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Rice as Wealth, Power, and Aesthetics

TO FURTHER understand the symbolism of rice, which served as the primary form of wealth for many centuries, I explore the concepts of wealth in the context of Japanese cosmology and the related notions of power and aesthetics of rice.

Wealth in Japanese Folklore and Folk Religions

Acquisition of wealth is a dominant motif in the folklore of various parts of Japan, past and present (Yanagita 1951:371). Tales in this genre, referred to as “tales of a wealthy person” (*chōjatan*), share common themes: (1) a stranger, sometimes in the form of an animal, brings fortune to a person; (2) the stranger lives somewhere outside the village, sometimes at the bottom of a river, sea, or pool, or in the mountains; (3) a person becomes wealthy as a reward for a virtuous personality trait, such as honesty, mercy for animals, and so forth. Two of the best-known tales, which remain favorite children’s tales today, are *Shitakiri suzume* (A sparrow whose tongue was cut off) and *Tsuru no ongaeshi* (A crane who repaid its gratitude).

Shitakiri suzume is about an old man who loved a sparrow and fed her (the sparrow is always depicted as female) every day. One day, the sparrow ate the rice paste that his wife had made to use as starch for her laundry. The old woman became angry and cut off the sparrow’s tongue. In tears, the sparrow flew away to her home. Without his sparrow, the old man was very sad and set off to the mountains to find her. After many failed attempts, he finally found her in a bamboo bush. The sparrow and her relatives and friends joyfully welcomed the old man with feasts, songs, and dances. When he was ready to go home, they gave him a small trunk. After returning home, he opened it to find, to his surprise, all sorts of treasures. The greedy old woman wanted treasures for herself and visited the sparrows. She returned with a large trunk, but when she opened it, out came ghosts and goblins (Muraki n.d.).¹

Tsuru no ongaeshi begins with “Long, long ago, an old man and an old woman lived.” They were very poor but very kind. One day the old

man placed firewood on his back to take to town to sell. As he crossed a mountain to get to town, he saw something struggling in the snow—a crane caught in a trap. Feeling sorry for it, he released the crane, which spread its wings and cried happily as it flew into the sky. He returned home that evening after selling his firewood. As he was talking with his wife, someone knocked at the door. When they opened the door, a beautiful young woman was standing in the snow. She told them that she had lost her way in the snow. They invited her to stay until she became warm. She stayed on with them. One day she said she felt like weaving and asked to purchase some threads. She asked them not to look at her while she wove. Behind a screen, she wove for three days and nights without food or sleep. She then emerged from behind the screen with a beautiful brocade and gave it to the old man to sell in town. When the old man went to town, even the lord was pleased with the brocade's beauty and paid a high price for it. The young woman was pleased to hear the story and wanted to weave more. She again wove three days and nights without food or sleep. The old woman became so concerned about the young woman's health that she looked behind the screen. There she saw a crane picking her own feathers and weaving a brocade. The crane-maiden emerged from behind the screen and told them that she was the crane rescued by the old man and that she wanted to repay him for the mercy he had shown her. She then flew away into the sky. The old man and his wife lived happily ever after thanks to the wealth she bestowed upon them (Koharu n.d.).²

Although minor variations are found in various versions of these stories, depending on the historical period and the region, they share basic features (Yanagita 1951:258, 382).

Underlying the Buddhist moral message of mercy for all beings, I find in these tales important themes in Japanese cosmology. Because the mountains have been the abode of deities in Japanese cosmology, I interpret the animals in these stories as deities or their messengers. Birds have been messengers from the deities to humans ever since the eighth-century myth-histories. Either directly or via messengers, deities reward humans for their virtuous acts. These deities are “stranger deities” who live outside of human settlements in places like the mountains. Wealth is bestowed upon a person because of good nature and behavior and not as a result of hard work.

Another genre of folktales contains explicit references to the symbolic equivalence of rice and wealth given by the deity. A number of folktales that Komatsu (1983:25–26) classifies as Untoku (the name of the central figure) tales are found in various parts of Japan. Although there are variations, some themes are shared; below the boy is called Hyōtoku.

Somewhere lived an old man and his wife. The old man went to the mountains every day to fetch firewood. One day, while gathering firewood, he found a large cave in the ground. Thinking that such a cave was a residence of an evil spirit, he decided to fill it with firewood. He inserted one bundle of wood, but it was not enough. He continued until finally he used up all the firewood that he had gathered for the past three months. At that moment, a beautiful woman emerged from the cave. She thanked him for the firewood and urged him to visit the cave. Upon entering, he found a splendid mansion, beside which all his firewood was piled. As he entered the mansion at her request, he encountered a dignified old man with a white beard who entertained him with a feast. As he was leaving, the bearded host offered him a very ugly lad named Hyōtoku who was playing with his navel. The two returned to the old man's house. The boy continued his habit of constantly picking his navel. One day the old man poked the boy's navel with an iron tong used for the *hibachi* [portable heater], whereupon a gold grain came out of his navel. After that, the old man poked the boy's navel three times a day, and the old man and his wife became very rich. The old woman, however, was too greedy to settle for that amount of gold. While the old man was away, she poked the boy's navel forcefully to get more gold grains, whereupon the boy died. The old man was very sad, but the boy appeared in a dream and told him: "Please do not be so sad. Make a mask that looks just like me. Hang it on the pillar in front of the hearth where you look at it every day. Then, wealth will accumulate."

It is said that in this village even today people make an ugly mask from clay or wood and hang it on the pillar near the hearth.

Although there are other themes in this story, the central themes parallel the two folktales introduced earlier: wealth is a gift from a Stranger Deity offered as a reward for good behavior. The old man did not get rich as a direct consequence of his difficult work gathering firewood. Instead, the white-bearded man, that is, the Stranger Deity gives him a fortune because of the old man's generosity in offering the firewood without anticipating any return and his lack of greed for the gold grains. His spontaneous altruism is rewarded by the Stranger Deity with wealth.

The Hyōtoku genre of folktales has two additional themes that are important for understanding the meaning of wealth in Japanese cosmology. First, wealth is described as gold *grains*. Because ripe rice grains are referred to as "golden grains" and rice paddies full of ripe heads of rice are thus referred to as golden waves, I suggest that the gold grain coming out of the lad's navel is wealth in the form of rice. Second, gold is coming out of the abdomen—the abode of the soul and fetus—as in the eighth-century myth-history that describes rice originating in a deity's abdomen.

Folk religions are replete with the theme of wealth as a gift from a deity. Since the Medieval period, even today, Daikoku and Ebisu have been popular as the deities of the kitchen. They are two of the seven deities who bring fortune to people (*shichifukujin*). In paintings and statuettes made of porcelain, wood, or metal, that are still popular, Ebisu is depicted as a jolly fisherman with a fishing rod and a catch of fish on his shoulder, whereas Daikoku is depicted as a jolly man with fat cheeks, a hood on his head, carrying a large bag on his left shoulder and a mallet in his right hand, and with his foot on a bundle of rice (for details of Ebisu and Daikoku, see Yanagita 1951: 68–69, 338–339). A popular theme in folklore, the special mallet called *uchide no kozuchi* would produce fortune when struck. The fortune that Daikoku produces with his mallet is rice as iconographically represented by the bundle of rice (*komedawara*) upon which he places his foot.

These folktales, some of which are still told today, share the theme in the version of Japanese cosmogony in which the origin of rice—wealth par excellence—is explained as a *gift* from the deities in heaven. Seen in this light, a contemporary saying *tana kara botamochi* (a rice cake accidentally has fallen from a shelf) takes on a rich cultural meaning. Today, this saying refers to “luck” in a secular sense, a fortune received accidentally, without working for it. But, if a rice cake embodies the soul of a deity and rice originally was given by the deities in heaven, this ordinary saying is apparently embedded in cosmology and offers evidence that contemporary Japanese continue to think that wealth can sometimes be a windfall.

In folk cosmology as expressed in folktales and folk religions, wealth is bestowed upon a human by a Stranger Deity in the form of a sparrow, a crane, or a white-bearded man cum ugly boy because of the recipient’s generosity, mercy, or other virtue, especially altruism. As a gift from a deity, wealth receives religious sanction. Being sacred, it takes the form of golden rice or gold itself.

The wealth as a divine gift described in these folktales often constitutes a part of the body of a deity—a feather of a crane or grain from the abdomen. In other words, wealth is portrayed as a part of the divine body in both the origin myths of the eighth century discussed in chapter 4 and in the folktales and folk religions found in many parts of Japan even today.

The folktales and folk religions clearly share common themes with the myth-histories and the imperial harvest ritual. Thus, the cosmology propagated by the imperial system during the Ancient period and the folk cosmology of later periods do not constitute or derive from separate systems of thought. In all these folk and imperial tales and religions, for-

tune is depicted as a gift from a Stranger Deity, who may be an agrarian or a nonagrarian deity who resides somewhere in heaven, in the mountains, the sea, and so forth.

Rice as a Sacred Tax and Sacred Currency

Rice as a Sacred Tax

During the Early Modern period a taxation system (*kokudaka*) was instituted in which the tax was based on the putative yield of rice in the territory of each regional lord. The *kokudaka* system has usually been discussed solely as an economic and political institution, especially as an instrument of oppression against the peasants. Recent scholarship, however, points to its religious nature. Amino (1983, 1987) has uncovered important evidence to demonstrate that markets, taxation, and interest in Japan's Ancient and Medieval periods were essentially religious institutions. At that time, the government, shrines, and temples gave peasants unhulled rice seeds (*tanemomi*) for planting in the spring. In the fall, at harvest time, they repaid the "loan" with the new crop of rice (*hatsubo*) in amounts that included "interest" (*ritō*). This practice of loaning seed with interest, called *suiko*, originated during the Ancient period (see also Oda 1986; Yoshimura 1986). According to Amino, this transaction derives from the custom of offering the new crop of rice (*hatsubo*) and the first catch of the sea (*hatsuo*) to deities and Buddhas. These offerings then became the properties of the deities and Buddhas and could not be handled carelessly by humans. This practice, called *jōbun*, is the prototype for the seed loan (*suiko*) and both practices, according to Amino, should be viewed in religious terms. Amino emphasizes that the *jōbun* provided the model for all monetary transactions, which were handled by religious specialists during the Medieval period.³ The myth-histories and the imperial harvest ritual follow the same model as the *jōbun*.

Rice as Pure Money

Rice as the item of gift exchange between deities and humans is closely associated with the way rice was used as a medium of exchange in general. The strong tradition of a barter system and the use of rice as currency slowed the development of a cash economy based on metallic currency after its introduction from China. Thus, despite government encouragement of a cash economy, the Japanese continued the barter sys-



5.1. Containers of Rice Wine as Offerings to a Shrine in Kōbe, Japan, 1990. These containers are empty but symbolize cash donations. Photo by the author.

tem using rice, cloth, and other goods as items of exchange. Only with the beginning of the Medieval period, did the cash economy gradually make inroads into the Japanese economy. The percentage of coins and rice in the payment of a land tax during the Medieval period, quoted in Morisue (1953:125) delineates this gradual shift (table 5.1). The shift from the barter system to metallic currency took place gradually between the twelfth and fifteenth centuries (Reischauer and Craig 1978:63). By

TABLE 5.1
Land Tax Payment in Coins and Rice during the
Medieval Period (*Chūsei*) (percentage)

	<i>Kamakura Period</i> (1185–1392)			<i>Muromachi Period</i> (1392–1603)
	<i>Early</i>	<i>Middle</i>	<i>Late</i>	<i>Early</i>
Coin	39.7	69.9	84.2	93.2
Rice	60.3	30.1	15.8	6.8

1300 perhaps ten times as much metallic currency was in circulation as one century earlier (Sansom 1961:184). At the beginning of the Medieval period coins were imported from China, but by the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, copper, silver, and gold mines had been discovered in Japan, enabling the Japanese to mint their own currency (K. Inoue 1967:206).

Despite the presumed switch from a barter to a cash economy, rice as a means of exchange and as a form of tax did not disappear. Thus, even though the *kandaka*, the tax collected in copper coins, was adopted during the midsixteenth century, the *kokudaka* system returned during the early seventeenth century only fifty years later (Yamamura 1988). The *kokudaka* system returned, according to Yamamura, because of the economic and political advantages of the rice tax system over the cash system although others argue that farmers often found it difficult to convert their rice into money to pay taxes. Many reasons were likely for the resistance to a monetary tax, but there is no question that the religious/symbolic meaning of rice had much to do with it. Rice continued to be the medium of exchange for special occasions and remains so today at least in its symbolic forms as discussed later.

From a cross-cultural perspective, a special character of rice as a medium of exchange should be noted. Precious objects, money and quasi-money are all mediums of exchange, but they all change hands. Salt money of the Baruya of the Eastern Highlands of New Guinea is more important for intergroup exchange than for intragroup exchange (Godelier 1977:127–151). The Ainu of southern Sakhalin eagerly sought goods from neighboring populations, but their use was limited to offerings to their bear deities; such goods had no use or exchange value among themselves (Ohnuki-Tierney 1974).

Rice as a medium of exchange differs from both salt money and the Ainu trade goods in that, in addition to being the most important offering to the deities, it had both use and exchange value among the Japanese. It was *not*, however, a medium of exchange with non-Japanese

social groups. “Japanese rice” was exclusively for the Japanese, who, during most historical periods, did not have enough to export and refused for the most part to accept other peoples’ rice precisely because Japanese rice serves as a metaphor for the collective self of the Japanese—the theme of chapter 6.

Pure Money and Impure Money

In a discussion of state-issued money in Western scholarly discourse, Parry and Bloch (1989) identify two disparate views that are part of Western cultural tradition. In the tradition from Aristotle, Thomas Aquinas, and Marx, money is condemned. Aristotle (1958:25–26) sees “the exchange of commodities,” which is “limitless,” as “the unnatural form of acquisition,” in contrast to household acquisition with limits that are “natural.” Like Aristotle, Marx views money as a commodity fetish par excellence. An opposite view of money is represented by Mandeville and Adam Smith, for whom money provided the means for the individual pursuit of happiness and prosperity. A third view, represented by Simmel ([1907] 1950), takes an intermediate position that regards money as an instrument of freedom for the individual, on the one hand, and a threat to the moral order of the community, on the other hand.

With regard to social relationship, like Marx, Simmel ([1907] 1950: especially 283–354) links money to the development of individualism and the destruction of communal solidarity. Parry and Bloch (1989:4) summarize Roberts and Stephenson’s (1983:13) argument: Independent communities become dependent and dependent individuals become independent (see also Gregory 1982:71). To put the contrast between money and commodity crudely,

Gift exchange = an exchange of inalienable objects (gifts) between
interdependent transactors; creation of social bonds

Commodity exchange = the exchange of alienable objects (commodities)
between independent transactors; absence of social relations

Gift exchange and commodity exchange, however, are never clear-cut in practice. Discussing the origins of home industry in India between 1700 and 1930, Bayly notes, “What is striking here is the way in which the formal apparatus of markets and a monetized economy modeled themselves to and were accommodated by mentalities that still viewed the relationships between men, commodities, and other men in terms of good (pure) and evil (polluting)” (Bayly 1986:316). Thus, the Indians tried to accommodate both systems of transaction with an elaborate double-entry accounting system.

What Bayly observed among the Indians in these centuries, I think, pertains to even the most advanced capitalist societies of today, such as the United States and Japan. In practice, a sharp distinction between alienable and inalienable objects and between independent and interdependent human agents seems to obliterate human transactions in which, except in extreme cases, these structural oppositions are intertwined in complex ways. Money can be both inalienable and alienable, and the agents of transaction can be independent of each other or interdependent.

Both “dirty money (metallic currency)” and “clean money” have been used in Japan. Since its introduction from China money has been impure, dirty, degrading, and “unnatural to human nature.” The following statement about money in the twelfth century strikes a sympathetic cord even today:

One of the first clear mentions of the growth of monetary transactions is a passage in the *Hyakurenshō* under the date 1179, which says: “There is a strange sickness going round the country nowadays. It is called the money disease.” In conservative Court circles the use of coins was thought (not without some reason) to upset the price of commodities, and even so grave a statesman as Kujō Kanezane, writing in the 1180’s, said that the decay of government at this time was due entirely to these coins. (Sansom 1961:184)

During the Medieval and Early Modern periods rice was preferred to money as a medium of exchange because rice was considered pure whereas money was impure (Amino personal communication). There were serious discussions in the Early Modern period about the definition of productivity. Should merchants “be considered productive” or should the definition of productivity be restricted to agrarian labor? (See chapter 6.) The rationale for locating the merchant class at the bottom of the four-class/caste system during this period was based on the idea that merchants dealt with dirty money. Even today, many Japanese demonstrate an intense aversion to “dirty” money. The Japanese who come to the United States often find it difficult to hold a sandwich in their hands after paying for it at the cash register because their hands have just touched “dirty money” that “you don’t know who might have handled.” Japanese children are often taught to wash their hands after handling money, even though except for a few items, it is taboo to use hands for eating; instead, one must always use chopsticks, which are “by definition clean,” from a cultural standpoint (Ohnuki-Tierney 1984).

Money in Japan can, indeed, be clean, and even religious in nature. As shown in the folktales, a fortune, including gold currency, may be a divine gift. For example, in the crane story, the crane/deity weaves the brocade for the old man to *sell* for money. “Clean money,” in fact, has been

a major gift item in Japan throughout history, and even today gift-offerings to the deities must be money. People toss coins (*osaisen*) into a wooden box in front of a shrine and pray to the deities.

On many annual gift exchange occasions in Japan today money rather than an object is the prescribed gift. The *otoshidama*, a New Year's gift to children from adults, must be money. For funerals, rice and/or rice products used to be the main gift (*kōden*), but they were replaced by money (Itoh 1984:103; Ishimori 1984). Money is also the gift for weddings in contemporary Japan. On occasions for which money is the prescribed gift, there are commonsense "fixed prices" depending on the occasion and the relationship between the donor and the recipient. For example, in the 1980s and 1990s in urban Japan, ¥ 50,000 is appropriate if the person is equal or superior in social standing to the *parents* of a groom or a bride, but ¥ 30,000 is proper if given by a social inferior although friends and co-workers of a groom or a bride may follow a recent trend and opt to give a gift worth about ¥ 30,000. The money must be new bills and must be put in appropriate envelopes, properly and elaborately decorated. On some of these occasions, especially funerals, the family must keep a record of names and the amount of money each person gives to the family. The record enables the family to determine an appropriate return gift in the future.

Dirty money can be purified. During the Medieval period, people buried a money box (*senryōbako*) in the ground with a word *bukku* (offering to Buddha) in a belief that anything buried in the ground loses its ownership identity and becomes the property of buddhas and deities (Amino 1987). People could then lend the money and receive interest for it. This practice derives from the aforementioned ritual during which the new crop of rice and the first catch from the sea offered to the Buddhas and deities as *jōbun* became sacred and belonged to them. Burying money follows this tradition of consecration by offering it to the buddhas and deities. The oblong gold coins (*ōban* and *koban*) during the late Early Modern period bore an embossed picture of rice stalks with succulent rice grains, which made them symbolically equivalent to pure money.

How "pure money" became equivalent to rice is succinctly expressed in the way red rice (*sekihan*) and other rice products, which used to be the prescribed gifts for funerals, were replaced by money in the mid-nineteenth century. Ishimori (1984:276) analyzed the records of funeral gifts received by one family in Nagano Prefecture that covered seven generations, beginning in 1846. In table 5.2 I summarize the number of gifts of each type and combine all the rice products in Ishimori's table into one category that includes red rice (*sekihan*), rice wine, glutinous rice, rice cake, and *ohagi* (sweets made of rice). A dramatic shift occurred between 1846 and 1861. In 1861, 64 percent of donors gave money gifts, 76 per-

TABLE 5.2
Rice and Money as Funeral Gifts

<i>Year</i>	<i>Money</i>	<i>Money Coupons</i>	<i>Rice Products</i>	<i>Other Gifts</i>	<i>Number of Donors</i>
1846	6	13	31	9	59
1861	59	11	16	6	92
1867	37	4	13	1	55
1880	73	1	27	2	103
1898	65	0	26	1	92
1905	82	0	18	1	101
1938	184	0	1	0	185
1939	132	0	3	0	135
1961	215	0	0	0	215

Source: Ishimori 1984:276, table 1.

cent, if money coupons are combined with money. By 1961 money became the only gift item at funerals.

Metallic currency is equivalent to rice in that both are forms of exchange. But, although money can be dirty or clean, rice as an item of exchange has always been “sacred” in the past and remains “clean” today. Equivocal money, however, can be as clean as rice if the money is consecrated in precisely the same way as rice: by offering it to the deities and Buddhas, by prescribing it as a gift from the deities as in the folktales, identifying money with rice in a specific way as in the gold coins embossed with a rice motif, or giving new bills at culturally prescribed occasions, such as funerals and weddings.

The crucial difference between money and rice, then, is that money is equivocal whereas rice is unequivocal. Money, thus, can be an important inalienable gift or devilish fetish, whereas rice as an item of exchange is always an inalienable gift exchanged among interdependent individuals; there is no dirty rice currency. The meaning of rice as a medium of exchange retains its original religious, or, to put it more broadly, cosmological meaning: the soul of rice embodies the peaceful soul of the deities.

Japanese culture is far from unique in this respect. Among many peoples in the world—the Chinese, the Greeks, the Romans, the Vedic Indians, the Samoans, the Tongans, and so forth—money originated as a sacred object (Hocart 1952:97–104). Hocart identifies the origin of money with the fee paid to the priest who represents the god; the priest “is presented with some objects in which the nature of that god abides” (Hocart [1936] 1970:103). In Greece, for example, mints were housed in temples, and forgery was considered sacrilege. The word *money* comes from Juno Moneta, a temple on the Capitoline Hill where a mint for silver currency was set up in 269 B.C. (Hocart 1952:100). Having originated as an offering to the deities, money gave rise to trade, which was

also sacred, according to Hocart, whose memorable sentence epitomizes the sacred spirit of the trade: “[a] little of it [gold] was given away in exchange for quantities of their stuff because *a few ounces of divinity were worth pounds of gross matter*” (Hocart 1952:101; italics added). Likewise, the origin of taxes is religious because “the Lord loveth a cheerful giver” (Hocart [1936] 1970:202).⁴

The Power and Aesthetics of Rice

Rice as Power

Because it embodied the sacred power of nigitama, rice was for a long time considered to provide sacred energy and power. Thus, many contemporary practices derive from the notion that rice gives a person sacred energy although today most Japanese observe these practices without believing in the sacredness of rice. Traditionally, rice cakes are eaten when people need strength, such as at the height of the agricultural season and the start of the New Year, a seasonal rite of passage. Even those Japanese who do not normally eat rice cakes do so on New Years, and until very recently, it was an important family affair in many regions of Japan, including urban areas, to prepare large numbers of rice cakes at the end of the year for the New Year when they were offered to the deities and shared among family members, relatives, and all other visitors (for details of New Year, see chap. 6). Rice cakes were also fed to women after childbirth (Yanagita 1982b:240–258). As a source of rejuvenating energy, even today rice gruel (*okayu*) is *the* food for the sick and the weaning food for babies, as well as for young people participating in sports as noted earlier. Shops sell rice cakes labeled “rice cake for strength (*chikara mochi*).” In other words, in a secularized form the symbolic power of rice remains significant in contemporary Japan, although its meaning and power may be recognized only at times of crisis, such as discussion of the rice importation issue today.⁵

Although the political dimension of rice is not a focus in this book, I should mention that the cosmological or religious power of rice underscored the political power. The rice tax system (*kokudaka*) was based on the putative yield of rice in the territory of regional lords. The putative yield of rice then became an important expression of wealth and power of the lords. A lord whose territory yielded one million *koku* of rice (*Hyakumangoku no otonosama*), for example, of Kaga-han (presently in the Ishikawa Prefecture), conveyed an image of fields of golden rice stalks, which symbolized wealth and power, underscored by their aesthetic beauty.



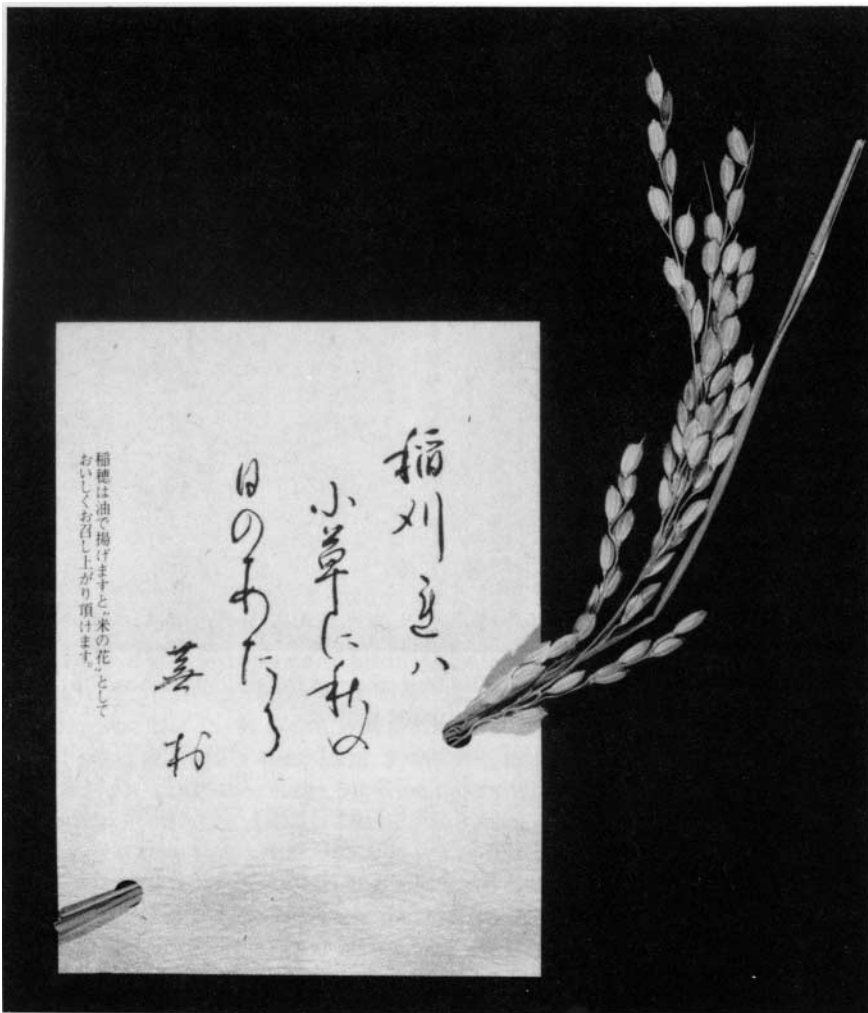
5.2. Contemporary Postage Stamps. The fragrance of the succulent heads of the early crop (*wase*) is praised in a poem. (Photo by the author)

Rice as Beautiful

Rice, both in raw and cooked forms, is not only powerful but also beautiful. Ripe heads of rice grain are described as having a golden luster. The association is between their color and “rice as money” because the character *kin* (or *kane*) refers both to money and gold.

The aesthetics of rice is expressed in poems, essays, and visual arts, which, in turn, further promoted the beauty of rice. Motoori Norinaga (1730–1801), a nativist scholar of the Early Modern period, emphasized in his chauvinistic way that Japan’s superiority over other countries is epitomized by the rice grown in Japan, which is superior to that grown in other countries; its *beauty* is derived from the superiority of the country (Motoori Norinaga, *Kojikiden*, cited in Watanabe 1989:089).

Even today, the aesthetics of rice is extolled. A pair of ¥ 60 stamps, one with a picture of succulent heads of rice and the other with a poem written in calligraphy praising the fragrance of new rice grains were issued recently (see figs. 5.2, 5.3). The visual message of these stamps is powerful: rice is not only beautiful but its beauty is as quintessentially



5.3. Insert in a Container of Rice Crackers. An illustration of succulent grains of rice with a poem by the famous poet, Buson, in which he describes rice harvesting in aesthetic terms. Photo by the author.

Japanese as the brushstrokes with which the Japanese often choose to present/represent their culture to outsiders.

As for the beauty of cooked rice, the most important characteristics are the related qualities of luster, purity, and whiteness. In his *In-ei Raisan* (In praise of shadows), Tanizaki Junichirō, an important novelist of this century, extols the beauty of cooked rice: “When cooked rice is in

a lacquer container placed in the dark, shining with black luster, it is more aesthetic to look at, and it is more appetizing. When you lift the lid [of the lacquer container], you see pure white rice with vapor rising. *Each grain is a pearl.* If you are a Japanese, you certainly appreciate rice when you look at it this way (in a lacquerware container placed in the dark)” (Tanizaki [1933] 1959:17–18; translation by this author; italics added). This passage illustrates the aesthetics of rice as developed perhaps most highly among the elite but shared also by the folk.

Even today, “pure rice” (*junmai*) or “white rice” (*hakumai*) has aesthetic quality. The two kinds of rice preferred by most Japanese today are *koshibikari* and *sasanishiki*. The term *bikari* means light or luster in Japanese, and *nishiki* means gold. Both labels, thus, emphasize the luster of rice, its aesthetics. Like the deities embodied in mirrors, the aesthetics of rice must lie in the luster, whiteness, and purity.⁶

It is easy to see how the aesthetics of rice are closely related to the self-representation and perception of the Japanese and thereby become susceptible to a dangerous transformation into the chauvinistic value seen in the writings of Motoori Norinaga and Tanizaki Junichirō.

Rice as Good Life

In addition to beauty and power, rice also stands for “good life.” In the folktales people who are rewarded with wealth (rice) live happily ever after. The purpose of many rituals, including the imperial and folk harvest rituals, is to guarantee an abundant crop of rice and a good life. Many other folk religions and millenarian movements share the same goal. For example, *inari shinkō*, a folk religion that celebrates the Deity of Rice Paddies (Ta-no Kami) and the fox, the messenger from this deity (Matsumae 1988; Yanagita 1951:35–36), concerns exclusively the rice harvest.

Ethnohistorical descriptions of peasant rebellions, which often took the form of millenarian movements, portray a utopia with abundant rice. Throughout the Early Modern period uprisings both in rural and urban areas were endemic. Most were expressions of peasant dissatisfaction with local people—local officials who failed to be benevolent, money lenders, sake dealers, and priests and monks at shrines and temples who hoarded wealth. During these riots peasants often targeted the storehouses of wealthy local people. The utopia portrayed in their demand was a community under a good government that eliminates unequal distribution of wealth and unfair accumulation of wealth by certain individuals (Katsumata 1985). These uprisings, therefore, had the characteris-

tics of millenarian movements. When staging these uprisings, peasants donned rice-straw coats and carried straw bags of rice on their shoulders; their banners were also made of rice straw (Katsumata 1985:127–131). In other words, all the important symbols used in the peasant uprisings were made from the rice plant.

The message of these symbols is quite significant: Japanese deities are iconographically depicted as wearing rice-straw coats (Orikuchi 1975a: 202). Thus, according to Katsumata (1985:131), peasants symbolically carried deities on their backs when they staged their rebellion and demanded a utopia with “economic egalitarianism” among fellow villagers.⁷ But the power to bring forth this utopia rested on rice, whose products were used for attire and banners during the uprisings. In short, the peasants aligned themselves directly with the agrarian deities in their protest by using rice products for their symbols.

A vision of utopia as a world with abundant crops, especially rice (Miyata 1970:89, 169–170, 195; 1987:28–44), is detailed in a well-known work by Miyata (1970) who offers a detailed historical and ethnographic account of the cosmology underlying a folk religion cum millenarian movement known as the “Miroku Shinkō” (The belief in Maitreya). Although the Buddha Maitreya derives from Indian Buddhism, it has been thoroughly transformed in Japan and become closely aligned with the rice rituals (Miyata 1970:169–70). Miyata argues that this utopia is shared by a number of millenarian movements, some spread across wide areas, toward the end of the Early Modern period and afterward, particularly after 1867. People began to realize that something was drastically wrong with the Tokugawa regime. For example, in a millenarian movement known as Eejanaika (It’s all right), which was closely related to the Miroku belief, people took to the street where they danced and sang in a frenzy to express a desire for world renewal (*yonaoshi, yonaori*). The world they envisioned and hoped for emphasized a low price for rice and an abundant rice crop; their songs and dances often derived from harvest songs and dances (Takagi 1983:221–231; Miyata 1987). During the nineteenth century, villagers in many regions held a ritual called “longing for the good world,” during which some villagers chanted, “Give us a pleasant world and a peaceful world, give us a world that is full of rice and millet” (Scheiner 1973:586).

The utopian vision portrayed in the rebellions and millenarian movements testifies to the acute shortage of food, especially rice. It is highly significant that the people who participated in these movements not only upheld the symbolic importance of rice but, in fact, intensified it by using symbols made from the rice plant, rather than challenging or subverting the cosmology based on rice agriculture.

Rice as Sacred Gift

The characterization of rice as wealth, money, and the source of power and aesthetics shows some cross-cultural parallels as well as meanings specific to Japanese culture. In contrast to the Protestant ethic introduced in chapter 3, which justified forcing farmers to work from dawn to dusk, there is another altogether different and equally important cosmological meaning of wealth—a gift from the Stranger Deity (marebito), a deity from a far-off land who brings good fortune to the people, just as the origin of rice was explained as the gift of self from the deities in heaven.

Anthropologists have been acutely aware that multiple, often competing if not contesting, world views are held either simultaneously by people or by different social groups within the same society. To find the theme of the Stranger Deity as the source of wealth alongside the notion of wealth as a result of hard work is not surprising. The former is non-formalized, whereas the latter is formalized, just as the male-centered, formalized world view of the Ainu is expressed in their bear ceremony, whereas the nonformalized world view, celebrating the symbolic power of women, is expressed in their shamanistic ritual (Ohnuki-Tierney 1981).

The notion of a “stranger” is widespread in Africa, Oceania, and many other parts of the world. Originally pointed out by Simmel ([1907] 1950:402–408), the “stranger” is simultaneously far and near, or belongs to and yet does not belong to the community in which he or she is in a position to exercise considerable power, including material and non-material blessings. Although the specific nature of the power of the stranger varies from culture to culture, the Stranger Deity has been used by a number of scholars as a powerful analytical tool to explain cultural dynamics, including historical changes.⁸

In many societies, precious goods originate as a medium of exchange between deities and humans, thereby assigning religious meaning to these goods and to “economic” transactions. Because the sacred is often perceived both as powerful and beautiful, art and religion are inseparable in almost every past culture. Although the aesthetics of rice may be difficult to understand for nonrice-eating peoples, it is celebrated and appreciated almost as a piece of art would be. Some contrast must be noted here, however. Wheat and bread—the latter as the metaphor for the body of Christ—have not found their way into aesthetics as much as rice has, owing, perhaps, to the fact that, unlike rice, which is a deity, they themselves are not deified.

Equivocal metallic currency and unequivocal rice present us with a

significant problem for students of symbolism. One knows that behavior or an object does not cry out with a specific meaning. Historical actors assign meanings to their own symbolic behaviors and objects. Yet one sees the basic cultural framework to restrict the actors who are not altogether free to assign meanings after all: the basic cultural meanings of rice and metallic currency, respectively, exercise some constraints. Money can be pure or dirty, whereas rice can be insignificant in the secularized world today but it can *never* be “dirty.”