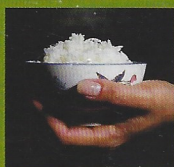




rice is life

cultivation • culture • meaning

An exhibit developed by the Vancouver Museum in partnership
with the Canadian Society for Asian Arts.



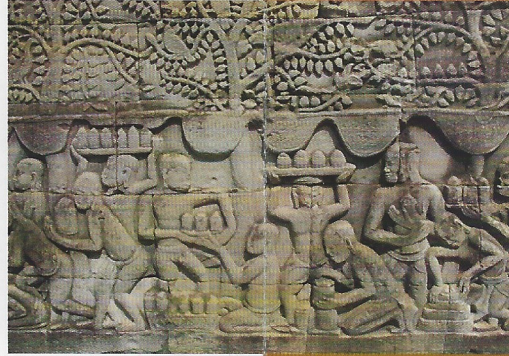
.....why rice matters

Rice is deeply imbedded in the culture and heritage of societies from Asia to Australia, from the Americas to Africa. Rice is an essential ingredient, not only in daily food, but also as part of individual identity, social organization and artistic expression. Tossed over newly wedded couples, presented to spirits and deities, and drunk as rice wine in celebration or ritual, for countless people rice is synonymous with well-being and good fortune.

Rice is the staple food of over half the world's population. In Asia alone, more than 2 billion people obtain most of their energy intake from rice-based foods.

Yet the situation for many of the world's rice producers is grim. The spectre of increased hunger, malnutrition, poverty and conflict in the coming decades resulted in the declaration by the United Nations General Assembly of the year 2004 as the International Year of Rice (IYR). Devoting a year to a staple food was an unprecedented step in the history of the United Nations.

Rice seedlings ready for planting. © CIDA.



Bas-relief, Bayon Temple; people with bowls of rice, Angkor Thom, Cambodia, Khmer, late 12th century. Barry Till, 2007.

the cultivation of rice.....

The origins of rice have been debated for some time, but the plant is of such antiquity that we may never know when and where it was first cultivated. It is certain, however, that the domestication of rice ranks as one of the most important developments in history, for rice is the oldest, continuously grown cereal crop in the world. The cycles of its cultivation have shaped the cycles of human life, thus influencing the development of civilization.

The two species of domesticated rice are Asian rice (*Oryza sativa*) and African rice (*Oryza glaberrima*). Botanical and linguistic evidence points to mainland Southeast Asia as the heartland of rice cultivation, where it likely began over 6,500 years ago. The origin of cultivated

African rice dates to 3,500 years ago in the regions of the inland delta of the Niger River, in modern-day Mali.

Farmers in over 80 countries have developed an astonishing 100,000 varieties of rice. It grows at sea level in Bangladesh and at altitudes of 3,000 meters in Nepal. Rice is often grown in irrigated paddies. However, not all rice is grown in water. With upland rice, the seeds are sown directly into the dry earth.



Rock painting of rice plants, buffalo and humans, ca. 6100–4100 BC, Thailand. *Rice and Thai People*, Institute of Rice Research, Ministry of Agriculture, Thailand, 1999.

.....the granary

In parts of Asia, rice granaries resembled houses (r), reflecting the belief rice spirits needed a home. Agam, Sumatra, Indonesia, ca. 1900. KIT Tropenmuseum, Amsterdam.



rice: a favourite food.....

In many languages, the phrase for “eating rice” is synonymous with “eating food.” Rice forms an integral part of culinary traditions worldwide. Each culture has its own set of preferences regarding the texture, taste, colour and stickiness of rice and each has its own signature dish. In China, there is congee, in Japan, sushi, in India, pilafs, in Italy, risotto, in Spain, paella and the UK enjoys rice pudding.

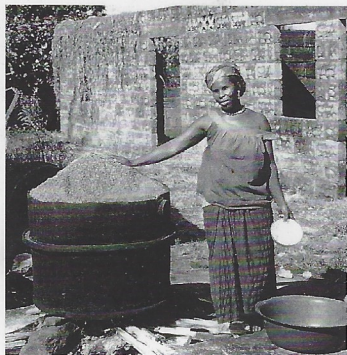
Rice is low in fat and cholesterol, and high in carbohydrates, which makes it a great source of energy and easy to digest. However, it contains only limited amounts of essential micronutrients. Because of this, rice is usually supplemented by other foods: some countries specialise in “rice and fish” cuisine, while others consume “rice and beans.”

Tradition and preference dictate that most rice is milled, yielding white rice. This process removes the outer indigestible coating, as well as the outer bran layers of the grain. While this procedure reduces cooking time and increases storage life, it also strips rice of much of the protein, fibre, fat, iron and B vitamins found in unmilled brown rice. In a number of countries, unhusked rice grains are parboiled or “converted,” by soaking and steaming, to preserve these nutrients.



Plate with “rice grain” pattern, blue and white porcelain with enamel, China, 1950s. Private Collection.

the origins of rice cultivationin the Americas



Arab scholar al-Bakri first mentions rice cultivation along the Niger River in 1068. In the centuries following the early Portuguese explorers of the 1400s, the densely

A Temne woman parboiling rice in Sierra Leone. This method of rice preparation was brought by slaves to America. © David P. Gamble.

populated region from Senegal to Liberia would become known as the “Grain” or “Rice Coast.” In the early 16th century Portuguese ships started to carry rice seed to Brazil.

From the end of the 17th century, colonial rice plantation owners preferred slaves from ethnic groups who were skilled in wet rice cultivation. In at least two important areas of the New World, South Carolina and the eastern Amazon in Brazil, plantation owners depended on African expertise in rice farming. The development of rice in the Americas marked not only the movement of a crop across the Atlantic but also the transfer of an entire cultural system.

.....rice in culture

Rice is intimately woven into the culture of myriad societies. Rice planting rituals, where offerings are made and seeds blessed, are essential for ensuring a good harvest in many parts of the world, and contribute to cultural identity. Historically, in China, the Emperor would mark the first planting in a sacred ploughing ceremony. Similar customs involving the royal family have survived in Thailand and Japan to this day.

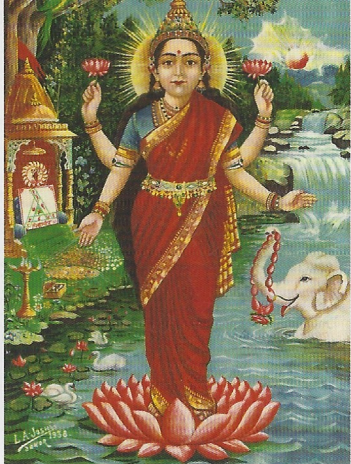


The rice planting season in Thailand begins with the annual First Ploughing Ceremony in Bangkok, presided over by the King. © *Thai People and Rice*, 1999.

Festivals to celebrate the rice harvest are held around the world. In the United States, rice festivals are like state fairs, with Rice Queen contests and rice cooking competitions. The festival in Crowley, Louisiana, first held in 1927, may be the oldest in North America.

divine rice: deities and spirits.....

The appearance of rice in the world is closely tied to the divine, and the presence of a ‘Rice Mother’ is the most common motif in rice stories. Each culture has its own name for the rice deity who is often a Goddess. In Thailand, she is known as Mae Phosop. In Bali, she answers to Dewi Sri, where her image is



Poster of Lakshmi, India. This Hindu goddess and the Japanese Shinto deity Inari have both evolved from rice deities into those of wealth and prosperity. L.A. Joshi, British India Press, 1938.

worshipped at home or at a shrine in the rice field.

In early Western culture the Great Goddess ruled over grains and agriculture, whether the product was rice, corn or wheat. Often portrayed holding a stalk

of grain, her Roman name was Ceres, from which we derive the word "cereal." The Rice Goddess, whatever her form, symbolizes fertility and the unending cycle of life.

rice, ritual and meaning.....

The respect for rice as a sacred crop ensures its use as an offering to ancestors and deities. At the magnificent Lingaraj Temple in Bhubaneswar, India, devotees bring puffed rice, as an offering to Lord Shiva. In Thailand, lay Buddhists gain religious merit by giving rice daily to monks or monasteries.



Sake ewer with cryptomeria design. Gold decoration, black and red lacquer on wood, Japan, early 20th century. Private Collection.

Rice wine is distilled and drunk wherever rice is grown. It is consumed at feasts and festivals while remaining an important sacrament for religious occasions. In Japan, the culture of rice wine (sake) is highly developed and has long had a central role in major life events because of its sacred associations as a Shinto offering to the gods.



A newly wed couple in a shower of rice. © Johann Helgason.

.....rice challenges

Rice is a key economic force. More than 2 billion people depend upon rice as the essential element of food security in countries where it is eaten daily. And the pressures on rice are rising. As populations increase, so must rice production, even

as land, water and labour are all decreasing and climate is changing. As one response to meet the demand, new varieties of hybrid rice have been created, which yield more than conventional rice.

Technological change can offer benefits, but can also create problems. Soil depletion, pollution from agricultural chemicals and loss of traditional seed varieties are but a few. About 80% of the world's rice is produced by small-scale farmers and is consumed locally. Rice ecosystems support a variety of edible plants as well as fish, frogs and snails, which also help supplement rural diets and incomes. This is why rice is on the frontline in the fight against world hunger and poverty.



Rice Planting, Ono Bafuku (1888–1976). Japan, 1952, woodblock print. Vancouver Museum.

.....the future of rice

Genetically modified, or GM, foods have stirred controversy globally. On one hand, they promise superior nutrition, food security and poverty reduction. On the other, they generate fears for consumer and environmental safety. Concerns like cost, consumer acceptance and choice remain sensitive issues in Europe and several Asian nations. The focus on new technologies can itself be a problem by shifting attention, and resources, away from the need to find broadly-based approaches to improve nutrition, food security and farm income.



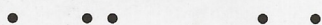
International Rice Research Institute (IRRI) staff selecting good seeds for storage at the IRRI Genebank facility. © Ariel Javellana, IRRI 2003.

Meanwhile, the GM debate was overshadowed in 2001 when the rice genome, its "life code," was unveiled. This discovery will have a significant impact on rice breeding. Traits that govern pest and disease resistance, yield and nutrient content can be identified, allowing new, potentially non-GM varieties to help meet global demands.

As technology is embraced, social and cultural patterns — the very rhythm of life — will change. These changes will affect not only individuals, but also the social fabric of a nation. For many, rice is not merely a commodity. Rice is life.

The Rice is Life project was developed by the Vancouver Museum in partnership with the Canadian Society for Asian Arts: May 3, 2007 – January 1, 2008.

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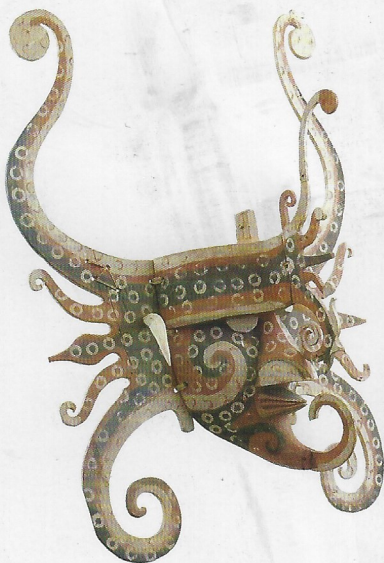


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Hudoq mask worn
during the rice planting
festival. Borneo,
Indonesia, ca. 1900.
KIT Tropenmuseum,
Amsterdam.

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COVER IMAGES

Top: Rice plants. © Canadian International Development Agency (CIDA).
Bottom: Poster of the Rice Mother Mae Phosop holding stalks of rice. Thailand, ca.
1980. Fowler Museum at UCLA.

All artefacts and images from the *Rice is Life* project. Brochure design: Justyna Krol.