

Japanese Village Farm Life

by Kozo Yamaji

(translated by Carey Giudici)

Travelers on Japan's coastal railway during the June rice planting season are treated to a vista of shimmering wet paddies that fill every flat plain all the way to the mountains. The importance of rice cultivation to Japanese villagers is still very real, and although less than 10 percent of the national work force is involved in agriculture — a reduction from 50 percent at the turn of the century — inevitably, many of Japan's traditions are still based on agricultural events and products.

Although various kinds of agriculture contributed to Japanese culture, rice-growing was at the center of village life in medieval Japan. Basic to survival, rice provided the main nourishment from each fall's harvest. The crop depended on the skill of farmers and the support of various gods who were encouraged through ceremonies and festivals to live in the fields.

Today's rice paddies, which need a dependable water supply at specific times in the season, probably date from 18th-century *daimyo* feudal estates, and from large-scale irrigation projects initiated during modernization in the 19th century. Until that time, rice crops were usually only large enough to meet the survival needs of a family, grown on paddies set on whatever land was available.

The first paddies were set on gently-sloping river banks, to provide them access to water. But farmers often saw their seed rice washed away during fall rains, so they moved the fields to well-irrigated volcanic soil. From the beginning, rice cultivation was a group effort because of the need to plant many seedlings quickly.

In early spring each farmer sowed seed rice in that part of his field designated as a seed bed. He timed this by following cues from nature, such as a certain flower's bloom or patterns formed in melting mountain snow. When the rainy season began in May or June, seedlings were transplanted in rows into the larger paddy. Traditionally, this had to be accomplished in a single day, which meant careful planning, coordination, and hard work. Fields belonging to the village shrine or a feudal lord were planted first, often requiring help from neighboring villages. Plowing and stooping over to plant made this the most difficult chore of the year for villagers, yet also their most festive.

For the rest of summer, farmers needed only to weed the fields a few times and hope for the right amount of sunshine. Weeding during the extremely muggy summers was very trying, but of more concern was the chance that fields would dry up from too much sun. Thus, songs for rain and rest were common during the summer. In the fall came harvest — another hard task, but with the promised reward of enough rice to see the village through the winter. The vil-

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lagers and their gods could then take a break until the cycle began again in early spring.

For each stage of the rice-growing season, villagers depended on the good will of the gods to provide them the sun and water to insure a good crop. Just as each individual in the well-organized village had a role in rice production, so did individual gods and their human representatives provide specific resources or skills.

The New Year gave villages a chance to establish contact with such primary gods as *Ta-no-kami* ("God of Fields") and to pray for a prosperous year. Prayers were made to *Toshi-toku-kami* (literally "bountiful year deity") in dances called *Ta-asobi* ("field play") and *Ta-ue Odori* ("planting dance"), which can still be seen today. *Ta-no-kami* reappeared at sowing time in the guise of the water god *Mizu-no-kami*, the deity providing plenty of water from mountain streams, who was prayed to at the field nearest to the source, called *Mina-kuchi*, or Water Gate. Certain village women were honored as "wives" of the god and were responsible for the actual planting. *Ta-no-kami* was asked to make the planting successful at the beginning of the rainy season in May; he was revered together with the village ancestors, during summer festivals like the *Obon* celebrations still seen in Japan.

A typical planting day in a medieval village surviving in present-day Hiroshima Prefecture imparts a feeling for the cultural importance of rice cultivation. As mentioned earlier, planting is accomplished in one day, before the god could disappear. This tradition is so important that even if planting lasted into the night, farmers would greet each other, saying "We finished before dark!"

Before daybreak, village women put on work clothes especially made for the occasion — plain blue for wives and red or pink for unmarried women. The latter group was the first to arise, making themselves as attractive as possible for the men, and showing that they were hard workers. Previously, those women who would act as "wives" of the god would have climbed into the mountains for ritual purification, wearing flowers as a sign of their important role. Meanwhile, men also looked forward to the social opportunities of the occasion, the day's plowing and the special music.

This well-organized cast of characters assembled in the morning to welcome *Ta-no-kami* in a ceremony called *Sanbai-san*, named after the three-tiered shrine on which three bunches of seedlings represented the deity. The leader of the day's activities (also called *Sanbai-san* for the occasion) sang alone as well as in a duet with a "wife."

Draft oxen decorated with peonies or the landowner's coat-of-arms grandly led the procession to the fields. While most farmers could muster only a few oxen, plowing the lord's fields required up to 50 head to be borrowed from neighboring villages. During the oxen's entrance, the maidens went to the seed bed to tie up bunches of seedlings with straw, while performing the appropriate song. Such a procession, following the lead cow, or *Yaku-ushi*, was as impressive a pageant as most villagers would ever see.

Once the plowing was finished, women, in groups of one or two dozen at a time, took turns going into the fields with seedlings. They were led by the day's *Sanbai-san* as conductor and followed by a



marching band of drums, flutes and gongs. Women took a break at about 10 A.M. for tea or to smoke. The landlord brought out rice balls wrapped in leaves, which were eaten in the fields, while his wife supervised the lunch with the help of priestesses, called *Onari*. Singing farewell to the *Onari* after lunch meant it was time to get back to work—and quickly. However large the rice paddy, planting was still finished in one day, while the *Ta-no-kami* was still in the field.

At day's end the villagers could relax. Men were jovially slapped with leftover sprouts, and one who had moved into his wife's household was a popular target. Then the women went to a nearby stream to wash. For a few rare hours, unmarried men and women were allowed relative freedom in making social contacts with each other. During this period, young villagers could make their feelings known, and even visiting cowherders or musicians were allowed to flirt with the village girls. Parents looked the other way, and if their daughters attracted no attention, they might even act ashamed.

A *tabayashi* performance in Mibu, Hiroshima Prefecture, referred to as *banadaue*. The performance includes rice planting accompanied by drums, flute, cymbals, and singing. Photo by Isao Sutou



In Akita Prefecture, rice straw effigies called *Kasbima-sama* are traditionally believed to guard a village from evil influences. Photo by Isao Sutou

Pageantry aside, planting rice was an extremely important act to medieval farmers in Japan. Strong parallels to human procreation made putting seed into the earth an emotional, spiritual, and physical event in which the “baby” born in the fall would mean another year’s survival. The connection between planting and sexual activity became more explicit during this time.

An endless supply of *sake* (rice wine) was provided by the landowner for adult men. Planting rice was not only the biggest job of the year for Japanese villagers, but also a kind of religious festival which rewarded workers for their labor and encouraged the gods to bestow a bountiful harvest.

Once all the planting was finished, the village took a full day’s rest, while *Ta-no-kami* returned to the mountains — some say on the lightning bolts which are common at this time of year. In order to avoid blight, straw figures representing evil spirits were carried out of town to musical accompaniment. But if no such threats appeared, villagers used this brief period of rest to perform memorial services for their ancestors. This was the forerunner of today’s *Obon* summer festival, during which practically every Japanese community prays to ancestors while having a good time as well. It was a time when farmers could “take a breather” and join together in a sense of accomplishment at having finished the arduous first half of the rice cultivation.

In the fall, harvest time approaches as the typhoon season begins. While some prayers for the end of typhoons were common, we have no record of ceremonies directly related to the threshing of dried rice plants.

As the staple of the Japanese diet, the nutritional value of rice is obvious. By-products of the rice plant have also provided artisans with many materials for their crafts. Rice straw, or *wara*, was carefully saved by farmers to be used during the long winter months in creating household items, such as woven rice sacks and mats, rope, raincoats, snow boots, coats and hats. Local shrines required woven dolls and symbolic ropes made from the same straw, and adult male villagers could make these items without relying on specialists to accomplish the task.

At this year's Festival you will see craftsmen from Yuzawa City in rural Akita Prefecture making a large woven doll. Such sacred dolls were usually made twice a year at the town's borders and placed at three locations to ward off sickness and evil spirits. Other *wara* crafts include small ceremonial horses and boats which were used to house the village's evil spirits until they could be carried outside the village for disposal in a river or fire.

While men were the artisans, women in Japan's villages were responsible for keeping their family members fed and clothed — much of the latter from scratch. Weaving was an important part of every woman's day, and because silk was reserved for royalty only, farmers' wives made cloth from cotton or hemp. Until the 17th century, when cotton spinning and weaving became common, hemp was the main source of thread. All weaving thread was homemade. White cloth or thread was dyed by professionals in patterns, such as *kasuri*, or "splashed pattern," or stripes using indigo and other natural dyes.

Dark blue kimonos were shaded to show off an unmarried woman's beauty. Popular patterns were achieved by tying up white thread or applying rice paste to woven fabric before the thread or cloth was dyed to keep sections white. The latter technique is similar to southeast Asian *batik* dyeing, except that the dye-resisting material in this case was paste made from rice powder. The paste was applied, either by squeezing a little bit at a time from a tube (a method still used in dyeing *furoshiki* cloths or flags), or by putting a stencil on the cloth and brushing paste over it. The latter technique is still used for light summer *kimonos* (*yukata*) in Tokyo.

Sake wine is another rice product. Fermented in winter, *sake* was brewed using traditional skills and pure mountain spring water. The large wooden and bamboo storage kegs, such as can be seen today at celebrations everywhere in Japan, contributed to the wine's flavor.

Village life in Japan has changed drastically during the last 20 years. Machines are taking over rice-planting chores; young women are no longer eligible to be gods' honorary wives, but neither do they have to weave cloth; full-time rice farmers are becoming increasingly rare, as automation allows office workers to become part-time cultivators. As nature's awesome power has been partially tamed by civil engineering projects, in the process, farmers have lost touch with the God of Fields and the God of Water.

Suggested reading

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