined in a meal with people from the Yuki and Suki regions, who represented the whole country, eating with



The Daijosai ceremony symbolizes the link between rice, Shinto and the emperor.

Photo: Kyodo News Service

them the food that had been offered to the gods, and watching entertainment from those regions, thereby absorbing the souls of the regions. In the third part, banquets were held for representatives from other parts of the country, and various ancient performing arts were shown.

Thus, as well as the enthronement ceremony, by which the emperor ascended to the throne in accordance with the Constitution, the emperor also took part in the Daijosai ceremony, in which he entered into spiritual communion with the imperial ancestors. Clearly, there is a profound relationship between the emperor and rice.

The Australian scholar Gregory Clark has argued very persuasively that the uniqueness of Japan lies in the fact that it has never suffered a large-scale invasion by another country and has preserved the tribal and family values of ancient times. It has also been argued that the Japanese have been able to preserve this tribal political system because the emperor has remained at the head of these rice-growing tribes and has continued to practice the Shinto rites related to rice cultivation.

Lettuce and other vegetables are now factory-grown in Japan. Eventually rice will probably be grown in factories, too. If biotechnology makes progress, it will not be long before rice is grown indoors all year round in three-month cycles. However much the process of rice cultivation is industrialized, however, the link between rice, Shinto and the emperor in Japan will probably continue forever.

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Photo: Kyodo News Service

A rice planting ritual held each April at Chichibu Shrine in Chichibu City, Saitama Prefecture, immediately north of Tokyo.