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Rice and Magic
A Cultural History from the Precolonial World to the Present

Beliefs in rice spirits were integral to the magical worldview of the precolonial inhabitants of the Philippine islands. Under Spanish colonialism, rice became a staple but it underwent disenchantment and symbolic marginality. By the 1870s rice production fell short relative to demand. Twentieth-century initiatives to address persistent shortages culminated in the 1960s Green Revolution, which further altered the rice plant and ushered in the age of practicality. Because rice production cannot be fully controlled, farmers still deploy culturally meaningful strategies to deal with uncertainties. The old meanings of rice for commensality have also proven resilient and reveal peculiarly Filipino ways.

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The United Nations declared 2004 as the International Year of Rice with the motto "Rice is life." In the Philippines various seminars and publications were launched to celebrate rice in the arts and in studies of Philippine science and development (e.g., Zafaralla 2004; Castillo 2006). In most cases, the motto was beyond critical scrutiny, for who would doubt the value of rice as food and sustenance? Nevertheless, in human history ways of living have not stood still, and social transformations have profoundly affected how people regard rice as both plant and food. The method of growing rice has been far from static, and rice itself has changed. Given the evolving historical milieu, the ways in which rice is seen as invigorating life has also changed. Although the overall story of rice may hark back to the ancient past, the meanings of rice and the materiality of rice cultivation and consumption have differed over the centuries, and continue to move into unprecedented social and technological terrains. That rice is life need not be reified as an eternal verity, but diachronically understood as a proposition subject to historical contingencies.

This article focuses on one aspect of the social history of rice: its cultural significance to Filipinos, starting from the embedment of rice in a magical worldview in the precolonial era through to the progressive disenchantment of the rice plant. The process that evacuated magic from rice was precipitated by radical changes in production technology and religion under Spanish colonialism, which also made rice into a staple food. However, from the late nineteenth century onward, rice supply has persistently fallen short of demand. To increase the rice stock modernizing endeavors were pursued in the course of the twentieth century, which culminated in the "modern rice technology" of the Green Revolution of the 1960s that profoundly altered rural ways of life and sapped the rice plant of any lingering magical potency. However, because the modern technologies of growing rice have not been able to control all factors in the environment, the contemporary farmer must still deploy culturally meaningful strategies to deal with uncertainties. Thus, as this article shows, there remains room for ritualized magic along with Catholic prayers in rice cultivation. At the same time, the meanings of rice for commensality, kinship, and social solidarity have proven resilient despite the commoditization of rice and its subjection to scientific and technological engineering. The article ends with a discussion of sumptuary practices that reveal peculiarly Filipino ways of consuming rice and evoking its ritual significance, no matter how attenuated it may now be.

Rice in the Precolonial World

Dictionaries prepared by Spaniards in the early part of the Spanish colonial period recorded numerous words referring to rice. In Fray Miguel Ruiz's *Diccionario Español en Tagalo* the second largest grouping of food-related words—201 in all—consisted of words pertaining to rice (Fernandez 2001, 74–79). Each step in the cultivation of the rice plant and in the preparation and consumption of the rice grain was denoted by a specific word. The dictionary listed forty-one varieties of rice, sixteen of which were identified specifically as referring to varieties grown in flooded rice paddies (*de tubigan*) and twenty specifically as grown in upland swidden (*de altos*). As Doreen Fernandez (ibid., 74) concluded, among the Tagalog, rice "was obviously high in the consciousness, being important to livelihood and life-style."

William Henry Scott (1994) and Laura Lee Junker (2000) provide valuable information about rice in the social life of the inhabitants of the islands that would later be known as the Philippines. In the preconquest period, rice was highly valued and perhaps considered the most esteemed cereal, but it was not a daily staple. Rice production was insufficient and did not allow year-round consumption: "even *datus* with many slaves ate root crops in certain seasons" (Scott 1994, 291).

Concerning the Visayas, Scott (ibid., 35) writes: "But since only in a few places could a year's supply of rice be produced, root crops were therefore the most common food for part of the year, or all of the year for part of the people." Subject to seasonal flooding, the alluvial plains of Bikol produced large quantities of irrigated rice and supported a large population.[1] Even there Scott (ibid., 182) says: "Despite the abundance of rice in some places and for some people, the staple Bikol food was root crops." Taro, yams, and millet were the staple cereals of the islanders. These were planted in swidden fields and around the margins of swidden patches devoted to dry upland rice.

Rice was relatively abundant in the uplands, and cultivated using a dibble stick or pole that men thrust to the ground to make holes where women placed the rice seeds. In the lowlands, wet-rice cultivation depended on transplanting rice from seedbed to swampland, but water levels could not be controlled and rice plants stood the risk of drowning. Lowlanders desiring to obtain upland rice offered seafood, salt, and pottery in exchange (ibid., 36).

Portions of rice harvests were given to chiefs as *buwis*, which Spanish chroniclers interpreted as tribute (Aguilar 1998, 66). Among the Tagalog "standardized measures of rice were demanded by southern Luzon chiefs from their commoner constituency, with the number of *gantas* (approximately three liters of rice) dependent on the amount of land cultivated by individual families" (Junker 2000, 237). Limited archaeological evidence indicates that "rice was significantly more prevalent in the presumed elite habitation zone in comparison to the nonelite residential zone" (ibid., 331). Early on, rice was implicated with the asymmetries of social power relations and inequalities.

Junker (ibid., 330) notes that rice was a prestigious and highly valued food because of the "high labor intensity in growing rice" relative to root crops. In addition to its texture and flavor, the ease of pounding rice (compared with, say, millet with its hard husk) might also have made it a highly preferred food (Scott 1994, 39). Like root crops, rice was boiled without seasoning, but with fragrant leaves sometimes mixed with rice in the cooking pot. Cooked rice was combined with viands that were frequently fried in coconut oil, barbecued, or smoked. There were various ways of preparing and consuming rice, which could be grounded to produce flour and made into rice cakes (ibid., 47–48). As the Jesuit Ignacio Francisco Alcina (2002, 198–99) narrated in the late seventeenth century, rice was "the first nourishment (*el sustento primero*) in the appreciation of the natives and the one with the greatest nutritive effects. It is also the one that gives them greater strength and is most agreeable to their constitution (*mejor disposición en el cuerpo*) . . . ."

Early on, rice was a marker of ecological and geographic differentiation as well as a signifier of social stratification. It was highly valued and desired, but was not a staple food. These islands were thus akin to Japan, where "rice was primarily the food for the upper class throughout most of history, and was not a 'staple food' for most Japanese until recently" (Ohnuki-Tierney 1995, 228). But, as Emiko Ohnuki-Tierney (ibid.) notes, it "has always been the most important food for ritual occasions for most Japanese." Indeed, in the preconquest islands, rice was an important element of ritual and a signifier of the people's cosmology.

This cultural significance of rice can be glimpsed from Scott's (1994, 190) description of harvest practices:

> Harvesting was accompanied by strict religious [taboos]. For three days before, harvesters had to remain continent and keep away from fire. Neither could outsiders enter the house: otherwise, they believed, the rice would be all straw with very few grains. In some places they even camped in the field all during the harvest, lest the rice decrease—as they said—by running away angry because the house had not been left to it alone. Harvesting was usually done by women, and men could not join them even if the crop would be lost for want of reapers. . . . And once the harvest was finished, more [taboos] were enforced for seven days—for example, houses were closed to outsiders, and cooking fires had to be rekindled each time.
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> Rice was reaped panicle by panicle, leaving stalks standing, with a sickle . . . or any kind of knife . . . . the rest were sunned and stored unthreshed in field granaries . . . or under the house . . . . It was threshed as needed by being trampled underfoot . . . scraped against a seashell . . . or pulled through with the hands . . . .

This account alerts us to the fact that, in the preconquest world, rice growing, harvesting, and consumption were embedded not only in social relationships but also in the islanders' cosmology. They possessed a belief complex that, as in other parts of Southeast Asia, associated women with the rice plant and justified the near-exclusive application of female labor to rice planting, care, and harvesting.[2] Their magical worldview suggested that spirits resided in the grains of rice. These spirits had to be propitiated or they could become "angry" and "run away" if certain practices were not followed.

A key practice was harvesting rice panicle by panicle, which was widely observed, even among the sixteenth-century Igorot (ibid., 262). Today among the Bontok, whom the Spaniards failed to subjugate, rice is harvested in the same manner: "taken, as it were, unawares, and with a minimum of shock or disturbance," else a drastic motion might scare the spirits and cause them to flee to other fields (Labrador 1998, 97–98). In panicles, the rice stalks appear to continue to hold the spirits, and it is in that form that harvested rice is kept by present-day Bontok women. In the past rice was threshed "as needed" (Scott 1994, 39), a practice that has persisted among the Bontok today.

Among the Ifugao in the early twentieth century, Roy Barton (1946, 80–81, 119) observed that individual households kept harvested rice in a granary ("the shaded place") guarded by Bulul figures carved from narra

wood, believed to be potent in increasing the rice supply while in storage. In a collective ritual, all the Bulul icons in a village were brought together and appeased with rice wine and rice cakes, an event marking the end of the annual agricultural cycle (ibid., 123). Often taken as representations of rice deities, the Bulul figures that have survived are "serene, austere, and powerful" (Pastor Roces 2013, 215; see photographs in Monbrison and Alvina 2013, 216–41). These images are those of females and of the complementary dyads of male and female, and in all cases are always bald and naked, with a "nearly imperceptible bow" (Pastor Roces 2013, 217). Not conveying personality, the faces of Bulul figures are "a concentrated essence, and, as a couple, the partner sculptures emanate the principles of conjoint and reciprocal male and female energies" consistent with the Austronesian principles of cognatic kinship (ibid., 222).[3] As Marian Pastor Roces (ibid., 217, 220) has observed, "The typically compact forms [of the classic Bulul] 'fit' within a vertical, rectangular volume of abstract space," which communicates stability and power. Even today Bulul images are present in rice harvest rituals.

The difficulty of growing rice and its relative scarcity in the precolonial world could explain the apparently antisocial practice of keeping away "outsiders" from the house during the harvest and immediate postharvest periods. But this practice could have been a sign of respect accorded to the rice spirits, allowing them to "have" the rice before humans partake of it. It is instructive that in Bali newly harvested rice cannot be eaten or sold until the household celebrates a ritual in which the essence of rice is "returned" to heaven, given that rice production is seen as a cooperative endeavor between deities and people (Howe 1991, 454). The apparent belief in the prerogative of spirits over the rice harvest is expressed negatively in terms of a taboo that Alcina (2002, 198–99) noted in the seventeenth century: "when [rice] is newly or recently harvested and eaten, it causes a high fever or a blood-stool of sorts," and even the Spanish priests—evidently influenced by indigenous beliefs—refrained from eating rice "until about a month or two after it is harvested."

Once the panicles had been stored (and perhaps the amount of the harvest established), sociality reentered the realm of rice. As long as the supply lasted, rice occupied an important role in everyday meals, and in feasts and rituals. One could imagine that, after all, there was no way to hide the inviting aroma of cooking rice wafting through the physical and social space of commensal beings. Men partook of this social world via women, whose labor linked rice cultivation to food preparation and consumption.

What happened then to the spirits in the rice when it was cooked and ingested? In the early twentieth century, Barton (1946, 113–14) observed that the Ifugao held a ritual at the first eating of new rice in which the shaman prayed "very softly to the rice" inside a bamboo tube, requesting the rice grains to feel tranquility like they were inside the tube once they entered the stomachs of the children, "as if inside a nose flute, as if laid against a house stud, and so that the vapors will pass straight through . . . and be thou quiet and [feel like twilight] . . . and turned into food . . . ." The gentle appeal to the rice was to stay the course and be at peace in their conversion into food, which would be digestible yet able to delay the next hunger pang. To the rice was also addressed the request: "please thou to increase also so that thou meet . . . our rice of the seasonal swing" (ibid., 114). The appeal was for rice to cooperate with humans so as to last until the next crop harvest.

For rice to restore vitality and reinvigorate life, rice spirits must be seen as performing a life-giving role. The Ifugao belief resonates with those of the Japanese whose mythologies advice that one way by which people "rejuvenate themselves" is by "internalizing the divine power through the consumption of rice-cum-deities, which become part of the human body and its growth" (Ohnuki-Tierney 1995, 228–29). To the inhabitants of these islands prior to European conquest, we may suppose that the rice spirits were believed to perform an analogous role in preserving life and restoring vitality. Rice was not a mere source of calories, but a life force that linked people to the cosmos and its potencies.

Present-day Bontok practices remain highly suggestive. Ana Labrador's (1998, 93) ethnography underscores that rice is a crucial food in ritual, during which it "crosses the threshold of the category of mundane food to become part of a feasting fare" that otherwise privileges meat over plant food—meat being the main ritual food in ancient Southeast Asia (cf. Reid 1988, 32–33). "So like meat, rice restores vitality after a potentially lifedraining and polluting effect of a death in the family. Feasting is also part of conquering vulnerability and transcends liminality. Among the Bontok, these would not be possible without rice" (Labrador 1998, 93–94).

Perhaps because of its ritual and material significance and its relatively scarce supply, rice—rather than a precious mineral such as silver or gold—was the one item that preconquest natives lent and borrowed. Horacio

de la Costa (1965/1992, 5) explains the high interest rate: rice "is food, a consumable commodity; but it is also seed, a factor of production. Planted, it yields much more than double its original quantity. It must have seemed equitable, therefore, that anyone who borrowed rice should repay at least double what he borrowed, and that the interest on the loan should grow with each planting season that he failed to give it back."

The Making of a Staple: Colonial Transformations under Spain

The preconquest social world was radically altered by the advent of Spanish colonialism. Although the powerful changes that occurred during the contact period cannot be discussed here at length (cf. Aguilar 1998, 32–93), noteworthy is the fact that the spirit-world remained but it began to be dominated by Hispanic rather than indigenous preternatural beings, and the power relations they signified reflected the dynamics of colonial life. While reduced to living in compact settlements, or at least within hearing of the church bells, as a result of the colonial program of *reducción*, the subjugated native (*indio*) was transformed at the same time into an individuated peasant. Under the reign of the colonial Catholic Church, the ancient communal rituals disappeared. However, each peasant household adopted its own magical strategies of entreating the spirit-world to nurture and protect the farm and its crops, a practice that has persisted to the present day.

Moreover, under Spanish rule the production and handling of rice were profoundly transformed. Without a doubt, rice continued to be an important and highly valued food crop, but the system by which it was grown underwent radical change.

To finance the colonial enterprise (cf. Alonso 2003), the Spanish friars introduced plow technology that harnessed the carabao—and, along with it, the channeling of waterways for gravity irrigation—making wet-rice cultivation possible in lowland but not waterlogged areas. The system relied on monsoon rains and the methodical transplanting of seedlings from seedbeds to rice fields. The irrigation system was rudimentary. As Norman Owen (1984, 120) says of rice cultivation in the Bikol peninsula in the nineteenth century, it

> did not have the elaborate network of canals and reservoirs we associate with "hydraulic societies," nor were there the institutions (officials, courts, fees, irrigation associations) and endemic conflicts over water rights which characterize such societies. Most Bikol "irrigation" consisted of little more than local drainage-retention systems, a few canals through which river waters were diverted into the paddies during the rainy season. These were not normally capable of supplying water during the dry seasons, carrying it any distance to otherwise uncultivable ground, or draining the field when they were flooded . . . .

Nevertheless, this technology was revolutionary in the local context, making wet-rice cultivation "normative, the state toward which all farming would move if land and labor permitted" (ibid., 121).

To propagate the new plow technology—a contribution by Spanish friars often elided in Philippine nationalist histories—a foundry for casting plowshares was established in Manila in 1584, with Panday Pira as the first foundryman. As O. D. Corpuz (1997, 28) narrates, "Plowmaking was made a monopoly, farmed out in auction by the regime. The work of the friars in training the natives in the use of the carabao and plow was a valuable contribution. The friars disseminated the new technology by bringing trained farmers and their families with them when they were transferred to other parishes."

For the lowland indio peasant, male labor became crucial in land preparation, particularly in plowing the field. The preconquest male tasks of clearing forest patches for swidden and creating holes in the ground for the rice seed in the old system of dry-rice farming were converted to the tasks of preparing the land for planting of the rice seedlings.

The work of transforming Philippine rice agriculture must have been a protracted endeavor during the three centuries of Spanish colonialism. Observing these changes during his travels in the mid-1840s, Jean Mallat (1983, 245–46) reported that "the religious went around the countryside, showing how to distribute water so that everyone had his share, the manner of gathering water in large reservoirs so that it would never be lacking; they built dams with earth and incorruptible posts, converted marshland into rice-fields, taught Indios how to transplant rice in the fields."

The monastic estates, which were founded in the late seventeenth and eighteenth centuries mainly in the Tagalog region but secondarily in Cebu, shifted from cattle-raising to wet-rice agriculture by the mid-eighteenth century with the rise in population and the emergence of a commercialized

economy (Roth 1982; Fenner 1985, 47; Palanco 2010). In the course of the eighteenth century, migration, settlement, and rice farming extended to the northern portions of the central Luzon plain (McLennan 1982). Thus, more areas were opened for cultivation, which increased the aggregate output of rice. The large-scale commercialization of Philippine agriculture also occurred around the same period.

The 1740s, and especially after the expulsion of ethnic Chinese for cooperating with the British in the 1760s and the subsequent period that put Chinese immigration to a virtual halt, witnessed the ascendancy of Chinese mestizos who began to form the new class of native elites (Wickberg 1964, 1965/2000). Chinese mestizos would eventually constitute the core of the nationalist movement and the Filipino elite in the twentieth century. Among their various economic niches, Chinese mestizos became leaseholders (*inquilinos*) of rice lands in the friar haciendas. Some of these leased lands were cultivated through sharecropping agreements while others were sublet to indio peasants. Chinese mestizos also acquired ownership of rice lands through moneylending that stipulated deeds of retrocession (*sanglang-bili*). As landowners and rice traders, Chinese mestizos became involved in capitalizing rice production and advancing its commercialization while accumulating personal wealth. Rice started to acquire the character of a commodity that the leaseholder and sharecropper paid to the landowner in the friar estates and elsewhere. Rice was also traded in the market subject to fluctuating prices.

Later in the eighteenth century Spanish authorities, especially under the administration of José Basco y Vargas, sought a systematic approach to develop export agriculture. With the de facto opening of Manila's port to world trade in 1789, rice production "received great impetus"; for instance, in 1793 Pampanga Province exported 28,307 piculs of rice (Díaz-Trechuelo 1966, 125–26). By the early nineteenth century, the export of rice, particularly to China, would appear to have been commonplace. Other provinces, such as Camarines Sur on the Bikol peninsula, also participated in the export of rice.[4]

The overall increase in rice production in the Spanish colony was able to support a growing population of noncultivators, including native elites, Spanish friars and officials, and Chinese traders. Following Ester Boserup's (1981) famous theory, it can be said that the technology of rice production kept pace with the rate of population growth during this period. Rice came to be regarded by Spanish priests as "the only real source of wealth" as other sources were deemed inherently unstable, and the availability of wet-rice lands became a primary consideration in deciding whether a proposed town could support its population (Owen 1984, 123).

Nonetheless, the many varieties of rice—one count registered fifty-four varieties, another enumerated ninety-three—continued to be cultivated in different ways. In addition to wet-rice agriculture, rice was grown on swidden fields (or *kaingin*) in upland areas and was also sown directly in elevated areas that benefited from monsoon rains (Díaz-Trechuelo 1966, 125).

In addition to plow technology, the Spaniards introduced new crops that would become the staple of many of the colonized natives. Sweet potato was one of the crops that underwent a transpacific journey, leading to the Náhuatl word, *camote*, entering the lexicon of Philippine languages (Albalá 2003). In the same vein, maize became a new dry-land crop, a phenomenon emblematized by the entry of the word *mais*, originally from the Antilles, into Philippine vocabularies. Corn and sweet potato became widely accepted staple food in nonirrigated parts of the archipelago. As Fenner (1985, 48–49) puts it, "Gradually, the Cebuanos must have been won over to corn, for by the nineteenth century it was grown extensively on both small and large parcels of land. Because it grows better than rice on unirrigated fields, corn, like millet, was ideally suited to Cebu's dry climate." Today in Cebu and the rest of the Visayas and, through the influence of Visayan migrants, in Mindanao as well, corn is the real staple of many poor households.

By the nineteenth century the ancient magical cosmology that enveloped rice cultivation had been obscured. Wet-rice technology made rice supply abundant as never before, at least in some regions. With improved yields and diminished uncertainty, as the classic theoretical proposition goes, reliance on magic could be expected to decline. Peasants retained their spirit beliefs, which were marshaled through individuated rituals to cope with the uncertainties of rice cultivation, but the view of the rice plant itself was disenchanted. Preternatural beings were no longer domiciled in rice grains. In the hispanized lowlands, harvested rice was no longer stored in panicles but threshed soon after harvest, the threshed rice dried in the sun and then stored. Belief in the ability of rice to cause illness if eaten soon after harvest disappeared.

This cosmological sea change evidently loosened rigidities in the gender division of labor and banished the ancient taboos, allowing males to freely join females in the transplanting, weeding, and harvesting of rice. The degree of gender equality in rice cultivation thus sets the lowland Philippines apart from countries in Southeast Asia, such as Indonesia, where transplanting in particular, but also weeding and harvesting, are still seen today as tasks primarily marked out for women.[5] Likewise, starting in the 1960s in the Philippines, with the appearance of rice plants of short stature as a result of the Green Revolution, practicality (rather than cosmology) was the principal issue.[6]

Moreover, by the nineteenth century, taro, yam, and millet had been eclipsed and replaced by sweet potato, corn, and rice as staple cereals. The process of food substitution was dependent on geography, ecology, and social class. For the native elites, rice became the preeminent source of carbohydrates, but one increasingly disengaged from any ritual function. Indeed, rice did not have any part in the major ritual of colonial society: the mass of the Roman Catholic Church. Certainly, rice prepared in elaborate ways—*suman*, *kalamay*, *bibingka*, and the like—figured as an important food, particularly during town fiestas the dates of which were influenced by the local rice-growing seasons (Owen 1984, 126), and during celebrations of kinship such as marriage. But rice itself had no place in the formal world of ritual that commensally linked humans to the Divine and with each other, unlike in other parts of Asia.

In Indonesia, for instance, the ritual preparations of rice with different colors and shapes—as balls and pyramids in various sizes—were, and continue to be, central to the *slametan* celebrations (Geertz 1960). Linked to Islam, these syncretic *abangan* practices have persisted in a region where Dutch presence since the sixteenth century had not preoccupied itself with proselytizing the natives. In Vietnam the New Year rice cakes (*banh Tet*) are prominent culinary icons and, despite their contested messages, remain central to the practice of Vietnamese identity and the primordial celebration of the cosmos and the world of farming (Avieli 2005). Similarly, in Japan the New Year rice cakes (*kagamimochi*) are offered to deities, believed made potent by them, and then shared by humans (Ohnuki-Tierney 1995, 229). In the Spanish Philippines, in contrast, interventions in the ideational and material domains resulted in the simultaneous increase in rice production and the symbolic marginalization of rice.

Amid changes in the native elite's composition, as well as in the crop's cultural significance, rice remained a marker of social stratification. By the nineteenth century the native elites, composed largely of Chinese mestizos that comprised the *principalia*, were only indirectly involved in rice production as leaseholders, landowners, middlemen, and traders. Rather than producers of rice, they were wealthy consumers who ate rice everyday, prepared for them by servants. Because rice was relatively abundant and easily stored in granaries, the elites consumed rice year-round. As economic agents, they saw rice as a crop that generated profits and a mechanism by which control of tenants and others beneath them socially was achieved, fostering from such perspective an instrumentalist view of rice. In other words, Spanish colonialism saw the transformation of rice into a staple food. But rice had also become a commodity subject to the vagaries of the market as well as the weather.[7] At least for the elites, rice had become an indispensable food item—a pattern found in the colonial capital, the hispanized lowlands, and on the Cordillera uplands.[8] But even for the nonelites, especially urban residents, the idea of rice as staple food became entrenched. Soon, for most of Philippine society, a meal could no longer be imagined without rice.

From Abundance to Scarcity and Importation: 1870s to the Present

Rice production, at least in vast areas of Luzon, was said to be abundant such that rice was exported during the 1830s until about 1870. However, from the early 1870s onward the Philippines became a net importer of rice, as Benito Legarda's (1999, 156–73) classic study of the nineteenth century demonstrates. Manifest in the century's last three decades was the rice deficiency of the Philippines, a pattern of chronic shortage that would persist virtually unbroken until today. But because, prior to the 1870s, a steady supply of rice had become the norm, which colonial authorities probably used as barometer of good governance, rice shortages could not be deemed acceptable. Telling the people, particularly the native elite, to reinstate root crops or treat corn as the staple cereal seemed out of the question. The recourse to rice importation thus became inevitable.

Conditions in the Spanish Philippines contrasted sharply with Lower Burma, Siam, and Cochinchina where, during the late nineteenth century, large quantities of rice were grown in the great deltas of the Southeast Asian mainland, making these areas major rice exporters in the world market

(Owen 1971; Coclanis 1993). In the island-world of the Philippines hunger would periodically stalk the land.

One reason for the rice deficiency was the shift in productive land and labor from rice to export crops, such as sugar and abaca, as specific provinces and regions pursued crop specialization. As Legarda (1999, 166) has pointed out, "The loss of one rice-producing region would have meant little in a country where there were other rice-surplus regions and where new lands were being opened and agricultural production was on the increase, *provided this increase were in basic food crops*," but this condition was not met. Rather, the opening of new land was meant for other crops, and even land that had been devoted to rice was diverted to other crops. With the availability of Saigon rice and the liberalization of the rice trade, there occurred a growing reliance on rice imports, which made the country susceptible to drastic swings in supply and prices in the world market. The cultivation of export crops did not inconvenience the elites because they either controlled rice fields that assured them of their rice supply or they had sufficient money to purchase all the rice they needed from the market.

With respect to Boserup (1981), it can be argued that the state of technology was no longer suited to the increased population level that grew in the first half of the nineteenth century at 1.8 percent annually, although in the second half the rate of increase slowed down to 1.2 percent owing to natural calamities and cholera and smallpox epidemics (Legarda 1999, 167). No further innovations in rice production occurred. The benefits derived from the earlier technological breakthrough had been depleted. At the end of the nineteenth century, rinderpest infestation and other calamities had weakened rice production considerably.

In the early years of the US occupation of the Philippines, rather than seeking to understand the constraints to rice production, the American colonial state responded to rice shortages by following the late Spanish example of importing rice from external sources. Importation was the quickest way to ensure that the new imperial power would quell restiveness and potential disorder, especially in the nonfood-growing urban areas (Corpuz 1997, 286). This pattern of appeasing urban consumers amid deficiencies in rice production—consistent with the politics of "urban bias" (Lipton 1977)—has become deeply entrenched in Philippine life, skewing terms of trade against rural areas and legitimating rice importations throughout the twentieth century and beyond.

The American colonial state, however, marshaled science and technology to improve rice production. To raise yields the Bureau of Agriculture gave special attention to the selection of locally appropriate rice seeds; the introduction of farm machinery, such as tractors and mechanical threshers, as a way of dealing with labor costs and draught animal shortages; and, above all, the development of irrigation systems to replace the extant systems that were deemed as "large but antiquated." In fact, irrigation was considered as "the permanent solution of the problem of preventing rice shortages, as this will guarantee a sure crop every year, even if there is a drought, and furthermore irrigation will make possible the raising of two crops a year" (Camus 1921, 20). By the 1920s and 1930s, large rice haciendas in central Luzon had begun to modernize rice cultivation, displacing tenants and relying on hired labor and direct management of the production process (Kerkvliet 1990, 20–26). The passing of the moral economy in the relations between landlord and tenants would eventuate in the Huk rebellion (Kerkvliet 1977).

Crude estimates of annual per capita rice consumption suggest that, after a period of crisis in the mid- and late 1910s, it rose to high levels in the 1920s (120.9 kilograms in 1924–1925), dipped in the 1930s (76.7 kilograms in 1935–1936) and during the Second World War, "and then remaining relatively constant after the war at lower absolute levels," wrote Mears and colleagues (1974, 76) in the early 1970s. Crude estimates demonstrate that per capita consumption of milled rice rose slightly during the late 1980s and again since 2000 (probably due to steady and systematic importation), but these recent levels have not matched the high points of the 1920s. The year 2002 registered the highest mark in the postwar period (at 104.6 kilograms), but still fell short of the peak in the mid-1920s. Crude figures in the "food balance sheet" also confirm the existence of rice shortages in the 1930s (76.7 kilograms in 1935–1936), which was matched by the crisis of the 1990s (77.2 kilograms in 1992). Precipitous lows were also registered in the 1970s (80 kilograms in 1972–1973).[9]

During the rice shortages of the 1930s, coincident with the Great Depression, people in the Bikol region (where the abaca industry suffered a fatal slump) relied on corn and root crops, thus preventing outright starvation (Doeppers 2000; Owen 1999, 163–80). Other groups that suffered hunger could well have included the unskilled landless laborers and sugar sharecroppers in the central Luzon plain, a semiarid zone with a prolonged dry season, in

contrast to other regions with relatively equal amounts of rainfall throughout the year that permitted continuous food production (Wolters 2000).

Not surprisingly, conditions during the Second World War resulted in the cessation of rice production in many areas of conflict. For the first time in many centuries, elites experienced hunger and valued every grain of rice, deemed to be the only "real food." Corn and roots crops that fed many poor people during periodic and seasonal shortages did not belong to the category of "real food," as the testimony of Benjamin Santos, 18 years old at that time, implies:

> Since the Japanese commandeered most of the food supply, we had a hard time procuring 'real' food. The rice grains of our people, especially the farmers' palay, were seized by the enemy . . . So in the mountains, we ate only cassava flour made into bibingka (a ricecake), grated corn, cassava and castanog (toasted coconut meat). (Karganilla [1992], 204)

For urban dwellers, especially elites, accustomed to plenty by virtue of state support, the scarcity of rice highlighted what was by then seen as its primordial role in life. As one testimony put it, "to have rice, whether in Manila or even rice-producing provinces, was to have everything" (Orendain [1992], 103–4).

In the 1960s the Green Revolution commenced. With financial assistance from global capital, the International Rice Research Institute engineered new high-yielding, fast-maturing, short-stature varieties of rice, which were scale-neutral but highly dependent on chemical fertilizers, pesticides, and herbicides. The new rice technology was accompanied by mechanization, which disseminated the portable hand tractors for plowing and harrowing, and the development of large as well as communal irrigation systems to ensure dependable water supply. Rice production required a sizeable amount of capitalization as the farmer had to purchase inputs to farm production, thus the provision of credit became an important aspect of government rural development programs. As Benedict Kerkvliet (1990, 33–34) has observed, "Beginning in the late 1960s, the government frequently linked agrarian reform programs to the new technology."

By crop year 1970–1971 the new varieties were grown in half of the total land area in the country dedicated to rice. This proportion rose to 72 percent in crop year 1978–1979, by which time the new varieties had overtaken most of central Luzon, especially Nueva Ecija Province (ibid., 284, table B2). For the entire country, the average yield rose 50 percent from 28 cavans per hectare in 1967–1968 to 42 cavans per hectare in 1978–1979. In Nueva Ecija yields doubled from 36 cavans per hectare in 1967–1968 to a high 72 cavans per hectare in 1978–1979 (ibid.). However, although total rice production grew, the country's rice deficiency persisted, especially with the high rates of population growth. The country has continued to import rice, and the incidence of hunger has not been eradicated. In fact, serious food scarcities have occurred periodically from the 1970s to the present, the most recent, in 2008, occurring amid a worldwide shortage of rice.[10]

The Age of Practicality: The Green Revolution and Its Aftermath

The technological package of the Green Revolution has had profound effects on rural life and cultures of sociality. The deeper penetration of capital into the countryside as rice farmers have become extremely dependent on cash inputs has meant a closer integration to the market beyond even the remotest rural village. In this context rice farmers themselves have began to act as petty agrarian capitalists (Aguilar 1989). Seeking to reduce costs in a deliberate calculation of gains, rice farmers have altered methods of cultivation that have diminished the sphere of the moral economy.

Among the biggest changes have been the passing of reciprocal labor exchanges and the hiring of paid farm workers. In a village in Laguna province that we shall call San Lorenzo,[11] rice planting, as in countless other villages, used to rely on unpaid labor reciprocity in the age prior to the Green Revolution. The kin of farmers of adjacent fields performed tasks on each other's farms such as transplanting and reaping. There was plenty of food to feed the working party. Male and female youth made the occasion festive, singing happy songs to the accompaniment of guitar music. All these began to change in the early 1960s, with the advent of mechanization and paid labor. San Lorenzo has remained a rice-growing village but today a regimented work regime has replaced reciprocal labor exchanges and subdued merriment on the farm.

Some of the labor exchanges in the past, such as transplanting, harvesting, and threshing, can be interpreted as the peasantry's way of cornering more of the rice harvest within the village rather than allowing large portions of the

harvest to be siphoned off by the landowner through rental exactions (ibid., 50–53). With the new technology and with the cultivator becoming the owner-operator of the farm, such labor exchanges would not be individually advantageous and thus were discontinued. Moreover, given the abundance of affordable hired labor, farm operators have reduced the use of family labor and invented new contractual arrangements with hired labor, known as *gama* in Laguna, *prendes* in Leyte, and *sagod* in Iloilo. Hired laborers weed the fields without compensation but they acquire the exclusive right to harvest the crop, for which the remuneration is a portion of the harvest. In this way the farm operator minimizes the wage bill and increases the amount of the harvest that he is able to appropriate. To obtain further savings, some farmers have abandoned the practice of transplanting rice in straight rows and resorted to the broadcast or direct seeding method, which makes weeding more difficult. With the advantage decidedly in the favor of the farm operator, the relationship between the farmer and hired workers has become openly instrumental and contractual (ibid., 55–58).

The movement toward transactional exchange relationships applies even to the rice plant itself, given the many cash-dependent farm inputs required by the hybrid rice varieties without which production would be gravely affected. As one farmer puts it, "If you don't feed the rice, it won't feed you" (Kerkvliet 1990, 42). The farm inputs represent the new "scientific" way of "propitiating" the rice plant.

Gelia Castillo (1972, 110) observed analogous changes to have overtaken the countryside even in the early 1970s:

> Even the age-old practice of having neighbors and relatives perform the weeding operations in the field so that they also have the privilege of harvesting the same field is coming under scrutiny by the farmer. He now sees the advantage of specifically hiring labor to perform the weeding so he could obtain timely, effective, and better-supervised services. Under the traditional arrangement, the farmer is somehow kept by long-standing personal relationships from demanding a new quality of work. Actually the system of paying in rice rather than in cash has also been found to be expensive for there is a custom of measuring the harvester's share in more tightly packed cans than the farmer's share. Hiring labor to perform weeding, however, means more cash outlay which is hard to obtain.

> Another local custom which has also disappeared is the romantic practice of planting rice to the accompaniment of guitar music. Of course this could have been romantic only to the tourists taking pictures by the roadside. Guitar music was actually provided for a very functional reason—to keep in time and to regulate the spacing of plants as they were transplanted. What replaced the guitar is the planting board with strings and distancing specifications such as 20 x 20. Haystacks which have been the setting for local movie love scenes are disappearing in double-cropped areas. There is no time nor place for them in the rush to prepare for the second crop.

Castillo's description appears to celebrate the rational and technicist and the self-interest of the rice farmer. With the guidance of strings on planting boards and the precision of distancing specifications, who needs guitar music? Indeed Castillo's description highlights the advance of contractual social relationships brought about by the "modern" rice technology and the advance of a way of life that many people refer to as practicality. The calls for social justice through land redistribution and agrarian reform that have increasingly become more resolute since the 1960s coincided ironically with the petty embourgeoisement of rice farming.[12]

The age of practicality is also indexed by what farmers provide as snacks to workers involved in transplanting rice. In San Lorenzo rice-based food, such as *champorado* (chocolate porridge), porridge with coconut milk, rice cakes, and *arroz caldo* (porridge with chicken meat), were the customary food items that were served to ensure the laborers were not hungry and could work fast to complete the day's work. There was a deeper reason for this practice: the rice that made the planter full would transfer that feeling of fullness to the rice plant and eventually to the grains that would bud. It would ensure not only a plentiful harvest but also palay grains that were plump (*mabintog*) and dense (*siksik*). Moreover, the rice grains used in preparing these snack foods served as tokens of a ritualized rice cycle: they came from the previous cropping season's grains left over after the farmer and workers had taken their respective shares of the threshed rice. These grains, known as *tutong*, were milled and stored separately, to feed workers in the next planting season.

In recent times, however, farmers are still concerned that laborers should not be hungry while transplanting rice seedlings but they are simply

served bread, noodles, spaghetti, or any prepared food items bought from market sellers in the village center. The food the workers eat is not perceived as having any relationship to the rice they are transplanting. The tutong is also no longer kept separately but becomes part of the farmer's family's consumption. There is no apparent need to perpetuate the rice cycle—particularly as "certified" seeds must be purchased for each new planting, as seeds set aside from one's harvest of hybrid rice varieties are not as productive as the certified seeds. In this context, any lingering belief in the potency of rice after centuries of transformation has dissipated. No longer is there an apprehension that rice spirits would run away with the kernel.

The transformation in the plant itself produced another cultural change. There was a time when elementary school textbooks carried the advice of Manuel Quezon's father to his son: "a man should be like palay, the more it grows solid grains, the more it stoops." The rice plant embodied the lesson of humility and flexibility acquired with wisdom as one matures and ages. But this aphorism is inapplicable to the Green Revolution's engineered rice varieties that have been designed precisely to grow short stalks. In the case of high-yielding varieties the rice plant no longer bends as the grains develop. The old aphorism no longer holds.

Notwithstanding these radical cultural changes, San Lorenzo is not entirely devoid of a sense of community. Rice farmers there practice a form of voluntary communal labor called *paatag*. A male activity, paatag is performed before land preparation. One such activity is called *pandadaga* during which participants inspect farm dikes and paddies inhabited by rats, and their hibernating places are destroyed using a torch blower. Children run after rats that scurry away from the torch blower's blazing heat and club them down. These children are given small rewards of money for each head of dead rat. Another paatag activity is called *pagsasala* during which debris and waste materials that have accumulated in the river and irrigation canals are sifted by placing a felled coconut tree trunk across the width of these waterways. Women farmers and other men who cannot participate in these activities contribute money for the participants' snack. In these forms of voluntary communal labor may be discerned the figure of Samuel Popkin's (1979) "rational peasant" who participates in collective action in pursuit of self-interest, because the campaigns against rats and clogged water channels evidently redound to advantages for the individual farmer.

Farmers in San Lorenzo also cooperate with each other through the synchronous planting of rice. Although a farmer can choose to plant rice at anytime of the year as long as irrigation water is available, there is a concerted effort among farmers in this village to plant at the same time. This practice helps farmers to optimize the use of water and animal labor, and to minimize the possibility of one's paddy being attacked by pests (if it were the only standing crop) as well as the possibility of carabaos trampling on the growing rice plant in adjoining fields. Holes in dikes are made so that water flows simultaneously to irrigate contiguous paddies. Synchronous planting is supported by the opt-repeated saying, "Mahuli ka na sa panahon, huwag lang sa kahanggan" (You can be late with the season but not with your neighbor). This social practice is as much to protect self-interest as it is to promote social harmony and avoid conflict among field neighbors.

Despite the radical changes in social relations, the moral economy has not entirely left San Lorenzo. During manual threshing, when the harvested palay are beaten against a wooden frame to separate the rice grains from the panicle, an activity known locally as *yabatan*, the palay that fail to detach from the panicle are left on the side to be recuperated later by gleaners (*mamumulot*), usually composed of women and children belonging to the poorer families in the village.

Contemporary Rice Farming and the Negotiation of Uncertainties

Virginia Sandoval's (1995) study in a rice-growing village in Laguna reveals class-based distinctions in the valuation of rice. In contrast to those in the village upper ranks whose preferences for rice are based on flavor, aroma, and soft texture as eating qualities, those in lower socioeconomic positions tend to prefer rice

> that expands well (*mahilab*), feels heavier on the stomach and satisfies more quickly (*mabigat sa tiyan*), and takes longer to digest (*matagal matunaw*). Highly valued aromatic varieties like *Sinandomeng* and Malagkit sungsong, which were considered the most delicious, were also regarded as wasteful (*maaksaya*) because one tends to eat too much of it, too rich (*nakakaumay*) because of the strong flavor and aroma, too easily digested (*madaling matunaw*) because of its soft texture, and too expensive for "ordinary people." (ibid., 127)

Poor farming households thus favor functionality and economy in selecting consumable rice.

Similarly the rice farmers of San Lorenzo—half of whom own the land they till, usually less than a hectare—choose to plant rice varieties that produce a good yield. Palatability is not a major concern at all. Thus, although an organic farmer among them is promoting traditional rice varieties, which are more delectable than the modern ones, the rice farmers of this village, in pursuit of food security and productivity, consider yield as the most important criterion in choosing the rice varieties to plant. They say that modern rice varieties can be made savory by simply adding glutinous rice when these are cooked. But dealing with an unpredictable farming environment is something else.

Notwithstanding the virtually wholesale adoption of the modern rice technology in San Lorenzo, rice cultivation remains permeated by uncertainty due to weather and the persistence of pests such as rats. It must be stressed that these farmers view their occupation positively, treating it as a business but also, because of uncontrollable factors, as a gamble. In this context, despite the cumulative disenchantment of rice over the centuries, some farmers in San Lorenzo still practice some form of ritual in growing modern rice varieties.[13] Consistent with the individuation of the colonial peasant, these ritual practices are not commonly known but specific to individual farmers.

Many draw from the repertoire of Catholic prayers in their attempts to ensure a good harvest. For instance, at the start of a planting season, farm operators say a silent prayer as they thrust the very first seedling to the soil, known as *unang turok*. Farmers say a private prayer (which hired hands are not expected to do), such as the Apostles' Creed (*Sumasampalataya Ako*), the Lord's Prayer (*Ama Namin*), or the Hail Mary (*Aba Ginoong Maria*). A few say prayers that are not formulaic but which they describe as coming from the heart (*bukal sa puso*). The organic rice farmer, for example, closes his eyes and prays, "O Diyos ko, paramihin mo ang binhing ito para marami akong matulungan" (Oh, my God, multiply this seed so I can be of help to many others).

Other farmers say a prayer each time they visit their fields to observe the rice plant as it matures. A 60-year-old female planter, who is a member of the Catholic Charismatic group El Shaddai, sings religious songs as she walks around her one-hectare paddy to bless it, which she claims is highly effective: "Kapag inabot kami ng peste rito, nase-zero sila, pero ako meron at merong natitira kahit pangkain lang" (When pests attack us here, they [other farmers] are down to zero, but in my case something is definitely left [of the harvest], even if only for food).

Farmers may also try to predict the harvest and change the outcome if it is not propitious. At sundown the farmer kneels before a standing rice crop in the milky stage (*malagatas*). With eyes closed, the farmer mumbles a prayer and snatches with his right hand a bunch of rice panicles when he reaches the line of the Lord's Prayer that says, "bigyan mo kami ng kakanin sa araw-araw" (give us this day our daily [food]). After reciting the prayer, the palay grains are counted. If the total is an odd number (*hindi pares*), a bountiful harvest is assured. The snatched rice panicles are bundled, taken home, and tied to the ceiling of the farmer's house. However, if the count results in an even number (*pares*), the farmer repeats the ritual on the following day at sundown until the desired odd number is achieved. The belief that odd numbers are auspicious may have been derived from its association with Catholic beliefs and practices: the Trinity has three persons, Christmas Day falls on the 25th of December, a novena pertains to the number nine, and the traditional rosary is governed by three sets of mysteries each of which is composed of five components, for a total of fifteen mysteries.

When rats are a severe menace, the need for prayers is more urgent. The Apostles' Creed is recited in three corners of the rice field. Each time the phrase "ipinako sa krus" (was crucified) is reached, the farmer pounds the earth with either his left or right foot. Others pray three sets of the Lord's Prayer and the Hail Mary while walking the perimeter of the rice field in a clockwise direction, at the end of which the farmer stops and throws three pieces of charcoal to the center of the field.

To protect against rats, rice seedlings are poured through the dried mandibles of a snake into a sack before these are germinated. Because snakes feed on rats, the belief is that rats will avoid the plants that grow from seeds that have passed through the snake's jaws and vicious pangs. To protect against rats and diseases, a cross fashioned out of the *palaspas* or dried palm leaves used during Palm Sunday celebrations and blessed with holy water is placed inside a sack of palay seeds when it is soaked in water for germination.

To ensure a good harvest, some farmers in San Lorenzo choose an auspicious date for seed germination and seedbed preparation or for transplanting the seedlings, but the practices are highly variable: some

observe the moon and act when it is full or waxing, others near the lakeshore do so during low tide, others consult the annual Tagalog calendar of Honorio Lopez (*Kalendariong Tagalog ni Don Honorio Lopez*), while others pick out any odd-numbered date.

Rice stalks whose grains had been eaten by rats may be used in an encircling ritual to arrest the further destruction of the rice crop. At sundown two pieces of these stalks are scraped against each other as the farmer walks around his paddy, producing what is believed to be an unpleasant sound that causes rats' teeth to ache (*mangilo*) and prevents them from eating more rice grains. The farmer must not look back (like Lot's wife in the account of Sodom and Gomorrah's destruction) or be distracted, and must go home directly once the field has been encircled.

The rats are also wooed as if they had human understanding and compassion. Entreaties are made to them aloud while the farmer is in the field, saying

> O mabait, hindi bale tumikim ka sa palay, tirhan mo lang kami.
> (Hey nice fellow, it's all right for you to taste the palay, but leave some for us.)
>
> Kaibigan, huwag sisirain ang aming pananim, wala kaming kakainin.
> (Friend, do not destroy our plants, as we won't have anything to eat.)

Combining Catholic prayers and magical practices with the modern rice technology is the farmer's way of dealing with the uncertainties of rice cultivation. The rice plant itself is now seen largely within the realm of science, although vestiges of earlier beliefs remain and the harvest is regarded as a manifestation of the grace (*grasya*) of God to whom prayers must be addressed. Although preternatural beings in the cosmos no longer dictate rice production as in the past, fragments of the environment still make a difference in the outcome of a planting season and thus must be dealt with using the cultural armamentarium available to the farmer.[14]

The Sanctity of Rice and Sumptuary Observances

Because rice is deemed as God's grace and as embodying hard work, rice must be accorded due respect in the quotidian rituals of life. Whether traditional or hybrid, palay grains that are being dried under the sun must not be stepped on, as doing so is a sign of disrespect and may break the grains. The ideal of a whole kernel remains suggestive of the wholeness of life that eating rice makes possible.

To show respect one must not sit atop a sack of palay, and there must be no spillage of rice, both raw and cooked. When a sack of rice that is being carried, say, to storage is accidentally dropped to the ground, one must immediately seek dispensation by saying aloud *tabi sa grasya* (literally, "Excuse me, grace"). If one skips over palay being dried in the open, one must make the same invocation. When critical remarks about the yield or the gastronomic qualities of rice are made, the same plea is made.

On a daily basis, the sacredness of rice is affirmed in many Philippine households by the manner in which it is consumed. Before any amount of rice is scooped at all, the top of a freshly boiled pot of rice is marked with a cross, usually using the end of an inverted ladle. It is a way of blessing the rice and some say it makes the rice more filling and lengthens the time before one becomes hungry again. Similarly, my father used to instruct me as a child to finish every last bit of rice morsel on my plate as a sign of respect for the grace of God.

Rather than putting the whole pot of rice on the dining table, cooked rice must be scooped from the pot and placed on a serving dish (*panalin* or *damusakan*) from where individuals around the table take their share. The practice of individually putting rice on one's plate appears to be a continuation of an ancient tradition; as Mintz (2013, ch. 6) has observed, "Bikolanos [at the turn of the sixteenth century] ate with their hands and once the rice was placed on a central serving plate, they would remove it by the handful (*dugdóg*) and place it on their individual plates. Those eating would continue to eat by hand, forming the rice into a ball (*kúmol*) or lifting it by the handful (*daklót*) . . . ."

In the uneventful, nonexoticized, everyday life of Filipinos, rice remains the symbol of commensality as members of a social group partake of the rice in a meal. Without rice there is no proper meal. Despite the spread of the fastfood industry and the increasing consumption of bread, noodles, pasta, and other cereal products, rice is still the essential food of many Filipinos even in urban centers. Even among the poorest, rice suffices to constitute a meal, with added flavor coming from salt, soy sauce, or fish sauce. If there is a small amount of viand this may be rationed, but rice is still taken individually from a collective plate. Forcefully, rice stands for the "we" even in the poorest families.

In sumptuary practices a contrast with rice-exporting Thailand is instructive. The stark reality of rice as commodity in the Philippines is demonstrated by the fact that, from the lowliest street food seller (the *carinderia*) to high-end restaurants, a specific price tag is attached to rice, even in its most basic form as boiled rice. In Thailand rice is a "free good" in restaurants,[15] with seemingly no market value in a country where it is grown in abundance. Restaurants in Thailand probably recover the cost of rice through means other than a specific price tag, but the absence of an economic valuation is emblematic of the cultural value of rice.

Free rice is suggestive of noblesse oblige, a guarantee of a patron's provision and assurance that the poor shall meet their subsistence needs. Interestingly, in restaurants and households in Thailand, rice is usually not served on a large plate from which individual eaters get their share, as they do in the Philippines. Rather, rice is dispensed from a large bowl, apportioned by the host, and placed on a plate from which the individual may proceed with the meal, adding to it portions of the available dishes on the table. Rice is thus a gift of the authority figure. Rice is free, but marked with hierarchy. Derived probably from Thailand's *sakdina* (loosely translated as feudal) past, rice stands for the beneficence of a superior in a set of social relations that seemingly transcend the market.

In contrast, in the Philippines market relations permeate rice production, distribution, and consumption. The economic value of rice is undeniable. In addition, as already mentioned, in a meal whether at home, in a festival, or in a restaurant, individuals help themselves with their own servings from a common plate of rice. There is no central authority figure that gives and allocates rice, but each one performs the act of scooping rice from the serving dish. The commensality around rice is visibly egalitarian, with a strong element of individual autonomy that finds meaning in the context of a kinship group.[16] The self is defined individually but in relationship with one's kin and commensal group. Eating alone is avoided. In a Filipino meal, regardless of socioeconomic status, the partaking of rice is marked by a degree of individual parity as well as social solidarity.[17]

Although commoditized and symbolically marginalized in the formal Catholic ritual of the mass, rice retains some significance in rituals such as weddings. Even if the practice has been proscribed in many churches, in some cases family and guests still shower raw rice upon a newly wed couple as they leave the church, ostensibly as a sign of blessing.[18] Interestingly, this practice appears to be an inversion of the precolonial wedding ceremony during which an elder united the hands of the bride and groom "over a bowl of raw rice, which he then threw over the guests" (Scott 1994, 142). The precolonial practice may be read as indicating that the newlyweds constituted a blessing to the social group, as the rice emanated from the position of the couple and transferred to the guests. In the colonial and postcolonial wedding ceremony, the social group, in blessing the new couple, showers them with rice, the couple being the center of attention.

Today, in many rural areas, it is still believed that a newly wed couple should eat sticky rice in the course of the wedding celebration so that the couple's love for and devotion to each other will mimic the stickiness of rice—a rite that remains possible because some farmers still plant traditional rice varieties for celebrations and festivities.

In the Batangas village of Paraiso, the bride and groom visit the houses of their godparents to give presents called *dulot*, on the morning of the day before the wedding. Despite changes in the composition of these gifts, delicacies of sticky rice cake, kalamay and suman, remain at the heart of the dulot. The suman is said to represent the male, the kalamay the female. In the same way that the suman sticks to the kalamay, it is said, so should the husband stick to his wife (Aguilar 2009, 80). In the dulot, recalling the precolonial practice, the stickiness of rice moves from the couple to the godparents, and from them to the rest of the social group. After the church ceremony, the wedding party returns to the village for the reception in the bride's parents' house. Before the newlyweds enter the reception area, they are given a plate of bite-sized kalamay. The man gives a portion to his wife, and the woman to her husband. Because kalamay is very sticky, it is believed this quality will be transferred to the couple and will make them stick to each other closely. At the end of the celebration, the couple leads a procession to the groom's parents' house where the couple will stay. At the entrance the couple pays respect to the groom's parents, and the couple is again given kalamay, which they eat before proceeding inside the house (ibid., 89, 95). In this manner the celebration marshals the metaphorical potency of rice to buttress the marital union.

Rice also retains a place in the simple rite that is performed before a new house is occupied. In Barangay Paraiso, on the eve before the move, a palaspas leaf is made into a cross and placed on the upper traverse of the main doorframe of the new house. At the "center" of the new house are

placed the following items: a Santo Niño statue; milled rice; salt; a jug of water; festive food in small bowls; a round bowl of *pinindot* (glutinous rice balls cooked in coconut milk); cooked *lugaw* (rice gruel); and a coconut sapling (*pasibol*). These items are meant to appease and ward off spirits. In addition, the coconut sapling is a metaphor for the family that must bloom as one tree; for the siblings that must grow up together as a unitary set; and for each child who must have the enduring qualities of stability, flexibility, individuality, and fruitfulness (ibid., 129). At the same time, rice in all its guises figures prominently in this ritual: as uncooked rice to evoke food sufficiency; as glutinous rice to suggest close family bonds and solidarity; and as rice gruel because, as people say, the rice multiplies in such a dish, thus to induce abundance and productivity.

Conclusion

The Spanish friars' missionary work that spread Catholicism and wet-rice plow technology began the process that inadvertently obliterated the ancient belief in rice spirits, which also produced a flexible gender division of labor. The process increased rice production and made rice into a staple cereal, especially for those who could afford it, but it also marginalized rice in the world of Catholic rituals. Since the 1960s the engineering of hybrid rice and the new technological package, which were meant to address rice shortages, have also had the effect of ending practices suggestive of a ritualized rice cycle. In the wake of the Green Revolution the rice plant is best dealt with as an agronomic, rather than a cosmically potent, object. Parallel changes have occurred: reciprocal agricultural labor exchanges have disappeared, relationships with hired workers have become contractual, and the farm operator—probably owning the land due to agrarian reform—has become a petty rural capitalist.

Today, when farmers are asked if there are spirits in the rice plant, the question strikes them as strange and incomprehensible. The plant has been demystified and the production process rationalized. Nevertheless, because not all factors impinging on rice cultivation can be controlled, farmers do seek the favor of a Supernatural Being through prayers and individually deploy ritual magic to deal with rats and other harmful elements that may destroy the plant, which is at the mercy of these greater forces. However, in the same breadth, farmers recognize the importance of hard work, the indispensability of farm inputs, and the necessity to cooperate with other farmers.

In the sphere of consumption, the signification of rice since the colonial era has been comparatively stable. Sumptuary observances indicate that rice is regarded as more than mere food for it is accorded various forms of respect. Parallel to the farmer's two-pronged mindset, rice is seen as a sign of God's grace and the embodiment of hard work. Despite the growing popularity of instant noodles, bread, and other cereal products, rice remains integral to the concept of a meal. It is the basis of commensality, defining the kin or social group that shares a meal, which is also the context for expressing individual autonomy as performed in the partaking of rice. In many weddings and rites of house occupancy, rice is prominent, perhaps as explicable metaphor or as the unexplained vestige of an old belief. For all the fluidities of beliefs and technologies, the divergences in cultivation methods and the class-based appreciation of rice, rice retains some symbolic significance at the quotidian level.

Notes

Some sections of this article have appeared in French in abbreviated form in "Le riz, c'est la vie. Une approche culturelle" (Aguilar 2013). This article also builds on some of the materials found in my "Rice in the Filipino Diet and Culture" (Aguilar 2005a). I am grateful to referees whose comments helped me clarify some points made in this article.. Thanks also to Francis Gealogo for advice related to this publication.

1 For the Bikol terms used in relation to rice cultivation and consumption, see Mintz 2013, ch. 6.

2 In the system of complementary dualism of the Kodi in Eastern Indonesia, male spirit figures are associated with sky powers but female figures with rice and garden magic. The Kodi rice goddess, Mbiri Kyoni, is said to have been offered as a sacrifice, and was transformed to feed the starving. The new sprouts of rice that appear seasonally are believed to contain the soul of her child. Mbiri Kyoni's nurturance of the spirit-child is mirrored in the role of women as key ritual actors in planting and harvesting (Hoskins 1990, 280, 283–86). Among the Karo Batak in northern Sumatra, Beru Dayang, the spirit of rice, is female and rice grown in upland swidden is referred to as the Karo Batak women's daughters (Van der Goes 1997).

3 On cognatic kinship in the Philippines, see Aguilar 2009, 19, 100–105.

4 Espiritu Chua Vyco, mestizo residente en esta Capital, pidiendo conducir mil y ochocientos cabanes de arroz desde la provincia de Camarines Sur al Puerto de Macao en el Pontin Sta. Rosa de Lima . . . . Malacañan 13 Abril 1832. Spanish Document Section Bundle 14456, p. 10B, Pasaportes: Españoles y Filipinos 1832–1894, Philippine National Archives, Manila.

5 In a rainfed rice village in Iloilo, for instance, "transplanting is traditionally [*sic*] considered as an activity which is shared equally between men and women" and "generally the sexual division

of labor is not very rigid" (Res 1985, 107, 97). In contrast, the Javanese case suggests that "women's main tasks are transplanting (with very few exceptions), weeding and harvesting (with more exceptions . . .)" (White 1985, 131; cf. Sajogyo Pudjiwati 1985, 153).

6 In the Iloilo village studied by Res (1985, 106, 109), the sickle replaced the small harvesting knife called *kayog*. This shift in tools was facilitated by the spread of rice varieties that had become awnless. However, in the Ilocos region the hand knife continued to be relied upon in harvesting awned varieties of rice, collectively known as *pagay iloko*, which rendered the sickle technologically inappropriate (Lewis 1971, 59–61).

7 See Owen (1999, 39–47) for an account of a subsistence crisis in Bikol that ensued after a strong typhoon hit the region on 12–13 November 1844, devastating the local rice crop and jacking up the prices of palay. The Spanish colonial government sent relief grain, but, because the policy was to sell rather than distribute the rice freely and despite the recourse to corn and root crops, the most needy suffered from famine, resulting in higher than usual mortality rates.

8 In Ifugao in the early twentieth century, consumption or nonconsumption of rice distinguished the wealthy from poor and middle-class households. On one hand, rich households considered rice as the main food eaten throughout the year. On the other, poor households contented themselves with sweet potatoes, although they had their own small supply of rice obtained from their own fields or as wages (for working the fields, gathering firewood, making baskets, weaving clothes). Poor people ate rice only one or two months each year, and saved the rest for rituals and for their children. Middle-class households ate rice more often than poor households, but they too did not continually eat rice after the harvest and, instead, ate sweet potatoes (Lambrecht 1932).

9 Unequal access to rice as food in the current period is discussed at length in Aguilar 2005a.

10 The global rice shortage in April 2008 "sparked tensions in over 30 countries and threatened to drive more than 100 million people in the developing world deeper into poverty." "The shortfall was blamed on climate change, booming population, new-found affluence that has put more food on the table in China and India, conversion of grains into biofuels, natural disasters in the United States, Australia and Bangladesh, and export restrictions by rice producers" (De la Fuente and Jimeno 2010, A15).

11 The data for the village of San Lorenzo, a pseudonym, were collected as part of a study funded by an Institutional Merit Research Award of the Institute of Philippine Culture, Ateneo de Manila University. I am grateful to Evangeline Dare for assistance in the gathering of ethnographic data.

12 The relationship between rural land struggles and petty commodity production is analyzed at length in Aguilar 2005b.

13 While several anthropologists have explored the cultural significance of rice and associated rituals in upland ethnic communities, lowland rice practices in general have been ignored, thus betraying the widespread assumption about the purported "absence" or lack of distinctiveness of lowland Philippine culture.

14 Other farm practices in San Lorenzo simply draw upon local knowledge to deal with pests. For instance, portions of a bitter-tasting vine known as *makabuhay* are placed at the entrance of the irrigation canal to make water in the rice fields bitter for the rats to drink and thus drive them away. To spare the rice plants, papaya leaves are placed in the field so these could be eaten by snails. Snails feeding on these leaves are then easily collected and discarded.

15 I owe the observation that there is no price tag on rice in Thailand to Manuel P. Diaz.

16 Individual autonomy in the context of kin ties, especially siblingship, is discussed at length in Aguilar 2009, 100–44.

17 However, recent fastfood and restaurant innovations such as "rice toppings" in which the viand is placed on top of a bowl of rice (a derivative of the Chinese practice of serving rice in individual bowls) as well as the practice of providing separately wrapped servings of rice, or servings a la cafeteria style, appear to be based on the Western precept of individualism.

18 This is one instance in which the intentional spilling of rice is not perceived as wastage and a sign of disrespect for the grain.

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