

Emiko OHNUKI-TIERNEY, *Rice as Self: Japanese Identities through Time*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993. xiv + 184 pp. \$19.95 cloth, ISBN 0-691-09477-2.

"RICE HAS BEEN a critical metaphor by which the Japanese people have defined and redefined themselves through interaction with other peoples throughout history" (p. 102). Ohnuki-Tierney elaborates this thesis in a wide-ranging anthropological study against the background of a cross-cultural reflection on the symbolic values attached to *cuisine*. Her account of the significance of rice in Shinto cosmology involves some complex constructions:

The marebito, or stranger-outsider deities who come from outside a settlement or outside of Japan, constitute the semiotic *other* for the Japanese, which is symbolically equivalent to their transcendental self, that is, the *self* perceived at a higher level of abstraction than a reflective self. (p. 54)

Rice is equated with the peaceful power of the deities (*nigimitama*) as opposed to their violent aspect (*aramitama*). It is ritually harvested in order to harness the positive power of the deities (or of the transcendental self), while the negative side may be expelled in scapegoat rituals.

The Chinese of the T'ang period and Westerners in the modern age have played the role of stranger deity in Japanese experience: "The native concept of the Stranger Deity provided the model for perceiving foreigners as superior to the self, offering an ideal mirror for the Japanese to emulate" (p. 112). Rice became the symbol of Japanese identity over against meat-eating Westerners, and domestic rice symbolized Japanese purity and superiority over against other Asians who lived on low-grade foreign rice (p. 104). During World War II the agrarian ideology was "cleverly used for nationalistic purposes by the military elite" (p. 93); rice was served to children in a Mount-Fuji-shaped cone with a paper rising-sun flag on top. Today, as the controversy about importing California rice shows, rice has replaced the emperor as a metaphor of the Japanese self. The connection between the emperor and rice has become dim in the minds of contemporary Japanese.

The image of the Japanese that emerges from these analyses is not a very

attractive one: an insular people, obsessed with their identity, and relating to the other only as a narcissistic mirror, like children fixated in the pre-Oedipal mirror stage, trapped in *l'imaginaire*. But perhaps this image is largely a product of the categories employed by the author. Some may quarrel with the weight she attaches to rice-symbolism or with particular aspects of her construction. But a certain amount of amplification and speculative pattern-disclosure seems to be part of the art of anthropology. I would have preferred to the flat anthropological language of “commensality” and “exchange” a more poetic, Heideggerian appreciation of the way rice functions to gather together gods and mortals, earth and sky. But such phenomenological meditation may be foreign to the rules of the anthropological game.

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