

Rice Cultivation in Japan and *Ta-bayashi*

by Frank Hoff

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Mechanization of planting, transplanting and harvesting rice in Japan began early in the century and entered a stage of spectacular growth in the 1970s. In less than a generation, traditional labor-intensive agricultural methods were replaced by a highly mechanized and capital intensive system. So effective has been this agricultural modernization that government planners now seek ways to reduce the size of the rice crop, thereby bringing it into closer accord with consumer demand. Consequently, large scale transplanting by hand, such as we see at the Festival this summer, has decreased since the late 1960s while examples of small, day-long transplanting by hand accompanied by singing and drumming, are reported to have almost vanished.

While the economic significance of traditional transplanting may be minimal today, manual cultivation of rice once helped determine the very contours of Japanese society. Japan still bears the imprint of rice harvesting through such enduring hallmarks as the work ethic and the extended family system. These evolved naturally within the context of a rice culture which required sophisticated water control and effective communal cooperation during the brief period of transplanting. Other by-products of Japan's rice cultivation attest to the elegant frugality of the system. For example, craftsmen use the residue of the process — stalks from the harvested rice — to make containers for the transportation and storage of rice wine (*sake*).

Rice is thought to have been first introduced to Japan by way of the southern island of Kyushu about 2,000 years ago. At first, it may have been seeded directly into paddy fields or used for dry field farming, but from about the fifth or sixth century A.D. seedlings were grown in nursery beds until ready to be transplanted. Though both rice growing methods were introduced early into Japan, it is the transplanting method which conditioned the development of *ta-bayashi*, a composite social, religious, work and performance event. It is possible that similar events once existed in other areas of the world which share with Japan topological and climatic conditions suitable for wet-field rice cultivation, although conclusive evidence is lacking. Yet, as a hypothesis, it is likely that the need to provide "excitement" to "energize fields" by music, rhythm, song, color, and spectacle — the implication of the word *bayashi* in the expression *ta* (field)-*bayashi* — was not an independent invention of the Japanese. In other areas of the world which shared the same agricultural system, preparing a field in a celebratory fashion to receive its seedlings was likely as much a precondition for the successful growth of transplanted seedlings as was a labor-intensive mode of mobilizing society and the central control of its water resources.

In Japan, as elsewhere, rice planting techniques differ from region



Ritual plowing of a rice paddy before a performance. Prize bulls that are decorated belong to wealthy families in the community. Photo by Isao Sutou

to region. Weather conditions in July and August have critical, though subtle, effects upon the duration of sunshine, atmospheric and water temperatures. But these are not everywhere the same in a country which, though narrow, extends approximately 1,675 miles from northeast to southwest. Even within a relatively limited geographical area, we find differences from place to place in how *hanadaue* (literally, "spectacular transplanting") was celebrated. What follows is a general account of a day-long transplanting event—a composite picture, based upon older practices including the many local variations which once existed. Because of modern agricultural practices, it is unusual for *ta-bayashi* groups to perform for an entire day.

Well before dawn, workers gather in a special community shelter. Traditionally, there was general talk of courtship which, from the standpoint of fertility, plays an important role in the rice planting ritual. References to procreation are also included in the songs sung by the transplanting women. In certain regions seedlings are gathered early in the morning from the nursery-field where they have grown from seeds scattered some 40 days before. Seedlings are gathered to the accompaniment of a special group of songs. In other places seedlings are gathered not once but several times throughout the day to replenish the supply. Preceding the transplanting is a ritual invocation of the field god. The participants march out to song and music and gather before a temporary shelf set up in a field or on one of the narrow lanes between fields. An early form of this rite of calling down the field god may have been simply to place a tub in the center of a field or to put three rice seedlings on a stand. At present, the familiar sacred white Shinto wand—a wood stick or pole with white paper streamers affixed to the top—is a part of the reli-

Suggested reading

Hoff, Frank. *The Genial Seed. A Japanese Song Cycle*. Tokyo, New York: Mushinsha-Grossman, 1971.

_____. "City and Country: Song and the Performing Arts in Sixteenth Century Japan." *Warlords, Artists and Commoners: Japan in the Sixteenth Century*, eds. George Elison and Bardewell L. Smith. Hawaii: University Press of Hawaii, 1981.

In *Kodansha Encyclopedia of Japan*, Tokyo: Kodansha, 1983, articles on *Taue-zoshi*, *Dengaku*, Rice, Agriculture.

"Nihon No Minzoku Ongaku" [Japanese Folk Music] vol. 3, *Dengaku* (Victor SJL-2172).

gious decorations on most shelving, though Buddhist decorations also have their place. The genealogy and an account of the birth of the field god is sometimes read as a part of the ceremony. Otherwise, an ordinary Shinto prayer is recited.

As girls gather for this ceremony of invocation in a field where a ritual plowing has just been completed, the plowing and preparation of a second field may begin. Though local traditions and the topography of the area to some degree determine the actual order of events, a ritual plowing is a part of most transplantings of this type. Prize bulls are decorated and led into the fields; diagrams depicting traditionally prescribed patterns for plowing are used in planning the path of the bulls. Careful maneuvering is necessary to keep the animals out of each other's way in the narrow fields, but the patterns themselves may have ritual significance, for these configurations often differ from those in normal plowing. Many have names: "*sanbai's* rope," the pattern followed at the morning's invocation; a "sleeve of one-ply;" "a sleeve of two-ply;" "the dancing crane;" "crane in his nest." Some are prescribed for a certain time of day or for a field of a certain shape.

Bulls are prized for their strength and beauty, and it is an honor for a man to be chosen to lead the animals. The orderliness of the complex maneuvers in the field is in the hands of these drivers. (One consequence of mechanization, however, has been less need for, and, consequently, less interest in keeping prize bulls, hastening the demise of this event.) The decorations on the bulls are costly, and the line of animals, parading into the field and proceeding with the plowing, is a striking sight. Each animal carries the name of the house he represents. Keeping an animal for the festival is an expense that only the wealthy can afford, so that a public display of this sort reflects how the economy of the community and its festival are interlocked. From the community shelter where they have gathered before the invocation of the field god, the workers parade into the field, marching to the accompaniment of special music and song. The day's events thus combine a spectacular show with hard work. Historically, increasing affluence allowed a larger scope for display. A large-scale and costly transplanting event of this sort is traditionally reserved for special fields, such as those of a large landowner or one closely associated with deities. As part of the sacred nature of the event, only young women or girls do the actual work of transplanting.

After the field has been plowed by a line of bulls, men with rakes enter to break up clods of earth and smooth it over. Once the transplanting has begun, seedlings gathered from the nursery field are delivered to the girls as required.

The seedlings are inserted into the mud by a line of transplanting girls, *saotome*, which moves backwards across the field. A male leader, *sanbaisan* as he is called in some places in Hiroshima Prefecture, stands before the row of *saotome*. In some areas he beats two bamboo sticks together while singing responsorially with the *saotome*; in others he may rub one stick over the zig-zag surface of another like a rasp. Drums, flute and small cymbals played by young men in the field provide the music to which the *saotome* and the leader sing.



Synchronized movements of *taiko* drummers in a performance of *banadaue* in Mibu, Hiroshima Prefecture. Photo by Isao Sutou

The field work is hard, and rests are frequent. There is a longer pause for a meal brought into the fields for the workers in the late morning. Clearly an old custom, paintings from the late middle ages or early modern period show food and drink being brought out for a large-scale transplanting event. At one festival in Kyushu today women dressed in white, carrying boxes like those shown on the painted screens, still continue this practice. Tradition relates these women to the god of the field: in a sense both are mysterious visitors from afar bringing bounty, who must be sent off, as the songs say, after they have bestowed their gifts.

As the work draws to a close near dark, the workers' thoughts turn again to the courtship which has traditionally been a part of the event and is reflected in the poetry of their songs. In some places the *saotome* playfully scatter mud over the young men who have been preparing the fields, delivering the seedlings and providing the musical accompaniment for the singing.