Princeton University Press

Chapter Title: Symbolic Practice through Time: Self, Ethnicity, and Nationalism

Book Title: Rice as Self
Book Subtitle: Japanese Identities through Time
Book Author(s): Emiko Ohnuki-Tierney
Published by: Princeton University Press. (1993)
Stable URL: http://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt7t91m.13

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of the Terms & Conditions of Use, available at http://about.jstor.org/terms

JSTOR

Princeton University Press is collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to *Rice as Self*

This content downloaded from 129.174.21.5 on Wed, 11 Apr 2018 21:15:06 UTC
All use subject to http://about.jstor.org/terms

Nine

Symbolic Practice through Time: Self, Ethnicity, and Nationalism

There is a long tradition in symbolic anthropology of "food for thought" and, I would add, "for feeling." Theoretical dimensions of foods and food taboos have been discussed by a number of distinguished anthropologists; Douglas (1966), Leach (1968), Lévi-Strauss (1963, 1969b), and Tambiah (1969), to name only a few. Many others contributed to an understanding of offerings to deities. But the symbolic meaning of staple foods has escaped systematic attention.

In this book I have questioned an assumption, held at least by some, that so-called staple foods are primarily of quantitative value. I may have overemphasized the symbolic value of rice and other staple foods by using a construction from the perspective of urbanites and the affluent. I concur with Spence (1977:261) who insists on "the harsh backdrop of famine or the threat of famine" to understand food and eating.[1] In Japan many died of starvation during famines (see chapter 5). In France, Darnton convincingly argues that "to eat one's fill" was the "principal pleasure" for the peasants in early modern Europe who readily traded a promise to heaven after death for a "square meal" while alive (Darnton 1985:34, 33). I also think that there was a period when rice, bread, and other staple foods occupied a far more quantitative significance than they do now. The symbolic values of these staple foods, however, have always been important even during food shortages.

The cross-cultural parallels are striking in the social and cultural institutions in which the meanings of staple foods are embedded. Not to reify falsely the uniqueness of Japanese culture or its appropriation of rice, I have used some cross-cultural references, which have broadened the scope of a subject that is already enormous. I have raised more questions than answers in this book.

Symbolic Practice: Materialities and Meanings of Rice as Constituent

I have discussed rice as if it were an unchangeable object with a fixed meaning without stressing the plurality of both its materialities and

This content downloaded from 129.174.21.5 on Wed, 11 Apr 2018 21:15:06 UT
All use subject to http://about.jstor.org/terms

meanings. When one examines the use of rice as a symbol, however, it is neither an unchanging object nor does it have a fixed meaning.

Although the meaning of rice as the self or the self-identity seems univocal, the Japanese identity has been redefined time and again during every historical encounter with the others. If the self has undergone changes, then its meaning, too, has changed. The Japanese identity in relation to the Chinese is certainly different from the Japanese identity contrasted with that of Westerners.

If the meaning of the self as represented by rice has changed through history, so has the materiality of rice. The original rice was a tropical or subtropical plant, an entirely different rice from the rices of later periods. Until recently, because of the tradition of home grown reseeding there were innumerable varieties, each representing rice as self at the family level. Even in the 1990s there are several kinds on the market. Thus, under the linguistic label of 'rice', innumerable rices have been thought of as *the* Japanese rice.

When rice is opposed to meat as the metaphor for the Japanese self vis-à-vis the Western self, the entire category (class) of rice is at issue. But it is short-grain rice, rather than generic rice, that stands for the Japanese self; the Chinese by contrast are represented by long-grain rice. When California rice is the issue, short-grain rice grown on Japanese soil is opposed to the short-grain rice grown on foreign soil, even though the California rice may be "objectively" similar to Japanese domestic rice.

Similarly, a small amount of white rice defines a meal as *haute cuisine*, but it can also be a cheap meal, depending upon how it is served. That is, the containers, ambience, and above all, the social context define the same or similar rices in radically different ways. It depends upon the use by a social actor.

In contemporary restaurants raisu or gohan presents a dramatic case of code switching that assigns the same rice to separate systems of cuisine, giving different meanings to each.

Or, to take the Goffmanian approach, rice may be used by an actor as a symbol for "the presentation of self." Thus, the man introduced in chapter 2, who boasted that he and his colleagues eat nonrice foods for lunch, such as spaghetti, is, in fact, using his nonrice diet to present himself as "modern." Similarly, Japanese who have spent some time overseas, especially in the United States, often nostalgically associate the California rice they ate while in the United States with their enjoyable stay. Some even ask someone to send California rice for their personal use (*Asahi Shinbun*, May 12, 1987).

The constituent nature of the meaning or meanings of a symbol has been pointed out by scholars. Often neglected is the fact that the materiality of a symbol, too, is constituted by social actors. From the perspective of symbols, an important finding of the study of rice in historical

This content downloaded from 129.174.21.5 on Wed, 11 Apr 2018 21:15:06 UTC
All use subject to http://about.jstor.org/terms

perspective is that "Japanese rice" has not always been the same item. Rice became a different rice each time the Japanese self encountered a different other—rice first introduced from Asia, rice as opposed to meat, short-grain domestic rice as opposed to long-grain foreign rice, short-grain domestic rice in contrast to short-grain foreign rice—each was or is "rice as self." Rice, then, is not a static object; both its materiality and meaning are constructed *in practice* by historical actors (chap. 7).

In semiotics and symbolic anthropology, in general, emphasis is on multiplicity of meaning; a symbol is almost always multivocal or polysemic. In my recent works (Ohnuki-Tierney 1990c; 1991a), I point out that, in addition to being polysemic, symbols are often polytropic, that is, they assume various tropic capacities—as metaphors, metonyms, synecdoches, or ironies—as actors use the symbols. In the findings in this book I point to yet another dimension of the symbolic process: objects, like rice, are also constituent.

Paradoxically, then, the Japanese collective self has both changed and not changed. Rice, too, has stayed the same while not only its meaning but its materiality has changed. Put the other way, rice has been simultaneously univocal and multivocal; it represents the Japanese self while that self undergoes various historical changes. Thus, this book is about the Japanese selves and rices examined through "Rice as Self" for the Japanese. Through a very dynamic process of symbolization rice represents a variety of objects—*many rices representing many selves*. The symbolization process is far more complex and dynamic than a simple semiotic notion of a signifier that has multiple meanings.

Actors, however, never have free rein. Criticizing the individual-centered model of historical change, Moore (1986:322) warns of "the crippling disadvantage of a limited conception of analytic field and of causality." Rice remained unequivocal, whereas the metallic currency was equivocal. Thus, depending upon the context and the use by a social actor, money can be pure or extremely impure. But rice does not provide such freedom for actors. With increased secularization, today's rice is sacred or pure only in certain contexts. But it cannot be impure, even though rice was once used as currency. Unrestrained celebration of the power of individuals, although inviting, does not help one understand human behavior.

Food: Metonym-Metaphor of Self

The power of food as a symbol of self-identity derives from the particular nature of the symbolic process involved. An important food as a metaphor of a social group involves two interlocking dimensions. First, each member of the social group consumes the food, which becomes part of

This content downloaded from 129.174.21.5 on Wed, 11 Apr 2018 21:15:06 UTC
All use subject to http://about.jstor.org/terms

his or her body. The important food becomes *embodied* in each individual. It operates as a *metonym* by being part of the self. Second, the food is consumed by individual members of the social group who eat the food together. Communal consumption of the food leads to rice as a *metaphor* of *we*—his or her social group and, often, the people as a whole.

The double layering of metonymic and metaphoric relations between a symbol and what it stands for is often the source of the cognitive and evocative power of a symbol. Lévi-Strauss, who considers contiguity and analogy as the two most important conceptual principles of the human mind, calls attention to the importance of the "transformation and countertransformation" between metonymy and metaphor (1966:150) as does Fernandez (1974:125–126; 1982:558–562), who has persistently expounded the importance of metaphor for anthropological interpretations (see also Fernandez 1991). Even those who hold metaphor to be the most central of all tropes emphasize that a metonymic principle is often involved in it. For example, de Man (1979) insists that a striking metaphor depends upon metonymic connections, and Genette (1972) emphasizes the coexistence and mutual support or interpenetration of metaphor and metonymy.[2]

Consumed food, then, embodies the biaxial principles of metonymy and metaphor or contiguity and similarity in practice by social actors. Whether a food represents an individual self, a social group, or a people as a whole, this symbolic process renders foods as powerful not only conceptually but also psychologically. For this reason "our food" versus "their food" becomes a powerful way to express *we* versus *they*. This is so not only for the representation of *we* through a food item but also for discriminating the other from *us*. Although I have already given some examples in chapter 1, it is worth quoting one more from the ancient Chinese, who defined themselves in terms of the two important principles of *their* foodway: the eating of grain and the eating of *cooked* meat. These were the important markers that distinguished them from the neighboring "barbarians."

> The people of those five regions. . . . The tribes on the east . . . had their hair unbound, and tattooed their bodies. Some of them ate their food without its being cooked with fire. Those on the south . . . tattooed their foreheads, and their feet turned in toward each other. Some of them ate their food without its being cooked with fire. Those on the west . . . had their hair unbound, and wore skins. Some of them did not eat grain-food. Those on the north . . . wore skins of animals and birds, and dwelt in caves. Some of them did not eat grain-food. (Cited in Chang 1977a:42; Chang's italics)[3]

The barbarians lack one of the two defining features of the culinary principles. The "food semantics" (Chang 1977b) reveals the social system succinctly and powerfully.

This content downloaded from 129.174.21.5 on Wed, 11 Apr 2018 21:15:06 UTC
All use subject to http://about.jstor.org/terms

The beauty and purity of *we* are *embodied doubly in the body of the people and in the food that represents them*, and, conversely, the undesirable qualities of the other are embodied in *their* foods and foodway.

No such powerful embedment is involved for the emperor, whose ability to represent the Japanese has throughout history been tenuous, while the rice-Japanese association has remained intact. This is, however, by no means the only reason nor the causal factor for what happened in history to the imperial system.

The Primordial Self: Purity, Land, and History

Purity: Self, Ethnicity, and Nationalism

The study of ethnicity and nationalism is a burgeoning field in anthropology and related disciplines. In the post-colonial era ethnicity and nationalism intensified all over the world, well before the dissolution of the USSR. The symbolism of rice and rice paddies resonates with the symbolic dimensions of ethnicity and nationalism elsewhere in the world.

In his analytical comparison of the empire, nation, and ethnic group, Yalman (1992:1–2) sees an imperial system, such as the Ottoman empire, as one that "accepts and respects, on principle, the existence of diversity within its borders and devises political institutions which are responsive to diverse legal, religious and ethnic traditions." In contrast, ethnicity and nationalism both demand its *purity* and are intolerant of diversity.[4] B. Williams (1989) repeatedly emphasizes how "the invention of purity" is entailed in all nation building, both with a newly emerging nation as well as an established nation. Herzfeld (1987:82) describes the Greeks in their "search for the secular Eden of national *purity*." Handler (1988) points out that linguistic pollution and the search for purity are important concerns of recent Quebec nationalism. All these cases from a variety of societies testify that the notion of purity is deeply embedded in the concept of self, whether it is part of ethnicity or nationalism or independent of its political component. One of the findings of the long-term study presented here is that purity is an integral part of the concept of Japanese self and, thus, its presence did not have to wait until the rise of ethnicity or nationalism.

But, the purity of self is Janus faced. No one can forget the grotesque development of Hitler's Germany when this established nation strove for "racial purity." Japanese rice stood for the purity, or positive energy, of deities, whose consumption rejuvenates humans. But the purity of rice has been used for nationalistic purposes since the Early Modern period. The rallying cry during World War II was to win the war so that the Japanese could again eat the "pure white rice" that symbolizes their pu-

This content downloaded from 129.174.21.5 on Wed, 11 Apr 2018 21:15:06 UTC
All use subject to http://about.jstor.org/terms

rity. In *symbolic practice* purity can be elevated to an aesthetic level without political implications; it can also be shackled with intolerance to serve as the handmaiden of a negative nationalism in which the marginalized sectors within the society as well as the external other become scapegoats in the name of achieving individual purity.

Spatiotemporal Representations

Recent anthropological studies have shown the importance of metaphors of time and space, or, more concretely, land (territory) and history, for nationalism. Sometimes they are represented in nature. In a comparative study of nationalism in Sri Lanka and Australia, Kapferer (1988) repeatedly points to the metaphors of space-time—embodied in "nature"—in Australian nationalism. Herzfeld's work (1991) on "the disputed ownership of history" in a Cretan town is entitled, *A Place in History*, a clever title using the space-time metaphors of contemporary Greeks who struggle to come to terms with their identity or identities. Architecture becomes the main focus of contestation because it embodys *histories* of these people in *place*.

The evocative power, as V. Turner would say, of rice rests in the simultaneous double layering of rice as a metonym—a part of the body through consumption by individual Japanese—and a metaphor for the Japanese through commensality and other collective activities. This symbolic mechanism, however, only partially explains the power of rice as a symbol because the same argument can be applied to various other foods and drinks.

What distinguishes rice from other candidates for symbols is its link to space and time, or more concretely, land and history. This dimension of rice symbolism is buried if rice represents only the polished grains eaten. But when the eighth-century myth-histories appropriated the rice agriculture introduced from the Asian continent as their own, their "creation myth" of the Japanese universe, or at least one version of it, was a transformation of wilderness into a land filled with succulent heads of rice. In short, rice paddies created "Japanese land." Rice paddies stand for "the ancestral land" at the family level, and seigniorial power was expressed through the image of golden heads of rice stretching across the lord's territory.

This double linkage to the Japanese self—representing its *body* and its *land*—may be a clue to the enormous power and resilience of rice symbolism which has *remained more meaningful and powerful than both the imperial system and agriculture itself*. No other food item, even tea, which is *not* mentioned in the myth-histories, has received such consistent attention throughout history.

This content downloaded from 129.174.21.5 on Wed, 11 Apr 2018 21:15:06 UT
All use subject to http://about.jstor.org/terms

The intimate involvement of space for the Japanese concept of self, however, does *not* derive from a need to demarcate Japan, which is surrounded by the sea. This situation contrasts with circumstances in which the ethnicity and nationalism of social groups in adjacent areas physically need territorial boundaries, as symbolized by the Berlin Wall.

One of the defining characteristics of B. Anderson's (1991:7) well-known thesis of the nation as the "imagined community" is that the nation is "imagined as *limited*" in that it is within national "boundaries." The Japanese case powerfully argues for the importance of recognizing the symbolic importance of spatial boundaries even in the absence of the physical or political need to do so. "Space" is essential in the self-identity of a people, and Japan's case testifies that the need is *symbolic*.

In addition to *our land*, rice paddies objectify *time*. It is the *Japanese nature* that tells them of the four seasons, beginning with rice planting in the spring, through its growth during the summer, its harvesting in the fall, and empty rice paddies with sheaves of rice plants covered with snow in winter. But, nature objectifies time in another significant way—a past that is pure, simple, imbued with pristine beauty, and uncontaminated by foreign influences. It embodies *our history*. It is, then, no wonder that the myth-histories of the eighth century were summoned again and again during later periods in the effort to construct *our* history.

Landlessness as Transgression

But the link of rice to land gains an even more profound cultural cum politico-economic significance during the formation of internal others in Japan. It was the *nonsettled* people (*hiteijūmin*) who became increasingly marginalized after the end of the Medieval period, and this process paralleled the transformation of agrarian cosmology into agrarian ideology. Seen in this light, the labels used to refer to these people take on additional meaning. The main difference between the settled population and the nonsettled was that only the settled population was taxed. But, the designations applied to the nonsettled population all referred to marginalized space—people of the riverbanks, scattered places, and so forth. The economic principle of taxed versus nontaxed status is expressed through spatial metaphors.[5]

Even in the agrarian sector, stratification is closely tied to the notion of land. Rice farmers are not necessarily rice consumers. Those who rose to the top in the stratification were landowners, who were thereby able to control the mode of production, the relations of production, and even consumption. The key was to own land.

Thus, the development of the collective identity of the Japanese, as expressed in "rices as selves" and "rice paddies as Japanese land," repre-

This content downloaded from 129.174.21.5 on Wed, 11 Apr 2018 21:15:06 UTC
All use subject to http://about.jstor.org/terms

sents a historical process whereby those social groups who were not anchored to politically defined space became minorities—the *internal others*—whose presence was excluded both from history and from the representation of Japan as "agrarian." Within the agrarian sector, landownership became critical in the stratification. This is the other side of the development of the agrarian ideology, which accrued both symbolic and political centrality to the settled population (warriors and farmers). The process of *naturalization* of the agrarian cosmology-turned-ideology was accompanied by the devaluation of the nonsettled and their way of life. "The landlessness" became *transgression*.

To recapitulate, neither rice as food nor rice paddies as land themselves engender negative meanings. Precisely because these multivocal symbols are powerful, however, they can also be mobilized effectively for political purposes, including as tools for discrimination and chauvinism, as well documented in Hardacre (1989) in her work on State Shintoism.

Contrary to Hobsbawm's (1992:7) claim that "the social disorientation" is the key causal agent for the intensification of nationalism and ethnicity in the contemporary world, in the case of Japan, "social disorientation" is a result of the development of the agrarian ideology that became the ideological backbone of Japanese nationalism later.

"Cultural Colonialism" in Historical Conjunctures

A major focus of this study has been historical confluences. The following quotation from Moore (1986:4–5) offers an unforgettable visual metaphor of historical conjunctures:

> When, at the foot of Mount Kilimanjaro, one meets a blanket-wearing, otherwise naked, spear-carrying Maasai man on a back path in the Tanzanian bush, one notices that he has a spool from a Kodak film packet in his earholes as an earring plug. That earring alone is sufficient to indicate that he is not a total reproducer of an integrated ancestral culture. His film spindle is made of extruded plastic manufactured in Rochester, New York, his red blanket comes from Europe, his knife is made of Sheffield steel. Dangling from a thong around his neck is a small leather container full of Tanzanian paper money, the proceeds from selling his cattle in a government-regulated market. The price of his animals varies with world inflation. The roads nearby have buses and tourists. The international economy has penetrated everywhere.

Although Moore's purpose in presenting this passage is to argue her point about historical reproduction and changes, the passage also articulates how every culture, past and present, has been changing as a result of dialectic between internal and external developments.

This content downloaded from 129.174.21.5 on Wed, 11 Apr 2018 21:15:06 UT
All use subject to http://about.jstor.org/terms

If the Maasai man objectified historical conjunctures in Africa, so do architectures of a contemporary Cretan town in Rethemnos. Herzfeld's (1991:112) caption for photo 26 reads, "A characteristic conjuncture: electric light pole, Venetian masonry, shattered Turkish window box." The material culture objectifies multiple histories, and "the choice of pasts is negotiated in a shifting present" (Herzfeld 1991:257).

In all these conjunctures, the discourse of self and other has been deeply embedded in a complex historical interplay of power inequalities. Selves and others are seldom equal partners in these conjunctures. It is far easier to recognize the political domination of the West over Africa and other former colonies. But an even more serious consequence is the cultural domination by Western civilization not only over their former colonies but over many other parts of the world. The attitude of the Japanese is double-edged toward the superior other—the Chinese and the Westerners. Today, feeling that they have conquered Western technological fields, some Japanese are still eager to prove their *distinction*, developed within their society, through a craze for Beaujolais nouveau immediately after its release in France (for more detail see Ohnuki-Tierney 1990a:202–203) while defending *our* (Japanese) rice.

In the Middle East, Yalman (1989:15) explains the amazing appeal of Khomeini to the Iranians as an expression of "the violent gut reaction against the penetration of the West into the Middle East" and evokes Ashis Nandy's powerful phrase "the colonized mind" to understand what S. Rushdie stands for—the complexity and ambivalence that the culturally/politically colonized peoples feel about themselves in relation toward the West (Yalman 1989:16). Occidentalism, therefore, can never be a simple inversion of Orientalism.

But the symbolic power inequality is not confined to the West versus the other. It works even within so-called Western civilization. Mischievously calling the Greeks aboriginal Europeans, Herzfeld identifies the ambivalence contemporary Greeks feel about themselves and toward others. The image of fallen Hellenism portrays both the holy and the polluted visions of modern Greece, where rural Greeks satirize the literate, at the same time grudgingly recognizing "the power that literacy confers" (Herzfeld 1987:49).

Even more important than the recognition of inequality in symbolic power in historical encounters between peoples is its further effects upon the culture perceived to be inferior. The power inequality between the self and the "superior" *external other* is in part responsible for the creation of a scapegoat—the marginalized self turned into minorities, internally, and, the marginalized other, externally. "Cultural colonialism," as I call it, can play havoc toward others as well as toward themselves when it is combined with nationalism. It is an unfortunate subtext of many

This content downloaded from 129.174.21.5 on Wed, 11 Apr 2018 21:15:06 UTC
All use subject to http://about.jstor.org/terms

inter-national discourses and an even more unfortunate subtext for the phenomenon of using scapegoats to create marginalized selves and others.

The theme of the Stranger Deity—the deity with positive and negative powers who visits from outside—has provided a powerful model for the Japanese to interpret historical encounters with the superior others—the Chinese and, then, the Westerners. The cosmological model of the Stranger Deity, however, embodies symbolic power inequality: the deity is superior to humans, who must harness the deity's positive power. In historical practice the Stranger Deity can turn into a politically or culturally powerful other. Perhaps it is not surprising that the Stranger Deity is a theme found in many parts of the world (see chap. 5, n. 8); the model serves as an explanatory model for inequality, symbolic and political.

When the Stranger Deity is rejected and its energy and power are no longer harnessed for the rejuvenation of the self, the self must rely on its own source of purity for regeneration. To protect the last citadel—a metaphor for self-identity under threat as the phrase is used to oppose California rice importation, the *pure*, "chemical-free" domestic rice, rice paddies that *purify* Japanese air and represent the *pure* Japanese past without contamination from foreign influence, and the *pure* white rice *embodied* in the self, both individually and collectively, must be summoned for the self-rejuvenation. Or, the self purges itself by removing its impurity and placing it on the internal and external others.

The Japanese identity that was created in their discourse with the Chinese, the culturally superior other at the time, has since then gone through historical transformations as it encountered different others. In all these encounters between selves and others, the multivocal rice and rice paddies have served as the vehicle for deliberation about the self-identity as it transforms into selves and as the internal source of purity for the ever-changing self.

This content downloaded from 129.174.21.5 on Wed, 11 Apr 2018 21:15:06 UT
All use subject to http://about.jstor.org/terms