Eric Crystal — ORIAS Summer Institute 2014

"Sacred Grain—Rice and Religion in East and Southeast Asian Perspective"
Eric Crystal, Group in Asian Studies, UC Berkeley
Summarized by Stephen Pitcher

Professor Crystal's presentation featured a number of his own photographs; as well as providing a beautiful visual accompaniment to his words (even rendering them at times unnecessary), they serve as a perfect response whenever people asked, "Why do you work in *Bali?*" Crystal commented that everybody seemed to be interested in food nowadays; he felt sure that "sexways" would be trending next on the academic front.

In terms of the timeline from agriculture to urbanization, with the domestication of grain as a catalyst, Southwest Asia's progress was simultaneous with the New World's. The grains in question differed though: while maize and quinoa prevailed in the West, rice dominated Eastern agriculture, and is still the grain upon which more people in the world depend than any other. 3500 years ago, when the people who were to become the Hawaiians, Samoans, Tongans, and Maori set out from Southeast Asia in search of fortune, it was a different story: they brought taro and pigs with them, but no rice. Now, however, in the small-scale tribal societies of Southeast Asia Professor Crystal studies, rice is a deeply embedded element of local culture. Rice cultivation shapes the society and region in which it occurs through its demand for collaborative labor, its extraordinary dependence on a controlled water supply, and the collective effort required to transform the land to accommodate its needs and fragilities, whether through irrigation or construction of dyked highland terraces. One square meter of an irrigated rice paddy can require the labor of one hundred people or more.

In Asia there are stories about the origin of rice; it figures in ideologies, religious systems, and protective ritual repertories, not just because of its enormous nutritional significance but because of the many perils attendant upon its growth. Among the fatal pitfalls awaiting the young rice shoot are variations in water supply; attacks of locusts and leaf borers; rust and other diseases; and the predations of birds, deer, and humans (of whom 240 million, the fourth largest national population on the planet, live in Indonesia). It is unsurprising therefore, given its cultural resonance, that rice permeates the art of many Asian cultures. Slides of Balinese paintings of the rice harvest were shown, in which the rice goddess was depicted (the grain is associated with fertility and the female). Many cultures have extensive poetry devoted to rice, often associating it with gold—not just as a monetary metaphor but because the grain turns golden when ready to harvest. In the United States the position of rice is quite different, in part because of technology. Professor Crystal told of a consulting job he had once had, conducting Indonesian agricultural engineers on a tour of Californian rice farms in Yuba and Marysville. When the head of the delegation appeared at his door three days into the tour, Crystal was sure it was to complain about the food, the transportation, or perhaps his own performance. But the man simply blurted out, "Where are they hiding the *peasants?*" He had to explain the role played by combines, seed from airplanes, and weed-suppressing herbicides in our

agriculture: much money is spent on expensive machinery, and then four or five people do the work. It's not labor in which the entire population engages, as it is elsewhere.

Rice is celebrated not only in the religious rites of Bali—the last remaining strong Hindu enclave in Southeast Asia—but throughout the splendor of Balinese expressive arts, including a wealth of textile work Crystal deemed the most versatile in the world. The religious observance involves the offering of fruits and flowers to a temple as the gamelan plays; the arrival of the gods and goddesses and their participation in the festivities; a priest's soaking rice grains in holy water; and the parishioners placing a rice grain on their foreheads, certifying that they have paid their obligatory respects to the goddess of rice.

Professor Crystal showed a photograph of people looking relaxed and happy, commenting that harvest time is a happy time, because the period of anxiety over the welfare of the ever-vulnerable rice plants is finally over. He then moved on to the topic of Vietnamese rice cultivation.

Vietnam has a population of 185 million people and is, like most populous countries, multiethnic, with 85 percent ethnic Vietnamese and a 15 percent ethnic minority, primarily "mountain" minorities, like the Hmong. Among the mountain dwellers rice is grown on terraces, which have to be rebuilt every year. Irrigation is a central concern, as rice loves water when young, but has to be transplanted and vigorously protected from inundation when more mature. The mountain Vietnamese, otherwise a jovial people, are absolutely silent when harvesting the rice: the rice goddess *hates* noise and vulgarity of any type, according to Crystal. (She also insists on the employment of an extremely small knife for harvesting high-growing rice, though she will allow the use of a scythe where short rice is concerned.)

Most of these Vietnamese mountain regions do not produce subsistence-level rice yields, so New World crops—corn, sweet potato, millet—are grown as well. Rice is a rich man's food; poor people eat corn or cassava—but rice is always used for celebrations. Many cultures only offer to their rice deity in the morning: rice, like the rising sun, is linked to life; while death is associated with sunset. Professor Crystal recommended checking out the iconography on the Sulawesi coffee at Starbucks, which apparently involves rice being extracted from an ornate granary and depicts the equations right=life, left=death, rising sun=female, and fighting cock= male. He described a ritual of renewal performed every twelve years, in which everything is done backwards, a nocturnal bonfire lit to attract the high god's approval and his bestowal of good fortune on the rice, the mating of water buffalo and the planting of rice enacted, and a calf sacrificed; and closed with the idea that in Southeast Asia the rising sun symbolized both life and women.

Q&A

Participant: There's such a lot of celebrating—it there ever wine made from the rice?

Crystal: There's a species of palm—the Arenga sugar palm—that people go up to in the late afternoon, cut a protuberance from, and draw off a sweet juice which gets a little bit alcoholic. It's served with roasted meat.

Participant: How is the worship of rice manifested differently in countries that are Buddhist?
Crystal: The Japanese have two religions, Shinto and Buddhism. Shinto is very much involved in the celebration of rice. A temple I went to had a business producing sake; you could go to a festival there and get a three-day sake cup. Buddhism is very tolerant of other religions.

Participant: Do coffee and rice compete [agriculturally]?
Crystal: Coffee grows in mountains—Arabica is the best—but rice grows in valleys or terraces: there's no competition. Vietnam is the second largest coffee producer in the world; it's *much* more lucrative than rice.

Participant: Could you discuss Buddhism and Islam with respect to syncretism?
Crystal: Shinto was first in Japan, then Buddhism. They figured out how to get along. Monotheistic religions are not tolerant of pre-monotheistic religions; Buddhism is much more tolerant.

Participant: What's the gender situation with labor [involving rice]; do men and women do all jobs?
Crystal: Mostly both do everything. Rice is so important to life and so demanding that everybody kicks in. There is separation of gender in religious activity though.

Participant: How does the nutrition of rice compare to that of other grains?
Crystal: Rice has more protein than any other grain.

Participant: Even white rice?
Crystal: No, the nutrition's in the hull. When rice is hulled by hand a nutritious fraction remains.

Participant: Is rice grown in Sri Lanka?
Crystal: Ecologically Sri Lanka is part of South Asia.

Right now, under the Transpacific Trade Partnership, Japan has a 425% tariff on U.S. rice, which is a huge obstacle to negotiations. The Japanese trade minister is pushing to mechanize and maximize production, so the tariff would not be so important and ruinous to small farmers. So the centrality of rice to local culture is articulated in important policy issues of our time.