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The Birth of the Rice Spirit: An Essay in Comparative Ethnology

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ISSUES CONCERNING THE RICE SPIRIT AND THEIR SCOPE

Despite my efforts to consider the subject of the rice god, I am simply unable to bring my ideas together into a single integrated scheme. In regard to Japan and Southeast Asia, there already exists an accumulated body of traditional scholarship that provides a provisional framework for my speculations, and it is possible to place the results of my own investigations within this framework. I might even be able to make a certain contribution to the advance of scholarship. But when Sri Lanka, India (Kashmir), Nepal and Bhutan are added to this, I find it difficult to formulate an overall scheme or picture in which my investigations to date might find a position.

As has been pointed out by K.G. Izikowitz¹⁾, no rice god—here I do not distinguish between the terms ‘rice god’ and ‘rice spirit’—is recognized to the west of Assam, and rice is considered to have a divine status, or is treated as possessing a spirit, only to the east, namely, in the region extending from Assam and Myanmar into Southeast Asia. This is both most strange and also of great interest. It has been my desire to determine which peoples have come to distinguish rice from other cultivated crops and to conceive of it as being indwelt by a god or possessing a spirit, but I have still not succeeded in doing so.

It was in order to establish this in general terms that I undertook my latest survey and that I conducted investigations in Sri Lanka and earlier surveys in various parts of Southeast Asia, but in spite of this I find myself unable to delineate any schema concerning the rice god. Even on the basis of my preliminary investigations to date it may be said that in Sri Lanka, where the coexistence of Sinhalese and Tamils makes it difficult to obtain clear-cut results, rice-planting rites are not performed in any distinct form as in the case of Southeast Asia, and the situation is similar in the Indic world.

If it were simply a case of not recognizing in rice any godhood or the existence of any spirit, then, as stated by Izikowitz, the matter would end there. But some questions do nevertheless remain. Firstly, according to our observations at a rural village near Kurunegala in the central region of Sri Lanka, the rice-growing rites in Sri Lanka are for the purpose of protecting the rice from evil spirits that might

harm it, and rice is not considered to possess any sort of godhood²). But I did notice sheaves of rice tied to the beams of houses in the same village, and it will be necessary to ascertain whether these sheaves represent the first harvest of the season and whether any special significance is attached to them. I was, moreover, told by a family of rice farmers in a Tamil town in northern Sri Lanka that it is ultimately the sun god Sūrya who protects the rice and that no deity or spirit resides in the rice plant. By celebrating the harvest they were giving thanks to the sun god and his blessings³).

Circumstances were very similar in Bhutan. At the farmhouse that we visited on the outskirts of Thimphu the freshly harvested first ears of rice had been placed to one side of a large and imposing Buddhist altar and offerings had been laid out on a platter, but here too there was no conception of any god dwelling within the rice.

After the rice has been planted, and as long as it is in the paddy fields, it is protected by the god called Tsering, the god who increases family wealth, and the god Namse, who holds a mongoose in his hand. Because the household gods, including these gods, watch over the cultivation of rice from first to last, the first ears of rice are placed on the household altar. In some altars both Avalokiteśvara (Skt.) and Dema are enshrined, but here it is only Avalokiteśvara. There are also some areas where an earth god is said to reside in the earth, but not around Paro. The day for tilling the paddy fields is, however, fixed, and once the fields have been immersed in water, the water god protects them. The water god is called Zo-mem. After the seedlings have been transplanted, rice cakes are offered to this god⁴).

Next, let us summarize the situation in Nepal.

1) Some time in May or June the seed rice is taken out of the terra-cotta jars in which it has been stored, soaked in water, and dried for one day. 2) Over a period of one month nursery beds are prepared and the seeds are planted, and string is tied around the beds so that the seeds will not be eaten by pigeons, sparrows or crows. 3) A religious ceremony (*pūjā*) is then performed. The eldest woman in the village is chosen to pray for a fruitful harvest of rice, and she prays to a deity (one of Śiva's manifestations) who watches over the crops as they grow; this deity is said by some to represent a form of the Buddha in meditation, while others conceive of this deity as the goddess of harvests. 4) Neither cows nor water buffaloes are used for ploughing the fields. 5) The first person to transplant the rice seedlings is the eldest man or woman in the village, and he or she may start from any corner, but the rice planting is usually carried out by women. If there should happen to be a large tree still standing on any of the ridges separating the paddy fields, a *pūjā* may be performed there. (The inhabitants of the village in question were all Buddhists.) 6) When the planting has been completed, a *pūjā* called Sinajya Benkiga is performed in celebration of the completion of this task. The villagers purify both themselves and their homes: they cover the floors and the kitchen with fresh cow dung and clay, bathe themselves (usually with water from a well), drink alcohol, and eat buffalo

meat. Since this ceremony is performed upon the completion of rice planting by all the villagers, it is not carried out if there should still be even one villager engaged in planting. 7) One of the events that takes place while the rice is growing is the service for frogs, in which grains of rice are placed along the rice-paddy ridges for the frogs to eat. Frogs both represent the earth spirit and are symbols of the earth, and they assist the peasants by devouring countless noxious insects. They are also said to attract rain when they croak in unison, and so the peasants offer thanks to them in this manner. 8) It is also customary to erect scarecrows: the head is made of terra-cotta, the face is marked with eyes and a nose, the hair is painted black, and it is supported by a bamboo pole. It is said to prevent cows and water buffaloes from entering the paddy fields, but it may also be meant to prevent the intrusion of evil spirits. 9) Six months later harvest time comes. The peasants regard frosts as beneficial to the cultivation of rice, and frosts are especially frequent during September. At about this time the villagers pick white flowers and offer them to Indra. This is because Indra is said to descend from the heavens at the time of Indra-jātra. 10) No special ceremonies are performed at harvest time, but prayers are addressed to Vasendra, the goddess of fertility, at threshing time, even though there is no shrine dedicated to this goddess. The threshing floor is not besmeared with cow dung; instead threshing begins after having hardened the ground with sand and water. 11) After weighing, which is done using a wooden or metal weighing vessel with a capacity of four litres, the unhulled rice is stored in bamboo baskets 1½m in length and plastered with clay and cow dung. The baskets are placed on the floor, filled with rice, and covered with rice straw or dried grass. Most farmhouses have three or four of these containers near the kitchen on the uppermost floor. 12) As regards the question of the rice god, the villagers do not conceive of the ears of rice or the grains of rice as being indwelt by any god, nor do they consider there to be any spirit residing in the rice, and there does not appear to be any notion of a goddess of rice.

This being the case, it means that a rice-spirit cult or rice-growing rites such as we might readily visualize are not to be found in Nepal. Although it is true that rice in its capacity as a cultivated plant is treated with care and respect, it is not deified or anthropomorphized, and in this respect the situation differs from that in Japan and Southeast Asia.

Moving now on to Kashmir, what rice-growing rites might be performed there and in what rice god do the people believe? There is almost no need to pose any such questions, for Kashmir is an Islamic region. Apart from some exceptions, the entire population believes in Allah as the one and only god, and so it is hardly likely that they should believe in the existence of any spirits in the earth, forests, stones or paddy fields. In this sense it was not necessary to undertake any surveys there. But nevertheless I felt a desire to visit a farming village and test the reactions of the villagers. I thought that if I were to disregard terms such as 'god' or 'spirit' and if I did not bind myself to set forms of rice-growing rites, I might be able to elicit some interesting hints⁵).

The result was, however, as anticipated, and I was met with what could be only regarded as formal expressions of faith in the one and only Allah. I was unable to discover the slightest trace of any rice god in the villages of Kashmir. But even so the villagers displayed no averse reactions towards me, an infidel, when I asked in all seriousness questions not even deserving of replies, such as "Is there perhaps not a god dwelling in that ear of rice?" or "Is there perhaps not a spirit living in the waters of that stream over there?," and they not only carefully explained their own position, but also invited me upstairs and treated me to tea and Kashmiri bread. And while eating that warm bread, which had required more than two hours to bake, I realized that I would have to pursue the god of rice in a more limpid world of religion such as is never expressed in custom or ritual.

It goes without saying that the Koran describes in concrete terms the features of the heaven to which the faithful who believe in Allah will eventually attain. There are bubbling streams, flowers bloom in great profusion, all kinds of fruits are available, and dishes are piled high with various delicacies, while handmaids serve wine and pleasant music is to be heard. Although there is no mention of wheat or rice growing in the fields of heaven, judging from the unsurpassed pleasures of life there, it is to be assumed that not only man and the cuisine but also the cultivated crops are to a certain degree sanctified and blessed by Allah. In other words, all of heaven, including both man and crops, is graced as it is by religious rites. When the structure of the world is conceived of in such terms, there is from the first no need for any rice-growing rites on earth, for even without deifying the rice and without any spirit dwelling within it, the rice as it stands in the fields, its ears undulating in the wind, reflects the appearance of heaven.

Of course, if the peasants were unable to clearly visualize the radiantly golden ears of rice in heaven, they would not be able to handle the rice on earth with such great care. It is a question of to what extent their faith in Allah is able to transcend the bounds of human society and encompass the land and what lives there. Rather than visualize waving ears of rice in a remote heaven, it is perhaps easier to intuit god on earth in the rice before one's eyes.

Be that as it may, it will be understood from the above overview that it is of no avail discussing the question of whether or not there are rice-growing rites by limiting one's perspective to rice grain and the cultivation of rice in farming villages. It has become evident that it is a question of adopting a field of vision that places rice and the rice god within the structure of the religious world as a whole.

Assam constitutes a dividing zone to the west of which rice-growing rites are rare and hence there are no notions of a rice god or rice spirit, while to the east there are some regions and peoples that have evolved astonishingly diverse rice-growing rites of varying degrees of complexity. The significance of the fact that, with some minor differences, a god is believed to dwell within the rice plant and rice is handled as if it were a spirit will, I think, now be understood as a matter transcending questions of distribution and concerning the nature of religion itself.

But even if this should be so, and supposing that we set aside the regions of

Islam, Buddhism and Hinduism to the west (since the elucidation of these would involve all aspects of the world of religion), in regard to the regions to the east (especially Southeast Asia and Japan) we must clarify the process whereby the rice plant came to be indwelt by a god and rice grain came to be likened to the human soul. We must explain how the rice plant became a god with a spirit dwelling within, and it must be shown that this god or spirit is not a misunderstanding or illusion on the part of man. One must be convinced that it is not an image but has substance, albeit perhaps invisible, and embodies a certain truth.

FUTURE PROSPECTS AND PROCEDURE

I shall next touch on some general methods and the results that one might expect from them.

In a word, it is not a question of a concept of god the position of which has already been established within culture by means of language, but boils down to the structure of the situation in which we might experience a manifestation of godhood or the expression of this structure, which, considered in its most simplified form, becomes self and other or the self and the cosmos (or earth). Godhood is not within one, nor does it exist without, and one has no choice but to consider it to be realized as an experience occurring at a time of contact between the inner and the outer. One may awaken to an awareness of godhood by stumbling over a stone or one may sense it when scooping up some grains of rice in the palm of one's hand. There is no way to seek godhood other than in such momentary experiences, and the only course open to the investigator is to imitate or attune himself to such actions and thereby share in these experiences. In other words:

1) One pursues experiences in which oneself and the earth come in contact, strike against one another and remain as one, and in which one has a real sense of symbiosis involving not only oneself and not only the earth.

2) Rather than having only a momentary encounter, one moves about, goes back and forth, travels to other parts, and eventually returns to one's own place. It might be described as a journey, and on certain occasions and at certain places during the course of this journey part of oneself and part of the earth will confront one another and reach a mutual understanding. One will without doubt have occasion to realize one's own place in the order of things, and such occasions should see the birth of not words but godhood. One might call it the birth of poesy, but it is also the birth of godhood. There may appear to be a world of difference between the two, but both the peasant and the investigator are undergoing an experience that embraces this enormous difference but is yet of the same quality. Hence there is nothing wrong with revering even the head of a sardine as a god (alluded to in the Japanese expression to the effect that anything can be deified). Looking at the wide-open eyes of a sardine, one really can discern in them a manifestation of godhood.

3) There is no return from there, and godhood is also to be sensed in the direction pointed to by those who have faltered, fallen and died by the wayside. Just as in a game of hide-and-seek, a person or a rice plant that was here until a moment ago will suddenly undergo a transformation and vanish. In such instances one will sense an invisible god.

I now want to consider the structure of a spatial locus in which these three forms of godhood—namely, ① godhood that is encountered, ② godhood as a neighbour, and ③ invisible godhood—have simultaneous validity. Of course, since we are here concerned with rice, I wish to look for godhood in the spatial relationship obtaining between rice and man. I want to explore not the word 'god' but the underlying experience for which there is no other term.

A grain of rice is sown in the ground, where it germinates, produces two leaflets, grows into a healthy rice plant and, following the rainy season, matures. Then the heavily laden ears of rice are harvested, threshed and carried to the storehouse. Among the seed rice there will be some that remained submerged in the water without germinating, and even after ripening some of the rice may be eaten by crows or wild pigs or flattened to the ground by strong winds.

If we observe rice in such a fashion, approaching together with rice the vantage point of rice, we find that there is no great difference between rice and man. If there should be a god associated with man, there is no reason why it should not be the same for rice.

Rice, as a living thing that is active on the earth and in paddies, has its own subjectivity in its capacity as rice. By 'subjectivity' I mean that one's limbs are always in contact with the infinite. It is here—at this point of contact with the infinite—that I want to discover the birthplace of godhood. Let us commence our inquiry from the hut where rice is born, namely, the storehouse.

THE RICE SPIRIT OF THE KHMERS

That day, the harvesting of the rice having been completed, the villagers gathered in front of the village shrine called *katoum neak ta* ('hut of the honourable grandfather/grandmother'), laid out offerings, waited for the descent of the ancestral spirits known as *don ta* (= *neak ta*: 'honourable grandfather/grandmother'), and conducted a ceremony, after which the offerings were taken down and partaken of by the villagers. I accordingly assumed that the harvest festival had been successfully concluded. But after dark some villagers came to inform me that there was one more important ceremony to be performed. This was the ceremony held at the rice storehouse (*yun slao*).

Two priests (*achar*; one always presides over auspicious events and the other over inauspicious events) were already inside the storehouse, and so I squeezed myself into a corner. I was followed by the owner of the storehouse, and he and the two priests squatted on top of the heap of rice grain. A white cloth had been

spread out in the centre, with offerings arranged in proper form. What struck me as unusual was the fact these included three sickles and seven skewered fish (*trai kamplian*). One of the priests held two candles while the other sprinkled water on the beams of the storehouse and a type of liquor over the offerings, and then the chanting began.

"O Don Ta, god of the ancestors, please come to the *yun slao* ceremony and exchange greetings with the Rice Spirit. We have now invited the Rice Spirit here. Today we have prepared many fine dishes. Please partake of them. Rice Spirit, *Niang prapui srao*, you eat them too. Please take your time and stay in this storehouse for as long as you like. And please protect this rice. Do not be surprised if we should take this rice away. If you should be carried outside by mistake, please hurry back. If one basket of rice should be taken away, please return it as two baskets. If two baskets of rice should be carried away, please return them as four baskets. We beseech you. Now help yourselves."⁶

Once the rice spirit had thus finished eating, one of the priests took a cotton thread from a tray, tied it to the handles of the sickles, spread cooked rice along the back of the plough blade, and poured water from a bowl to wash the hands of the rice spirit. The ceremony of the storehouse, called '*saen jun srao*', was now over.

In a former book of mine I introduced this scene as an example of the religious rites of the Khmers, and at the time I commented on the apparent self-interest of the peasants in that they expected the rice spirit to fill the storehouse with an inexhaustible supply of rice. To pray for this was, I thought, rather self-centred.

But when I now think back on it more than twenty years later, I realize that I should not, as I did then, have considered only the labour of one year and its result in the form of a rich or poor harvest, but should have confronted more openly and more directly the infinitude of the rice's life force and, sitting on top of the rice in an inexhaustible storehouse, should have intuited its eternalness. I was viewing rice cultivation from the outside, whereas the life force of rice must be viewed from within. At that point in time the rice in the storehouse was without a doubt inexhaustible.

A spatial locus with an inexhaustible storehouse as its starting point: this was both the starting point of rice cultivation and also its final objective. Squatting on top of the rice in the storehouse that night, having left the outside world and slipped inside, as it were, and becoming one with the heap of rice, I could not help sensing, when contemplating the matter, a certain dynamism in which, as if superimposed on the space surrounding the rice, an invisible and inexhaustible space of the spirit was flowing forth, circulating, returning, and flowing back in. There my spirit was identical to that of the rice.

THE RICE SPIRITS OF THE IBAN

I shall now give another example, this time of the Iban people, which I heard

from the village headman of the Iban village of Uma Mangi on the upper reaches of the Rajang River in Borneo.

As is well-known, the Iban live in long houses, and in the upper part of each of the (generally one-family) apartments into which these long houses are partitioned there is a loft. It is here that the storage container for rice, called '*tiban*' and made of either intertwined bamboo or rings of bark, is kept.

In the *tiban* is stored the rice for private use—that which is to be sold is kept elsewhere—and the rice spirit (*semangat padi*) also resides there together with the rice. According to the villagers, there are three types of rice spirit, namely, that of the father rice, that of the mother rice, and that of the child rice. These are of course three separate rice spirits, but in general terms it might be better to say that they represent a family descended from the same rice spirit.

Among these three rice spirits, it is that of the mother rice that is always resident in the *tiban*. The mother rice deposits her children in the mountain swidden plots, where they grow, mature and bear fruit (i.e., children). This fruit in the form of rice is harvested, put into panniers and carried to the long house, where it is placed in the *tiban* in the loft.

The *tiban* is the home of the rice family. There the father rice, mother rice and child rice gather and lead a family life. The father and children go outside and work industriously, while the mother stays put. The spirit of the mother rice is called '*padi pun*' or 'sacred rice'. It could even be translated perhaps as 'rice of lineage'.

The *tiban* containing the rice spirits must be handled with the greatest care. When a new one is made, the rice spirits are first invited to enter, and a hen and its blood are sacrificed to them. Thereafter it is strictly forbidden to carelessly touch the *tiban*. If one should happen to inadvertently kick against it with one's feet or strike it with a hatchet or piece of wood, one must pay a fine. At the time (1970) the fine in such circumstances was eight Malaysian dollars. If a member of the owner's family should have happened to turn ill and have the misfortune to die as a result of someone's having struck the *tiban*, the offender had to pay the family of the deceased sixteen Malaysian dollars in compensation. The rice spirit and the human soul were linked by means of some sort of circuit. If the rice spirit should be injured, a villager would sometimes die.

The villagers perform four festivals annually for the rice spirits. The first takes place when sowing the rice, the second when the rice comes into flower, the third upon having carried the harvested rice back to the long house, and the fourth when the rice has been dried and stored in the *tiban*. In this manner festivals are held at important junctures in the rice-cultivating cycle, hens are sacrificed, and prayers are offered to the family of rice spirits, and so they gladly remain in that particular house. If festivals are not performed or the offerings should be inadequate, then the rice spirits will forsake that house and go elsewhere. Just like the *marebito* or itinerant gods of Japan, if they are not treated with due respect, the rice spirits will leave.

There is, however, no difference in the essential attributes of the rice spirits insofar that they all watch over the cultivation of rice. The rice spirits of the village headman's house are not, for example, of a higher rank than the rice spirits of any other house. But the rice spirits of a family that annually enjoys a rich harvest of rice are endowed with great potency. From the standpoint of man this means that it is possible to increase and arouse the potency of the rice spirit. This may be compared with the reactivation of the spirit (*tamafuri*) in the case of man as practised in Japanese Shintō.

We have seen that the rice spirit and the human soul are linked by some sort of invisible circuit. Stated in still simpler terms, this means that the rice spirit and the human soul are, in essence, identical.

The Iban believe that a person's spirit dwells in the nape of the neck or sometimes even in the hair. Hence in various rites it is customary for them to swing a live hen around the head of a seated guest or the patron of the festival, for this is meant to bless and invigorate the spirit residing in the person's head and make it stay there. It may be described as an act of spiritual reactivation or an act to prevent the spirit from leaving the body.

But once that person dies, the spirit will leave the body. For a while after having left the dying and decomposing body the spirit continues to live, going to places that it wanted to visit but was unable to while the person was still alive, visiting friends, and going into town for a cup of coffee or to see a film. Invisible to human eyes, the spirit roams about here and there.

After three years the spirit changes into a soul. Once it becomes a soul, it ascends into the sky, frequents mountain peaks and resides in clouds. If upland or dry rice should happen to be growing there, which is often the case, then the soul of the deceased will enter the rice and become a rice spirit. When harvest time eventually comes, it will be gathered in, placed in a basket, and carried back to the long house, where it will be stored in the *tiban*, cooked daily after having been carefully cleaned, and served at mealtimes. By being consumed by man the rice spirit (*semangat padi*) is said to become once again a human spirit (*semangat orang*). Or one might say that the two live in a cycle of transmigration and transformation.

Therefore rice is more than mere grains of rice. The ancestral spirits are, perhaps, lurking inside. There is, at least, such a possibility. If, therefore, some grains of rice should stick to the sole of one's foot, one must not brush them off roughly, and although one may put rice in a mortar and pound it with a pestle (since the mortar plays pleasant music), a power-driven rice-cleaning machine is not allowed because the noise will startle the rice spirit, and the startled rice spirit may then flee to another house or another village. And if one should happen to spill some rice when carrying it, one must be careful to gather it all up, for otherwise the rice spirit may take flight elsewhere.

The above is what I was told by the village headman⁷). A world starting from the *tiban*, the storage place for rice, connects the everyday actions of the Iban to non-everyday and invisible aspects unfolding on another plane. Man and rice

become one on the plane of the spirit and there commune freely with one another. This spiritual plane has the appearance both of a void perspicuous like the wind and of an inexhaustible space overflowing with rice such as is symbolized by the rice storehouse.

THE GOD OF THE JAPANESE

As an attempt to probe the origins of the Japanese race—I should mention that I have no intention whatsoever of enhancing in any way the unity of a group known as the “Japanese race” but hope rather, by transcending race, to establish the proper place of race within the totality of humankind—Yanagita Kunio’s *Kaijō no michi* (The Sea Route)(柳田國男『海上の道』) would appear to have fallen in estimation with the passing of time. But the appeal of this book and the import of the questions to which the author addresses himself have not diminished in the least. This is, I believe, because Yanagita was not concerned only with the origins of the Japanese race and its culture, but was moved even more by an ardent desire to discover the god of the Japanese, namely, the god that has constituted a perduring tradition within Japanese culture and, as the focal point of Japanese identity, has made the Japanese what they are.

Here I wish to make a brief comment on the essence of religion. This is because I feel that many people misunderstand the role of religion, although perhaps it is not so much a misunderstanding as a perfectly natural outlook. Nevertheless it does at any rate differ in essence from the autochthonous religion of the Japanese. In this latter instance religion neither serves as a slogan to unify a particular group, nor is it a symbol; it is not an apparatus for guaranteeing the continuation of any system of ethnic culture or human culture in general, nor is it something for manipulating the network of human relations or something resembling a switch with which to operate robots in the guise of human beings.

In a word, religion is not something that issues commands to people from the heights of a mountain summit, but represents the foothold of humankind rooted in nature. It is the link between man and nature or, if one likens man to a tree, the root or the point of contact between the root and the earth. God is what is found when one discovers this, and having discovered this god, one disports oneself with this same god: this act constitutes religion. The totality of oneself and the totality of nature (or the cosmos) intermingle at this single point.

There are stones called “footprint stones of the Buddha” in the shape of footprints and engraved with voluted patterns. There are also images of the Buddha in a reclining position, and in this case too the soles of his feet are marked with voluted patterns. When the Buddha stood erect, the stone and the soles of his feet became one, and the locus of this unification represents, for man, the locus of god. As regards what it might be called from the vantage point of the earth or nature, it is impossible for us to say. One can only describe it as a place of mystery. This place

of mystery is the locus of my identity and the identity of the Japanese, and is both 'god' and perhaps even 'God'.

Having interpreted the god of the Japanese in this fashion—although it does in fact transcend Japanese culture—I shall now return to the subject of the religion centring on rice. But since an ethnic god is to be found beyond the confines of a particular people, the rice god of Japan is also the rice god of Southeast Asia, just as kite flying and top spinning are to be found among children throughout the world. If ethnic religion is interpreted in this manner, it is no different from universal religion. Having come this far, let us now return to Yanagita's ideas.

Yanagita's *Kaijō no michi* is a unique work⁸. It differs somewhat in nature from his many other writings: there is an underlying idea, it provides an overview, and his dreams and hopes have merged into one. Is this perhaps because in this book his inquiries, which had hitherto been restricted to the studies of Japanese culture by Japanese, have deployed his imaginative powers in the direction of the islands in the south and the lands beyond the sea?

Kaijō no michi attempts to trace the genealogy of the Japanese people and to discover the origins of their ancestors. But it also has another important objective, namely, that of seeking out the prototype of the god of the Japanese. What is that element in the identity of the Japanese that makes them Japanese? If it should prove impossible to find the god of the Japanese, then the culture of Japan, created and transmitted over a long period of time, may end up falling apart; for the Japanese to remain Japanese, it is absolutely essential to discover the god of Japan.—When read in this context, the chapter entitled "The Birth Hut of Rice" is of absorbing interest, for here indigenous gods join hands over and beyond the bounds of ethnic groups⁹).

In this chapter Yanagita draws attention to the fact that ricks of rice are called '*nihō*', '*nyō*', etc., referring to the place where rice is stored, and that there are cognate terms relating to pregnancy. In the spring the rice goes out into the paddy fields to work, producing great yields of rice that are harvested in the autumn, and eventually returns to the same rick or "birth hut." This rice rick, representing the matrix of the life force of rice, and the woman who gives birth to human life are referred to by similar terms. This wisdom of the people of ancient times, who were accustomed to viewing things in this manner, is quite novel, and Yanagita too probably empathized with this way of discerning the identity of the life force of rice and that of man over and beyond differences of species.

This correspondence in terminology is not, however, restricted to the main islands of Japan, but is also to be found in Okinawa. In the Yaeyama Islands the term '*shira*' signifies an elevated rice storehouse, but it also appears in words relating to childbirth, such as '*shira*' (childbirth), '*shirayā*' (house in which there is a newborn baby) and '*shirafujō*' (taboos relating to childbirth), while the god of *shira* signifies the god of childbirth. Human childbirth and the birth hut of rice are designated by the same term, and judging from this correspondence, it is to be surmised that the rice storehouse and rick were both regarded as the birth hut of

rice. Analogous or parallel phenomena are, in other words, to be found in the life cycle of rice and the life cycle of man.

Rice is that which sustains the life force of man and is the source of human life. And just as rice sustains the physical body of man, the rice spirit, transformed into the spirit of man, supports human life from within. The body and the spirit, the house and the rice spirit: these live on through a process of mutual transferal, transformation and transmigration.

When considered in this light, the god of the Japanese is the god of rice—if we provisionally regard 'god' and 'spirit' as terms of equal status—and the image of the god of Japan overlaps the image of rice lying in the birth hut and maturing in the paddy fields.

Yanagita conceived of the roots or origins of the god of Japan and of the spirit of the Japanese in the above manner. His way of thinking bears a close resemblance to the course that we have followed in this essay. There are, however, minor differences, differences that may eventually widen.

SUMMARY AND FURTHER PROSPECTS

At this point I wish to bring together the ideas presented in the foregoing sections and sketch their general outline.

1) In regard to methods of inquiring into the god of Japan, it is to be found that language undergoes changes in the course of history and ideas, modified by other terms and supplemented with further explanations, snowball in their ramifications. It is of course true that in this fashion language develops into a powerful tool with a certain degree of consistency and theoretical persuasiveness, and this I interpret as the movement from 'god' to 'God' as it were. But here I have, on the contrary, undertaken to reduce language to the locus of its genesis, expression and origins and to consider the structure of the birthplace of godhood. This corresponds to the movement from 'God' to 'god'.

I am, in other words, seeking to grasp the birth of god (or God) without resorting to the medium of language, both language in general and the language of a particular people. Therefore our god must be subject to no restrictions imposed by the geographical location of Japan or by the ethnic group consisting of the Japanese people. As far as the rice spirit is concerned, there is no Japan, no Thailand and no Malaysia. I consider the essence of the rice spirit to be common to all regions and the prototypal scene of its birth to be also the same everywhere. Our religious world is one that, by penetrating the depths of the individual, becomes rooted in the earth; it does not soar up into the heavens and cause one to look heavenwards in awe.

2) I wish the reader to call to mind the Khmer rite performed in the *yun slao* or rice storehouse. Two priests and a peasant entered the storehouse and then I, as an observer, also squeezed myself into the narrow space, squatted on top of the heap

of rice, gazed at the unusual offerings and the flickering flames of the candles, and listened to the chants. I shall now reconsider this scene by reducing it to its simple elements.

(i) Rice lies heaped up in the storehouse.

(ii) The people crouching inside the storehouse are huddled together and enveloped by space peculiar to a night ceremony.

(iii) Man, a finite entity, is surrounded by a heap of rice representing the quintessence of inexhaustibility.

(iv) Man, a representative of ephemeral life, is surrounded by a mass of infinite life.

In the storehouse or birth hut of rice there exists a multistratified relationship between that which envelops and that which is enveloped. As in the case of the relationship between the spirit and the body, this spatial structure may perhaps be said to resemble the structure of life, and because it gives expression to the essence of life, the analogy moves from man to rice and from rice to man.

(v) At the time of the annual planting season the rice grain or seed rice leaves the storehouse for the fields, where it is sown in nursery beds, germinates, grows into seedlings, and is transplanted into the paddy fields. There it continues to grow, mingling with insects, birds and wild animals and also suffering harm from them, puts forth flowers, and bears fruit. Then, at a suitable time, it is harvested, threshed, and transported to the storehouse in baskets and bags. Although in the case of dry-rice cultivation in swidden plots the process differs somewhat, it is essentially the same insofar that the rice family that has been resting in the storehouse or birth hut fans out into the mountain fields, where it prospers and then returns with its numbers increased.

The landscape surrounding a storehouse in a hill region does of course differ from that in a wet-rice cultivating area, but apart from this the circumstances are quite the same, with an intimate interrelationship evolving between the labour of the peasants and the maturing rice. The multistratified structure of a scene embracing the rice, peasants, paddy fields, insects, birds and water buffaloes is revealed. The close-range scenery is enveloped in the distant view, and the scenes visible to the eye are enveloped by an invisible scene. The rice is enveloped by the rice spirit, the behaviour of the farmers is enveloped by their own spirits, reanimated, and then liberated from the spirit, operating without restraint. As a result of the physical and the spiritual thus enveloping and being enveloped, there evolves a locus for vibrant activity.

The convergence in the storehouse and the dispersion in the hills and paddy fields unfold rhythmically with the passage of time. The basic structure of the life force of man and of rice is identical. The visible landscape of the body is enveloped by an invisible landscape of the spirit and is thereby vitalized. In other words, the landscape itself becomes the protagonist.

vi) What happens, then, to the rice grains and rice spirits that went astray in the growth process? And what about the rice that was carelessly discarded while being

carried in a basket or was eaten by insects, pecked at by birds or trampled on by wild animals and died in the course of its maturation?

In northern Thailand one sometimes comes across large numbers of small shrines lining a sharp bend in the road. Here the people mourn for those who have died in accidents and offer prayers so that the souls of the dead will not wander about restlessly. It is the same in the case of the rice spirit, for after the harvest the rice spirits that have gone astray are called back by peasants beating gongs, and the peasants will sometimes search the valleys and the rice-paddy ridges in order to lead the rice spirits back home. They will reinvoked the rice spirits that have fallen into the holes of old trees, offer them food, apologize, and ask them to remain in their homes. In such cases the rice spirit is often personified and conceived of as a dwarf.

But even if the lost rice spirits may be saved in folktales, what happens within the logic of rice and the logic of man when it is not a story of fiction? The spirit that has become separated from the rice grain, or the body of the rice as it were, must pass through some invisible space and return to the storehouse. It will not do for the rice to be abandoned like the old woman in the short story by Fukazawa Shichirō entitled "Narayama-bushi kō" (The Oak Mountain Story) (深沢七郎『檀山節考』). The abandoned rice must ultimately be reborn in heaven. It is all very well to gather the ears of rice left behind by the harvesters, but that alone is not enough.

It is all a question of the structure of the landscape encompassing the paddy fields or dry-rice fields. On the one hand there are the river banks, valleys and flatlands of everyday life, while on the other hand there are the non-everyday places such as the peaks to which clouds cling and the places where rising clouds gather, and these two loci must constitute an unbroken continuum. If the outer and the inner, or the patterned foreground and the plain background, there become one, then the scattered rice will also be carried by the cyclic flow of its own circuit and rejoin the path of rice. The rice spirits that were lost on the way or died pass through a non-everyday space or circuit different from that of the harvested rice and return to the storehouse. There is no falling away from the world of rice that flows forth from the storehouse and reconverges on the storehouse.

vii) One should be able to understand readily in terms of landscape or spatial structure that the spirit of rice transfers to the spirit of man and transforms itself, resulting in a state of interpenetration of the two. Confusion is inevitable if one attempts to regard it as a partial action of the spirit involving only rice and man, for it becomes impossible to construct a world of total rationality also embracing that which does not belong to everyday life.

The local landscape of the fields and mountains and the scenes of rice growing and maturing there; the same local landscape and the scenery composed of the people, water buffaloes, farming implements and rice all working there; the close-range scenery and the distant view; the enveloped landscape and the enveloping

landscape: these two landscapes are, properly speaking, one. They are two in one and one in two. These two landscapes are continually changing from one to the other. One moment one may gaze at the far-off mountain ridges, and the next moment one will notice the wind blowing across the nearby paddy field; after looking at the swollen ears of rice before one's eyes, one will then turn one's attention to the clouds moving along the distant hills. On the one hand the life and death inherent in human life unfold in one's own home, and on the other hand the four seasons in the life of rice rotate in the paddy fields and its cycle of life and death fluctuates while intersecting directly with the life of man.

If the spirit is not something simply imprisoned in the body, then it is set free in the landscape, where it communes with those who gaze at the landscape. It interacts with those who participate in and contemplate this scene. Through the medium of the spirit—that aspect of life called the 'spirit'—of those who participate in and contemplate this scene, the two landscapes become one, and the spirit of rice becomes the spirit of man.

For those who participate and live in it, that which is referred to as the 'spirit' represents the structure of space. One must not look at the mountains and rivers and other natural features through the filter of the *word* 'spirit'; one must look at it quite detachedly, and then one will discover that the spirit is here, there and everywhere, both in rice and in man.

In such a world, moreover, there is neither Japan nor Southeast Asia. There exists no such thing as regional borders or ethnic boundaries. Through and beyond the window of the individual landscape of each person there unfolds a cosmic landscape that is invisible but replete with certainty.

NOTES

- 1) K.G. Izikowitz, *Lamet: Hill Peasants in French Indochina* (Göteborg, 1951).
- 2) A description and exposition of the rice festivals of the farming communities in the vicinity of Kurunegala, based on our investigations, may be found in Iwata Keiji 岩田慶治, Ikari Yasuke 井狩彌介, Suzuki Masataka 鈴木正崇 and Sekine Yasumasa 関根康正, *Suriranka no Matsuri* 『スリランカの祭』 (The Festivals of Sri Lanka; Kōsakusha 工作舎, 1982).
- 3) An investigation into the rice cultivation of Tamils was carried out around Jaffna. Since no report was, however, made on their religious rites, I am hoping that a second survey will be conducted.
- 4) This information was obtained from a farmer near Paro through the cooperation of Nishioka Keiji 西岡京治.
- 5) In the case of the rice-growing villages of Kashmir, the inquiry took the form of a conversation rather than a proper survey.
- 6) Iwata Keiji, *Nihon Bunka no Furusato* 『日本文化のふるさと』 (The home of Japanese culture; Kadokawa Shoten 角川書店 [Kadokawa Sensho 角川選書], 1992). This book represents a new edition of *Nihon Bunka no Furusato—Hikaku Bunkaron no*

Kokoromi-Nihon to Tōnan Ajia『日本文化のふるさと—比較文化論の試み・日本と東南アジア』(The home of Japanese culture: A tentative comparison of the cultures of Japan and Southeast Asia; Kadokawa Shoten [Kadokawa Shinsho 角川新書], 1966) and *Nihon Bunka no Kigen*『日本文化の起源』(The homeland of Japanese culture; Kadokawa Shoten [Kadokawa Sensho 角川選書], 1991).

- 7) J.D.Freeman, *Iban Agriculture* (London, 1956). On *padi pun* see A.Richards, *An Iban-English Dictionary* (Oxford, 1981).
- 8) *Teihon Yanagita Kunio Zenshū*『定本柳田国男全集』(Standard edition of the complete works of Yanagita Kunio; Chikuma Shobō 筑摩書房), Vol.1 (1968).
- 9) Miyata Noboru 宮田登, *Reikon no Minzokugaku*『靈魂の民俗学』(Folklife studies of the soul; Nihon Editā Sukūru 日本エディタースクール, 1988); Tsuboi Hirofumi 坪井洋文, *Minzoku Saikō*『民俗再考』(A reconsideration of folkways; Nihon Editā Sukūru, 1986).