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Francesca Bray

**Rice as self:  
food, history and nation-building in Japan and Malaysia**

Goody Lecture 2014

It is a commonplace around the world, expressed pithily in everyday proverbs and more pretentiously in academic treatises, that we are what we eat – or perhaps what we grow or raise or fish out of the sea. The Inuit identify with seal blood (Borré 1991), the highlanders of Northeast Thailand with sticky rice (Moerman 1968) and Americans with apple-pie (Levenstein 2003) – why, and what does this tell us? Nutritionists, psychologists, economists, theologians, lawyers, folklorists and poets all have explanations to propose for such attachments to food. In their interpretations of food as self, anthropologists and historians seek to knit together these separate strands of meaning, emphasising that the selves thus nourished are compounded of biological tissues and souls, tastes and landscapes, social hierarchies, consumer desires, fears, nostalgia or ambition. Today studying society through food seems an obvious strategy for getting to the heart of things, for exploring the constitution of identities that are at once biological, historical, political and social. If it now seems so natural to social scientists to use food as an organising device for social enquiry, a large part of the credit must go to Jack Goody.

Food has played a star role in Jack Goody's oeuvre. In his adventures in comparative sociology, in his probings of the deep histories of Africa and Eurasia and the emergence of global capitalism, a focus on food has served Goody as a powerful lens to investigate the articulations of production and reproduction, of culture and materiality, politics, power and taste. This year saw the publication of *Food Consumption in Global Perspective* (Klein and Murcott 2014), a collection honouring the thirtieth anniversary of one of Jack Goody's most influential works, *Cooking, Cuisine and Class* (Goody 1982), and re-affirming his role as a scholar whose critical insights shaped and continue to inspire the best scholarship in the burgeoning field of Food Studies.<sup>1</sup> It thus seems intellectually fitting that the 2014 Goody Lecture should celebrate the place of food in Goody's work by taking food and identity as its theme.

There is another, more personal reason for my choice. Jack Goody has been my friend and mentor for over forty years. As always with Jack, the warmth and closeness of our scholarly relationship has been nourished by the sharing of

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<sup>1</sup> From modest beginnings in the 1980s, when a group of historians, anthropologists and sociologists launched what then seemed a rather recondite journal, *Food and Foodways*, Food Studies has ballooned into a wildly popular academic field with apparently boundless potential for expansion. As an indication, in the last few years the *Annual Review of Anthropology* has commissioned no less than four surveys on the cultural and social anthropology of food: on food and eating (Mintz and Dubois 2002), food and memory (Holtzman 2006), food and globalisation (Phillips 2006) and food and the senses (Sutton 2010). In May 2014 the Food Studies Centre at SOAS celebrated the recent or imminent publication of no less than nine books by its members and associates, of which Klein and Murcott's collection was one.

food and drink, a conviviality both intellectual and material. Over the years, debating a spectrum of topics from the East in the West to the circulation of silver in Ming China to plum-brandy distillation in the Cantal, I have never met Jack over a desk in an office but always in some untidy room scattered with heaps of papers, dog-eared books, half-empty glasses of rough red wine and the promise of a delicious meal to come. Jack is inexhaustibly hospitable, in his own kitchen and in nearby restaurants. Jack's delight in food – growing in the field or orchard, prepared in the dairy, displayed in a market or shop, served on white napery or on faded oilcloth – is of course gastronomic, but above all it is *social*. The flavour of any mouthful is always spiced with the personalities, practices and histories behind it. This relish for looking at lives through food and food through lives is equally manifest in Jack's work.

I have also chosen food as today's theme, then, because sharing food and ideas about food with Jack has played such an important part in shaping my own intellectual trajectory (as well as my ideals of hospitality). When I first met Jack he had just published *Technology, Tradition and the State* (Goody 1971). I was embarking on a study of agriculture and history in pre-modern China (Bray 1984), and the model offered in *Technology, Tradition and the State* for integrating techniques of food production into political and social history was a powerful inspiration. Having begun my career focusing on farming and the production of food, I then began to think seriously about how its distribution and consumption played into shaping social organisation and structures of power, both locally and globally. Here again, Jack had pioneered the field with *Cooking, Cuisine and Class* (Goody 1982).<sup>2</sup> By the turn of the century I, like all my colleagues, had become fascinated by food's role in the constitution of identity. Jack, it turned out, had a book in the press: *Food and Love: A Cultural History of East and West* (Goody 1998).

Goody's characteristic and persuasive interweaving of modes of production and of consumption, of communication and of representation, has inspired much of my own work on the history and politics of food and farming. As a historian of agriculture in China who did anthropological fieldwork on the Green Revolution in Malaysia, rice – and the part it plays in defining the lives, identities and histories of individuals, communities and nations – has been one of my abiding interests. Almost everywhere that rice is the traditional staple, people assume that eating rice, or growing rice, makes them who they are. The belief that their physical constitutions, mental aptitudes, social institutions or political formations are profoundly shaped by their dependence upon rice is sometimes expressed in everyday maxims and vernacular habits, sometimes formally elaborated by politicians, historians or scientists into theories of identity. Since rice is nowadays the main staple in large zones of Asia, Asia is a good place to look for different expressions of the self-identification that the anthropologist of Japan, Emiko Ohnuki-Tierney, calls "rice as self".<sup>3</sup> Of course such self-images, or

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<sup>2</sup> *Cooking, Cuisine and Class* was one of a trinity of paradigm-setting works on modes or regimes of consumption, published three years after *La distinction* (Bourdieu 1979) and three years before *Sweetness and Power* (Mintz 1985).

<sup>3</sup> Ohnuki-Tierney 1993; for an Asia-wide perspective, focusing on rice in religion and ritual, see Hamilton 2004.

images of the other, are by no means confined to Asian cases, as we see from the debates raging around “Black Rice” and its place in the history of Atlantic slavery (Bray 2015).

My own research has always focused on rice in Asian contexts (Bray 1986, 2007), but four years ago I began a collaboration which looked at rice around the world, exploring its rise as a global commodity and its place in the history of modern capitalism (Bray *et al.* 2015). My encounter with rice-histories from Africa and the Americas opened my eyes to a whole new range of expressions of rice as self, some manifested in the society’s own (emic) discourses about why and how “rice is us”, others in external (etic) interpretations of “rice is them”, including academic theories about the place of rice in a particular society’s or region’s history. Not surprisingly, external representations of how and why rice counts in a specific case do not always match the internal understandings or beliefs (Bray 2015).

This lecture compares two Asian cases of “rice as self”, in Japan and in Malaysia. At first glance the common features of the two cases are striking. Yet if we trace the historical trajectories by which each nation came to its current expressions and discourses of “rice as self” we perceive that superficial similarities mask some profound differences. I argue then, in the spirit of Goody’s work, that there are no simple equations to be made between rice-eating or rice-growing and identity: the interest of each claim that “rice is us” or that “rice is them” lies in its historical specificity, inseparable in every instance from the broad global economic, political, scientific and economic *conjoncture* to which it responds.

### *Japan’s ideology of rice*

Japan is the classic case of “rice as self” (Ohnuki-Tierney 1993), where self-identification as rice-producers and rice-consumers has a particularly venerable and richly elaborated history. The supposedly unique qualities of Japanese rice as food and crop have been woven into essentialist “theories of Japaneseness” (*nihonjinron*) which assert variously that rice has been the staple food of all Japanese since time immemorial, that the nation’s cities would disappear under flood-water if not protected by irrigated rice-fields upstream (Ozawa 1993), that the skills of rice-farming moulded the Japanese path to capitalism, or that Japanese athletes can only reach their full physical and psychological potential if they eat home-grown rice (Bray 1986: 210-217; Ohnuki-Tierney 1993; Verschuer 2003; Cwiertka 2006).

While the Japanese concept of “rice as self” has roots that are indeed ancient, over the last 150 years it has been radically re-tooled for modern needs. Today’s *nihonjinron* and discourses of Japanese rice essentialism claim an immemorial heritage stretching back to Amaterasu, the Sun Goddess, who built and tended the sacred rice-fields that fed the first Japanese. In temples or tiny wayside shrines, in villages or city centres, the shrines to Inari, the fox deity who protects the rice-crop, are still kept freshly supplied with offerings of rice. The sandals and ropes for festival processions must be plaited from rice-straw, and a bowl of

rice is offered daily in every house that still maintains a family altar. As the direct descendant of the Sun Goddess, each spring the Emperor ploughs a small plot of rice-land on behalf of his nation and every autumn he harvests some symbolic sheaves of rice. This is not, however, an immemorial ritual. The ceremony was formalised during the Meiji period (1868-1912) as a potent tool in the government's agenda of building a modern imperial nation, powered by solid agrarian values, in which productive rice-farming would provide the capital and labour for rapid industrialisation and militarisation.

Japanese rice-identity, in theory and in practice, was a long-evolving construct (Verschuer 2003). In Japan's earliest texts, dating back to the seventh or eighth century, rice figured as the grain used for rituals and ceremonials, a sacred and prestigious food for the gods and for the elite. Peasants grew the rice but ate coarse grains themselves. In addition to its ritual and status functions, rice in medieval Japan also served as tax, rent and currency, a form of capital. From the early Tokugawa era (1600-1868), pressure from rulers and encouragement from expanding urban markets led to signal improvements in rice-farming methods, productivity and output, sustaining the rapid growth of commerce and urbanisation. Under centralised Meiji rule, government investment in modern inputs like mechanical pumps and chemical fertilisers brought additional gains in productivity. The annexation of Taiwan (1895) and Korea (1910) as Japanese colonies further increased national rice output. While rice had long been the typical urban fare, the rural poor typically ate more bean-and-barley porridge than rice. But by the 1890s military and industrial canteens could provide their soldiers and workers daily with rice and pickles – this, many felt, was really going up in the world! By the turn of the twentieth century rice had become the staple that the whole Japanese population expected to eat at least twice daily (Cwiertka 2006). Rather than a marker of elite status it now formed a bond between rich and poor, nourishing national solidarity.

New expressions of rice-identity, in recipe books and school books, folklore studies, nutritional research, domestic science and imperial ritual, flourished in consequence. The Meiji government formulated an ideology of "agrarian fundamentalism", *nōhon shugi*, identifying traditional small-scale rice-farming and the associated communal values of cooperation and discipline as a key source of national identity and civic virtue (Bray 1986: 215). But the accelerating demands of national development and increasingly harsh levels of extraction placed a heavy strain on rice-farmers. Landlordism increased and rural living conditions deteriorated, plummeting still further after the Great Crash of 1929. By the 1930s many small farmers were destitute, and the war effort brought the countryside to ruin and starvation.

So far from being discredited, however, under the US Occupation in 1945 the "fundamentalist" agrarian idyll of myriad tiny rice-farms supporting national growth was revived. Now, however, landlordism was eradicated under an American-guided land-reform policy of "land to the tiller": fields were distributed among former tenants, and selling and renting of farm-land became subject to very strict control. The American intention was to cut off support for Japan's militaristic elite, eliminate any threats of communism and foster grass-

roots democracy. By the 1960s the economy was sufficiently recovered for the Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) to dispense generous subsidies to the millions of small rice-farmers who became, and have remained, its most faithful supporters. It is largely thanks to the rural vote that the LDP has remained in power almost continuously since 1955.

Farm support policies and subsidies initially benefited all Japanese society. Farmers were provided with capital to modernize their methods and increase their output and incomes, and their purchases of farm machinery, domestic appliances and consumer goods supported the expansion of an internal market for Japan's manufacturing and service industries.<sup>4</sup> Independent smallholder farming was soon firmly established as the basis of a solid rural economy, and farm household incomes began to equal those of urban families, discouraging the rural exodus typical of most other post-war nations.

Thanks to heavy investments and strict discipline, agriculture recovered rapidly post-war. Japan was self-sufficient in rice by the mid-1960s. But with national development came problems. People began to eat less rice as their incomes increased, but rice output continued to rise with the successful application of new technologies. In 1971 the government introduced generous set-aside payments (*gentan*) in an effort to reduce rice surpluses to manageable proportions. Though mechanisation reduced the time needed to grow rice, opening the way in principle for larger, more cost-effective farms, rice-land could not easily be bought or sold and there was no scope (or appetite) for consolidating holdings. In the long-term the Japanese government has underwritten a perpetuation of peasant agriculture, albeit with a prosperous, middle-class peasantry. Today there are over two million small farms in Japan, of which at least one and a half million produce rice; the average rice-farm is under half a hectare in size. The tiny rice-holdings are by no means "traditional": they are highly capitalised and technically advanced, making the labour quite light. Typically the older household members tend the farm while the others work in nearby towns. Japanese is probably unique in the world today in that – thanks to agricultural subsidies and ample opportunities for off-farm employment – the average income of its farming households has for decades been consistently higher than that of urban families (Kim and Lee 2005: 131-133). Rice-production has essentially become a costly, over-equipped sideline, sometimes described as a hobby for pensioners.<sup>5</sup>

Today it costs twice as much to grow a kilo of rice in Japan as it would to import it from Australia (Takada and Mogi 2013). Ever since the 1980s Japanese agricultural methods and policies have been widely criticised for their inefficiency, and for their unfairness to foreign rice-producers in a world of free-

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<sup>4</sup> By the mid-1970s almost all rice-farmers owned a full range of expensive mini-machinery, and the average chemical use for rice rose to over 1 tonne per hectare, about ten times the US average (Tweeten *et al.* 1993).

<sup>5</sup> 'Subsidies for growers and import tariffs of 778 percent sustain 1.2 million rice farms whose typical owner is a 70-year-old man living off pension payments, part-time work and sales of the grain' (Takada and Mogi 2013). For years the government has pressed rice-farmers to pool their land to make bigger and more cost-effective farms – but in vain.

market competition. There is no doubt that by standard economic criteria the production of Japanese rice is extremely inefficient, in terms of production costs, labour productivity, over-use of chemicals, over-investment in machinery, and consumer prices. To this one could also add pollution of the rural environment. However in political and cultural terms the smallholder technology of Japanese rice farming has been extremely efficient.

The rice-farmers and their families, the LDP, and the manufacturing and service sectors have all benefited directly from the government's investments in rice production over the last seven decades. The benefits to the public at large are less obvious to outside eyes, but are nevertheless sufficiently appreciated within Japan for the rice-protection lobby to be able to mobilise considerable popular support. National food security remains a sensitive issue: the terrible shortages and starvation of the war years are still not forgotten, and fears of the effect of climate change on world food supplies were heightened by a severe global food crisis in 2007. Furthermore, the rice that Japanese like to eat is the slightly sticky, round-grained Japonica, which grows well only in a few regions: Japan itself, Korea and California.<sup>6</sup> Most rices available on world markets are long-grained Indica varieties unsuitable for Japanese cuisine.

For all these reasons the Japanese public are willing to pay the price for subsidising home-grown rice. The high cost of ordinary rice represents a very small part of today's household budgets, and there is ample demand for luxury rices too. In autumn, fine-food shops display stands of beautifully packaged, freshly harvested rices from prefectures famous for particularly tasty varieties. These seasonal treats command prices closer to French wine or Brazilian coffee than to a daily staple, and are a favoured gift. At a more mundane level, whenever the government cedes to pressure and opens the door a crack to rice imports, cheap street-stalls play up to rice chauvinism by festooning themselves in banners proclaiming that all their dishes use "100 percent Japanese rice".

With the average rice-farmer now in his or her seventies, it does seem that the post-war rice regime is now on the brink. Yet this year's proposals by the Prime Minister Yoshio Abe to cut financial support to rice-farmers and open the doors to rice imports are not so much a response to pressures within Japan, or to budgetary shortages.<sup>7</sup> Rather, they are diplomatic concessions to the free-trade demands of such regional and international consortia as TPP (Trans-Pacific Trade Agreement).<sup>8</sup> Even the TPP negotiators, however, have agreed that rice has "special status" in Japan and should therefore be treated as an exception in free-trade negotiations (Takada and Mogi 2013).

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<sup>6</sup> Most of Japan's (limited) rice imports come from California, which grows Japanese rice varieties specifically for the Japanese market (in particular for saké-brewing) and for the US sushi industry.

<sup>7</sup> In late 2013 the first significant cut to subsidies for rice production (in this case, set-aside payments, *gentan*) was announced in response to pressure from the international financial and trade communities. The Ministry of Agriculture claims that the *gentan* programme will be completely phased out by 2018 (*Economist* 2013).

<sup>8</sup> No doubt the growing tensions between China and Japan are also a factor in the timing of Japan's concession.

In sum, when a modern Japanese family sit round the supper table eating their bowls of Japanese-grown rice, they are not simply indulging a gastronomic preference for short-grained and slightly sticky Japonica rice over long-grained Indica rice from Thailand. They are eating and absorbing a food redolent of national essence, of tradition - in the sense of an invented and re-invented past. The enduring idyll of peasant rice-farming in Japan, the deep attachment of politicians and hydrologists as well as the general public to the rice-farming landscape, and the multi-layered expressions and experiences of rice-as-self, are the outcome of a highly successful political strategy of traditionalising, of building modern national solidarity around an imagined past. The representation of Japan as a nation tied to its legendary roots by the labours of simple, thrifty and patriotic rice-farmers is one that has served Japanese nationalist causes well since before the turn of the century and still has immense popular appeal.

*How Malaysia became a rice-farming nation*

The similarities between the current situation in Malaysia and Japan are at first glance so striking that we might suppose that rice played an identical role in both nations in shaping history, economy, policy and national identity. In Malaysia as in Japan, the post-war government has invested lavishly over decades in developing national rice production, preserving small-scale farms as the core of the rice industry despite economists' critiques. In both Malaysia and Japan, the current cost of growing a ton of rice at home is double the price of importing it. Malaysia like Japan has been severely criticised abroad for the inefficiencies of its rice sector and the unfairness of its subsidies, yet has succeeded in having its home-grown rice classified as a crop of high cultural significance, excluded on those grounds from the free-trade agreements that regulate normal commodities. In stark contrast to the Japanese case, however, Malaysia's small rice-farmers have remained poor. Forty years after first adopting the technologies of the Green Revolution they still represent troubling "pockets of poverty" in a prosperous, middle-income society (*9<sup>th</sup> Malaysia Plan*: 89; Hill 2013: 251).

In fact the paths by which Malaysia came to adopt its pro-farmer policies, as well as the economic status of rice-farmers and the meanings of rice as food in Malaysia, differ significantly from Japan. The complicating factor in Malaysia has been race. The commitment of the post-independence Malaysian state to maintaining a rice-growing peasantry has to be understood in the context of Malaysia's complex and tense history of ethnic distinctions and strife, and of the determination of the post-Independence government to build a durable basis for "national unity".

I spent 1976-77 studying the introduction of Green Revolution technologies in Bunut Susu, a rice-farming village in the East Coast state of Kelantan. By then Malaysia was justifiably confident of a bright future as an economically successful nation, and it could well afford to invest large sums in a Green Revolution. Rice development packages were carefully matched to the needs of peasant farmers (see below), but it seemed that a radical transformation of rural



society was looming in lines with broader transformations through the Malaysian economy (Bray and Robertson 1980; Fujimoto 1991). Through the period of the *2<sup>nd</sup> Malaysia Plan* (1971-75),<sup>9</sup> despite a hiccup during the oil crisis of 1973-74, Malaysia maintained an enviable average growth rate of 5.9% p.a. which showed no signs of flagging. The expansion of the Malaysian economy was prudently balanced across a wide range of activities, comprising urban-based sectors like the electronics assembly industry, construction, and a new and ambitious finance sector, as well as natural resource extraction and plantation agriculture. Natural resources included tin-mining, timber, and the oil and gas industry, much of which had been reorganised into a national company, Petronas, in 1974. Estate-grown export crops like rubber and oil-palm also added considerably to local employment and to the national coffers. By 1976 Malaysia had indisputably entered the club of modern nations.

The previous years, however, had not gone so smoothly: ethnic and geopolitical tensions threatened the new nation's survival for over a decade. At Independence in 1957 Malays numbered about 55% of the population, Chinese 35% and Indians 10%. Occupational segregation was marked, with most businesses, large and small, owned by Chinese and almost all land and senior government and military posts in Malay hands. Most capital was still controlled by foreign companies but the Chinese share, at around 35%, was much greater than the 2% in Malay hands, though poverty was widespread among urban working-class Chinese and rural Malay farmers alike. Tensions between the two communities over political control and perceived inequalities in wealth and opportunity ran high, and events kept fanning the flames.

The first Prime Minister of independent Malaya, Tunjku Abdul Rahman, coined the term *bumiputra*, "sons of the soil", to distinguish ethnic Malays and other indigenous groups from "recent immigrants", that is to say, Chinese and Indians.<sup>10</sup> With the *1<sup>st</sup> Malaysia Plan* (1966-70) the government began a programme of affirmative action to improve the economic position of the *bumiputra* – in effect, Malays. Though much resented by non-Malays, most Malays thought the programme ineffectual. In 1963 Malaya expanded to become Malaysia, incorporating the sparsely-populated but resource-rich Borneo territories of Sabah and Sarawak, and the densely-populated island-city of Singapore. Malay fears of the political impact of largely Chinese Singapore joining the nation led to race riots in 1964 and to the expulsion (some say

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<sup>9</sup> The British began the system of national plans. The *1<sup>st</sup>* and *2<sup>nd</sup> Malayan Five-Year Plans* (1956-60, 1961-65), spanning the transition to independence, aimed primarily to build infrastructure and develop export agriculture. The *1<sup>st</sup> Malaysia Plan* (1966-70) attempted to address economic imbalance between ethnic groups, but was widely perceived as having failed.

<sup>10</sup> Malay kingdoms on the Peninsula are recorded in early Chinese sources. Over the centuries and up to the period of *Konfrontasi* or stand-off with Indonesia (1962-66) there was a continual influx of Malay-speaking migrants from the Indonesian islands. One of Malaya's most productive rice-regions, Negri Sembilan, was opened up by Minangkabau settlers from Sumatra starting in the mid-nineteenth century. The British did not distinguish ethnically between immigrant and long-established Malay groups, and on independence they were all included, along with the tiny groups of indigenous peoples who had long since retreated up into the mountains, under the embracing category of *Bumiputra*, "sons of the soil". Thus a Minangkabau whose parents had migrated from Sumatra in the 1940s was a *Bumiputra*, while a Chinese whose ancestors had arrived to work in the tin-mines in the 1840s was not.

secession) of Singapore in 1965. In the elections of May 1969 the opposition polled more votes than the Malay-majority coalition. This led to further traumatic race riots and the declaration of a state of emergency. A new coalition government under Tun Abdul Razak devised a detailed national framework, the New Economic Policy (NEP), to promote national unity: 'The NEP had two prongs, namely "poverty eradication regardless of race" and "restructuring society to eliminate the identification of race with economic function". The NEP was supposed to create the conditions for national unity by reducing interethnic resentment due to socioeconomic disparities' (Jomo 2004: ii). Among the primary targets of the NEP were rice-farmers. Over 90% of rice-farmers were Malay, and 88% were classified as poor (Fujimoto 1991: 436).<sup>11</sup>

Since Independence the rice-farming sector had become a key focus of government policy and investment, initially with the goal of raising output to make the nation self-sufficient in this staple food. This quest reflected prevailing geopolitical tensions, and in formalising the identification of rice-farmers as Malays it institutionalised the ethnic divisions which "National Unity" policies were ostensibly intended to dissolve.

The glorious mission of feeding the nation is not a burden that Malay rice-farmers always had to shoulder, although *de facto* it was always Malays and other indigenous peoples who were the typical rice growers.<sup>12</sup> In colonial Malaya most wealth was generated by the tin-mining industry and by agricultural plantations growing coir, rubber, tobacco and other export crops. The mines were originally financed and owned by Chinese companies and worked by immigrants from China's Southern provinces; from the 1850s, as one Malay kingdom after another accepted British protection, the mines were bought up or displaced by British companies, but the labour force remained Chinese. The agricultural plantations began later; they were largely owned by British companies and run with immigrant labour from India (Ramasamy 1992; Hirschman 1986). Though some Malay immigrants from Indonesia were sailors or merchants by profession, most small trade and business in Malaya was in the hands of Chinese or Indians. Most ordinary, "native" Malays disdained the idea of working for foreigners in mines or on plantations. They chose to live in small villages (*kampung*) scattered through the countryside, growing rice and supplementing their incomes with crafts or small-holding production of cash-crops.<sup>13</sup> The rice they grew barely sufficed to feed themselves and their local Malay rulers; very little entered the market. The towns, mines and plantations of colonial Malaya therefore depended upon imported rice, mostly from British Burma.

Under British rule food self-sufficiency was debated but dismissed: it was cheaper and easier to import Burmese rice to feed the mining and plantation

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<sup>11</sup> This compared to about 50% for the population at large. See Jomo 2004 on the definitions and statistical assessments of poverty in the Malaysia Plans.

<sup>12</sup> Hill 2012. See Hill 2013: 264 on how post-Independence policies to intensify rice-production have persistently discriminated against non-Malay indigenous rice-farmers.

<sup>13</sup> Malay small-holding production of crops like rubber in fact proved quite competitive against the plantation-scale production of British colonial companies (Lim 1977).

workers who powered the economy. Ways to increase local rice production were often discussed. But Malay rulers and British administrators alike doubted that rural Malays would willingly sacrifice time and income to grow more rice. Schemes to modernise production with irrigation and mechanisation were too costly to develop far, and attempts to coax Chinese entrepreneurs into setting up as commercial rice-farmers failed. Overall it made sense for British Malaya to import the bulk of its rice supplies (Kratoska 1982; Hill 2012).

Rice-farming in the Malay States remained essentially a subsistence activity, contributing little to the national economy or to urban food supplies. Yet it was the foundation for the livelihood of millions of rural Malays, and steps were taken to support and protect a social group viewed as both vulnerable and entitled. In 1913 the *Malay Reservation Enactment* came into force: designed to protect Malays against dispossession by (mostly Chinese) money-lenders, it prohibited the transfer to non-Malays of Malay Reserve Land, which included most farm-land. Meanwhile the *Rice Lands Enactment* of 1917 prohibited, in principle if not always in practice, any alienation to other crops or uses of land suitable for rice-farming (Kratoska 1982).<sup>14</sup> Rice-farming and Malay identity thus became inseparably entwined.

By Independence the calculus of how best to secure the national food supply had changed. Prospects for reliable rice imports looked grim. Burma was no longer a sister state within the British Empire, indeed after the 1962 coup it disappeared from the map of international trade. 1962-66 saw an undeclared war (*Konfrontasi*) with Indonesia, which objected to the Borneo territories of Sabah and Sarawak joining Malaysia. Indochina was plunged in war, and Asian as well as Western leaders feared that Thailand and Indonesia would soon succumb to the Communist menace. It was clear that the new nation must try to feed itself. The government declared a goal of 100% self-sufficiency in rice, and went all-out for a programme to boost production through irrigation, extension of the rice-area and investment in fertilisers. A Guaranteed Minimum Price (GMP) policy had already been introduced in 1949, but the GMP was raised to encourage farmers to put more rice on the market (Fujimoto 1991:431-2). In 1960 the nation produced 54% of its rice needs; by 1970 this had risen to 80% self-sufficiency level. Total output, cultivated area and average yield all increased by about half during this decade, yet rural poverty actually increased, although 40% of all the considerable sums invested in national development were spent on agriculture (Siwar 2013: 713; Peacock 1981: 641).

Rice-farming was by now identified in the national mind as a quintessentially Malay occupation. In the Peninsular States the proportion of Malay farmers was (and remains) over 90% (Alam *et al* 2010: 252).<sup>15</sup> Furthermore, 'with independence and democracy came the realization that the rice-growing

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<sup>14</sup> Both laws are still in force today (Mohd. Arifin 2013).

<sup>15</sup> In Sabah and Sarawak upland rice is widely grown by other indigenous groups who, like Malays, qualify as *bumiputra*. But overall output is small and mostly consumed locally. Official policies have supported wet-rice farming (as practised by Malays) while often actively discouraging dry-rice or swidden farming (as practised by non-Malay groups such as the Dayak); see Hill 2013: 264.

peasantry represented a substantial power bloc for whom it was both politically and economically desirable to do something' (Hill 2013: 111). At that point two-thirds of votes were generated in the rural sector, and rice-farmers were a fifth of the national labour force (Peacock 1981: 641, 643). As Fujimoto notes, the New Economic Policy, initiated in 1970, marked a significant shift in state policy, from increasing rice production to increasing the income of rice-farmers (1991: 432). The NEP aimed to eradicate poverty and to promote national unity and strength. How better to do this than by raising the incomes of impoverished Malay rice-farmers, supporting and feeding them in return for the onerous responsibility of growing rice to feed the nation?

Reciprocity or mutual assistance is famously a key organising principle, ethical and practical, of "traditional" Malay *kampung* life. The idea that many hands make light work, or that a trouble shared is a trouble halved, is encapsulated in the term *gotong-royong*, "mutual assistance", frequently invoked by national and local government in Malaysia as a principle for promoting collective projects for the public good.<sup>16</sup> It was the Indonesian government, immediately after Independence in 1947, which first mobilised *gotong-royong* as both a social ideal and a concrete practice for building social solidarity and for bridging contending ethnic or class interests in an ethnically heterogeneous and culturally fissile nation (Bowen 1986). Faced with similar challenges of muting racial antagonisms, the Malaysian and Singaporean states quickly seized upon *gotong-royong* or "*kampung spirit*" as a morally powerful organising tactic. redolent of an innocent and caring village tradition.

In actual *kampung* practice, the most spectacular form of mutual assistance was *usung rumah*, "lifting the house".<sup>17</sup> But mutual assistance also figured prominently in everyday arrangements for the production, circulation and consumption of rice. In her study of Malay housekeeping, conducted in a fishing village on the Kelantan coast during 1939-40 and 1963, Rosemary Firth notes that the value set on rice far surpassed its importance as the indispensable daily staple: exchanges of rice circulated like blood through the body, not only between close kin but also between neighbours and more distant relatives, nourishing and fortifying as they flowed (Firth 1966: 58-71).<sup>18</sup> In her study of food, substance and the processual nature of kinship in Langkawi, an island off the West Coast of Malaysia, Carsten shows that for village Malays feeding (understood as both the giving and taking of food or nourishment) was a 'vital component in the long process of becoming a person and participating fully in social relations' (1995: 223). 'Food', Carsten continues, 'creates both persons in a physical sense and the substance, blood, by which they are related.' Children are nourished in the womb by their mother's blood, and after birth by the milk from her breast, formed from her blood. Blood is created in the body from food, and the primary food, the substance of any real meal, is cooked rice, *nasi*. '*Darah, daging mari pada nasi*, "Blood, flesh come from cooked rice," people say' (ibid:

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<sup>16</sup> *Gotong-royong* is actually Indonesian Malay; Malaysian Malay equivalents include *tolong-menolong*, *berderau*, etc.

<sup>17</sup> This involves either taking a house to pieces and re-erecting it elsewhere, or simply lifting the entire house by its posts and carrying it to the new site (Firth 1966: 23; Carsten 1997: 40).

<sup>18</sup> This was not a metaphor Firth used herself: her style, even for the time, was notably dry.

228), and the sharing of meals of rice builds relatedness between all those living around one hearth, just as drinking milk from the same woman's breast makes infants, whether her own offspring or adopted, into siblings.

In Bunut Susu, the *kampung* where I conducted my own field-work in the late 1970s, in the first years of the Green Revolution rice still pulsed through village life, nourishing social bonds and a sense of community. Sometimes the rice was cooked (*nasi*), equally often it was still in the husk (*padi*), or milled but raw (*beras*). Guests at weddings or circumcisions brought *beras* for their hosts to cook and serve as *nasi* at the communal feast. Friends who helped with tasks like re-building a house were given *rice* or *beras*; giving cash would have denied the closeness and permanence of the relationship. Transplanting and harvesting, when extra hands were needed, involved two forms of exchange: *berderau*, where groups of families exchanged equal quantities of work on each other's fields, and *pinjaman*, where the farmer provided a midday meal of *nasi* and curry to kin or neighbours who turned out to help. Although most seasonal labour needs were met through exchange, there were also opportunities for the landless, who could turn up to help at harvest and were paid one bundle of *padi* for every twenty they reaped.

One could think of these *kampung* transfers of rice as at once as a form of currency for payment, a celebration of people working together and a nourishing of long-term relations, a mutual feeding that built solidarities and redistributed resources. The redistributive element was especially clear in the arrangements for access to rice-land. Rice tenancies were all share-cropping agreements: the rent was transferred at harvest-time, dividing up the bundles of rice between landlord and tenant in a ratio agreed upon at the beginning of the contract. It might seem that the scarcity of rice-land would always advantage owners, but because it was rented only between households within the village and the terms were common knowledge, generosity largely prevailed. Frail elders got a bigger share from their tenants, couples with small children were charged less. Sharecropping redistributed the scarce resources of land and labour and shared the risks and benefits of unpredictable yields (Bray and Robertson 1980). The ethos was so marked that some researchers spoke of "income-sharing" as the basic principle of economic life in the *kampung* (Fujimoto 1983).

Rice, then, knit the *kampung* community together, not least because no household could manage transplanting and harvesting without help. Through food-sharing, labour-exchange and sharecropping contracts, land, labour and raw or cooked rice were exchanged in ways that helped all families to eat, to work and to survive. Translated into the symbolic logic of the *kampung*, if all Malaysian citizens, whatever their ethnicity, partook of the *nasi* provided by *bumiputra* farmers, this sharing of nourishment, and the exchange of resources that its production entails, would build visceral solidarities between individuals and groups whose interests and identities would naturally differ, diverge or even conflict.

Under the New Economic Policy (NEP) initiated in 1970, these rice-reciprocities were enacted on national scale. In the name of social solidarity, national unity and producing *nasi* to feed the nation, rice-farmers contributed their land and labour, the state (on behalf of the nation) contributed massive investment in infrastructure, credit, subsidies and technical know-how, in an exchange intended to assure not simply the well-being but the very survival, as modernisation progressed, of an economically marginal yet symbolically potent group. The poor Malay rice-farmers, voters all, were constituted as the quintessential subjects of the NEP *bumiputra* policy of redistributing wealth and capital assets to Malays from the wealthy, largely non-Malay, business and industrial sectors. This transfer was to be effected by the government, in the name of securing supplies of the food that all Malaysians, Indians, Chinese and Malays alike, shared as their staple.

Let me now briefly explain the nature of Malaysia's rice policies and their impact on farmers. Under the NEP the government launched its Green Revolution. It established agricultural development authorities in the main rice-growing regions, which built large-scale irrigation systems. No longer dependent on monsoon rains, farmers could now grow two crops of rice a year. This involved planting new varieties of high-yielding and quick-ripening rice and using chemical fertilisers, herbicides and pesticides to keep the fields clean. The government subsidised inputs, farm-gate prices and prices for urban consumers, and provided low-cost loans without collateral. Operation costs were kept very low so small-holdings remained viable and poorer farmers were not driven off the land, as they were in many other nations which adopted Green Revolution technologies. The number (around 1.3 million) and size (average 0.7 ha) of rice-farms has remained constant for over forty years.

Rice yields and output rose dramatically, as did incomes, in the first years of the Green Revolution, but then they flattened out. Between the late 1970s and the present, the rice industry has faced a series of crises: unfarmed land due to labour shortages in the 1980s; stagnation of yields and incomes through the 1990s and into the mid-2000s; a global food crisis in 2007, and now pressures to respond to climate change. Rejecting arguments for dismantling uneconomic peasant rice-farming and instead approving large-scale commercial rice-farms, or buying cheaper rice on the open market, the Malaysian government has responded to each crisis with micro-solutions designed to maintain the viability of small-holder rice-farmers, rather than the radical reorganisation that would promote increased output and returns to capital investment (Bray 2014).

Meanwhile, one significant impact of the Green Revolution was to heighten Malay farmers' dependence on rice, whereas previously most of them had lived from mixed farming combined with off-farm work. In imposing monoculture and diminishing opportunities for off-farm work, the introduction of rice double-cropping to Malaysia's rice regions recast the mutual assistance of *kampung* life as peasant dependency on the state. The Green Revolution technologies eliminated reciprocity within *kampung* rice-production: farmers who double-cropped had no time to help neighbours, and with commercialisation, fixed cash rents soon replaced sharecropping (Bray and

Robertson 1980; Fujimoto 1991). Government subsidies displaced other forms of mutual aid: soon, without state support rice-farmers simply could not survive. Input costs in 1996 would have come to about 90% of the sale price without subsidies, while in 2009 it was estimated that 74% of rice-farmers' income came from government support measures (Man and Sadiya 2009: 142).

The small Malay rice-farm has thus been preserved, but at what cost or benefit to the Malay farmers? Undoubtedly most are materially better off now than before the NEP and Green Revolution, when 88% of them were reckoned poor and many suffered from seasonal hunger or malnutrition. Over the last forty years most Malaysian padi-farmers have been raised from absolute to relative poverty; their houses now have concrete foundations and tiled rooms, electric light, running water and TVs. More crucial still, their children are properly nourished, go to school, and often get good jobs. However, most villages are poorly served by transport facilities, and as local jobs are scarce it is difficult to generate much off-farm income (Rabu and Mohd. Shah 2013). This is one important factor in explaining why Malaysia's rice-farmers still earn less than a quarter of the average urban income. Their essential role as the feeders of the nation is acknowledged by the public and rewarded by the state, yet in stark contrast to their Japanese counterparts Malay rice-farmers remain among the poorest of the nation's poor.

#### *Why are Japan's rice-farmers rich?*

The relative poverty of Malaysian peasant rice-farmers is neither unusual nor surprising. In a modern capitalist economy all small producers of low-value raw materials are disadvantaged, especially when they rely on industrial inputs to produce.<sup>19</sup> It is the prosperity of the Japanese rice-farmers that requires explanation.

So far I have discussed how discourses of "rice is us" form within a society, weaving and re-weaving threads of history and experience in response to prevailing social agendas or geopolitical context. I alluded earlier to the fact that the self-images or social dynamics elaborated in emic discourses of "rice is us" do not always coincide with etic models of "rice is them". Japan is a case in point.

Here let me introduce a famous and highly influential "etic" model of the historical dynamics of Asian rice societies, namely the concept of "agricultural involution" developed by the anthropologist Clifford Geertz. Geertz's book of that title, published in 1963, is a study of the social and ecological impact of the colonial "Cultivation System" (*Cultuur Stelsel*) in Java. Geertz proposed that

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<sup>19</sup> A comprehensive report on trends in farm-incomes in OECD nations between 1980 and 2003 shows, not surprisingly, that since the typical forms of support and subsidy are proportional to inputs and/or output, large farms benefit much more from these subsidies than small farmers. Most small farms fall into the low-income bracket on the national scale, except in those rare cases where direct payments are given to small farmers operating in less-favoured areas. The Swiss government, for instance, has reduced disparities in income between lowland and mountain farms by this policy, which amounts effectively to paying farmers a fixed salary regardless of the scale, nature or success of their operation (OECD 2003).

there is something technically special about wet rice as a staple. In Java the capitalist dynamism of the colonial sugar-plantation sector offered a dramatic contrast with the peasant rice farming which fed its labourers. Geertz argued that the technical characteristics of irrigated rice farming in Java permitted infinite small-scale increments in output, but these were achieved largely through the intensification of labour inputs. The dynamic of intensification was not the development of the means of production, but the reinforcement, or involution, of the traditional, non-capitalist social institutions within which rice farming was embedded. Involution occurred in Java, Geertz argued, because there was no industrial or urban sector to absorb surplus population.

Geertz' interpretation of the Javanese rural economy 'has been praised and imitated by many scholars who worked on areas other than Java, and vilified by most Java scholars' (Boomgaard and Kroonenberg 2015). Certainly it has been extremely influential in interpretations of East Asia. Many prominent economic historians of China, notably Mark Elvin (1973), have argued that the very success of China's early modern dynasties in developing intensive and productive rice-based economies fostered involution, stifled mechanical creativity and precluded true development.<sup>20</sup> The great exception to rice-based involution, first proposed by Geertz and accepted by Elvin and other involution-enthusiasts, was Japan.

In an earlier section I outline the rapid and radical modernisation and industrialisation policies of the Meiji government (1868-1912), and the role that intensified rice-production played in financing and provisioning these transformations. Geertz's position is that the intensification of rice-production did not lead to involution in Meiji Japan for two reasons: first, a growing industrial sector was attracting peasants off the land, and secondly, new labour-saving technologies were becoming available to Japanese farmers. In other words Geertz presents Japanese rice-farming as reactive, not formative: the exogenous impact of urban industrialisation (catalysed by the adoption of Western technology) saved it from its intrinsic propensities to involute, but beyond supplying food and labour the rice-sector had no role, according to this model, in shaping Japan's modern sector.

This, one might say, rather accurately describes what has been happening in Malaysia since 1970. The peasant sector has indeed been reactive to, rather than fully integrated into, broader national development. The model of "agricultural involution", with its counter-examples where agriculture is "rescued" from involution exogenously by a dynamic industrial sector, is not, however, one that Japanese historians and social scientists think of as accurately reflecting the historical realities of Japan, or indeed of other rice-based societies. Focusing on the positive potential of social cohesion and the importance of skills, they propose quite different interpretations of what different types of rice-farming contribute to broader social institutions.

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<sup>20</sup> For a more detailed account of involutory models and their critics see Bray 2013: 23-28.



I first became aware of the Japanese categorisations of rice societies, and their images of “rice is us” and “rice is them”, when I was surveying the literature on development in Southeast Asia during the 1970s. There I encountered the contrasts that Japanese economists and social scientists drew between the development prospects of “tightly structured” and “loosely structured” rice-growing communities (Ishii 1978). According to this theory, drawn from historical analyses of village life and livelihood in Japan, the demands of organising intensive forms of irrigation created a high degree of social and technical cohesion that promoted smooth adaptation and active contributions to development. Japan was a typical case of a “tightly structured” rice-society; China’s Yangzi Delta, Bali and Java also belonged to the “tightly structured” club. Elsewhere, however, and particularly in those mainland Southeast Asian nations where Japan was investing heavily in development aid, programmes needed to be tailored to the realities of “loosely structured” rice communities, lacking in social cohesion and discipline. The virtues of *gotong-royong* did not apparently appeal to Japanese development experts as a substitute for tight structure.

In addition to the concept of “tight structure”, which supposes that the skills and discipline needed for intensive rice-farming promoted nimble and effective adaptation to new challenges, another notable element of Japanese social and historical analysis was also constructed around the demands and characteristics of intensive rice-farming as experienced in medieval and early modern Japan, namely the concept of “industrious revolution” (Hayami 1992; Sugihara 2003). In Japanese models of *longue durée* history and paths to modernity, “industrious revolution” denotes an economic transformation based on the complex of managerial, technical and financial skills associated with the complex of small-scale rice-farms, crafts and manufactures that clustered in the early modern Japanese countryside. Starting in the seventeenth century these characteristic resources led Japan, it is argued, on a rurally-rooted, rice-based path to a form of industrialisation quite different from the classic cases of Britain or the Eastern United States. In Japan the rural economy was not reactive to, but constitutive of, development trajectories. Furthermore, rural skills and creativity were not marginalised or displaced by Western-inspired technical expertise, but mobilised and developed in the service of a characteristically Japanese repertory of modernising techniques (Morris-Suzuki 1994). There is a broad consensus among Japanese historians and social scientists that these deep-rooted resources and dynamics continue to shape the organisation of the economy and of production in Japan today (Francks 2015).

Japan is perhaps the most conspicuous example of a successful modern “rice economy”. Francks details the policies and institutions through which the Meiji and subsequent Japanese governments up to the present have mobilised multifunctional rural households to build a modern, competitive industrial economy. This modern economy is, still today and to a visible extent, shaped by and organised around the needs and affordances of small-scale rice-farming and the cluster of manufactures and other enterprises in which rice-farming, in Japan, is routinely embedded.

Generous as the subsidies are that the LDP lavishes on small rice-farmers to bring in the rural vote, subsidies alone could not have kept them afloat. It is policies of decentralised industrialisation and balanced rural-urban development, including the provision of good transport facilities and rural infrastructure, that have ensured access to skilled, well-paid jobs and entrepreneurial opportunities for farming families, enabling them to prosper. Today about 90% of the income of rice-farming households comes from off-farm work (Kim and Lee 2005).

*In conclusion*

As Francks remarks, if rice today is still the symbol of an authentic Japanese life, this reflects how tightly rice-farming has been integrated into Japan's industrial formation, economic institutions and consumer practices. This is not true of Malaysia which, like Japan, has chosen to defend its peasant rice-farmers against all the odds, or – some would say – against all reason. The arguments for “rice as self” are similar in Malaysia and Japan, but not identical. In both cases arguments are made that rice is bound up with national, personal and ethnic identity. Yet while there are clear parallels between Japanese claims about rice as the maker of Japanese bodies and persons, and Malay *kampung* understandings of rice as corporeal, social and moral substance, in the Japanese case such claims affirm an unquestioned ethnic unity. In the case of post-Independence Malaysia, with its simmering ethnic tensions, no such intrinsic unity could be assumed. The national policy of developing, protecting and supporting peasant rice-farms was not simply a pragmatic move to protect marginal Malays while securing supplies of basic food – at a more ambitious level it was a project of biological nation-building. In gaining long-term public commitment to the costly enterprise, we may say that in this the Malaysian government has been successful.

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