



Philippine Institute for Development Studies  
*Surian sa mga Pag-aaral Pangkaunlaran ng Pilipinas*

## Rice in the Filipino Diet and Culture

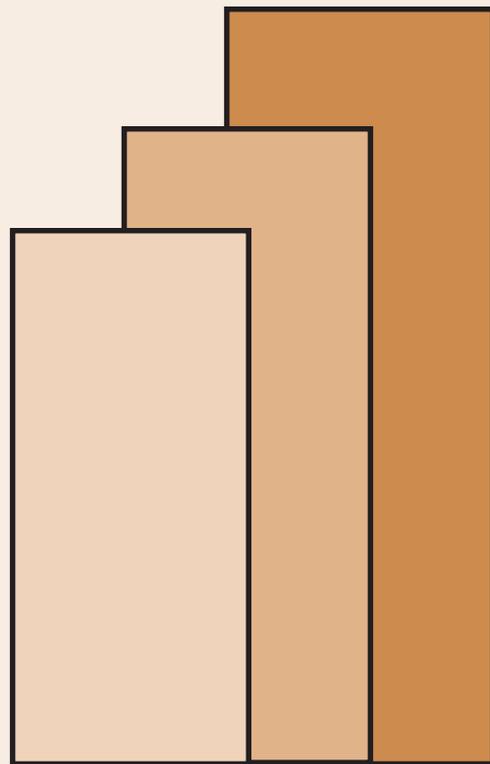
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**DISCUSSION PAPER SERIES NO. 2005-15**

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July 2005

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## **Rice in the Filipino Diet and Culture**

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### **ABSTRACT**

This paper deals with a basic question: How central is rice to the Filipino, what are its implications for understanding the way we approach and regard rice, and what do they indicate about Filipino culture? To answer this question, the paper focuses on the structural position of most Filipinos vis-à-vis rice. The paper argues that, at present, most Filipinos relate to rice as consumers rather than as producers of rice. From that perspective, the paper explores certain cultural practices that may shed light on the role of rice in Filipino culture. In particular, the paper traces the transformation of rice from a prestige and mainly elite food to the staple food by the end of the nineteenth century. This was accompanied by a change in perception of the rice plant that removed the magical elements. Rice today is primarily a consumer product the consumption of which reflects the stratification of Filipino society, as supported by quantitative data on contemporary trends in rice consumption. The paper concludes with reflections on the diminished centrality of rice in Philippine culture as a consumer commodity. The commoditization of rice is linked to urbanization, industrialization, and the Green Revolution.

Keywords: rice spirits, elite food, staple, rice consumption, commensality, commodity

## DISCUSSION PAPER

### Rice in the Filipino Diet and Culture

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Food and culture, undoubtedly, are intimately related and mutually constitutive. It is often adduced that one can know a people by what they eat and by their methods of food preparation. Anthropologists have differing views on the relationship between food and culture (e.g. Douglas 1966; Goody 1982; Bourdieu 1984; Harris 1974). But the gamut of this relationship cannot be covered in this paper, which is focused primarily on rice. Still, a focus on rice may provide us with clues and insights on Filipino culture.

There is a matter-of-factness about rice so that celebrating 2004 as the international year of the rice does not grab the passion of many. Rice is so commonplace, why celebrate something ordinary, a crop at the center of episodes of social unrest but hardly ever at the center of national rituals? Or is rice somehow undergoing a social diminution or perhaps a profound transformation, such that we need to invent a tradition of celebrating it (cf. Hobsbawn and Ranger 1983)? At any event, this occasion provides us with the opportunity to step back and analyze an important aspect of our collective life.

This paper is concerned with a basic question: How central is rice to the Filipino, and what are its implications for understanding the way we approach and regard rice? In answering this question, I focus mainly on the structural position of Filipinos vis-à-vis rice. From that position, which for the present I argue is mainly that of consumer rather than producer, this paper explores certain cultural practices that may shed light on the role of rice in Filipino culture. These cultural practices have not been static, but have changed over time, which is to say that the centrality of rice has been changing. Inevitably, to understand the place of rice in our lives we need to contextualize rice in terms of its social history in the Philippines. Thus, the first part of the paper offers such a narrative which, given the constraints of time, can be done here only as a broad schema. The second part of the paper is preoccupied with a somewhat different concern. It analyzes quantitative data on recent trends in rice consumption. These numeral data assist us in understanding the sociology of rice in the context of contemporary food practices of Filipinos. The nutrition aspect, however, is not discussed fully because I am not qualified in the topic. The third and final part of the paper offers reflections on the centrality of rice in Philippine culture. The overall story this paper tells about rice is not surprising—in some ways it harkens back to the ancient past, even as the meanings and the materiality of rice have changed considerably over the centuries, and continues to change and enter new and unprecedented social and technological terrains.

## A Brief Social History of Rice

### Rice in the Preconquest Period

For the period of contact with Europeans, William Henry Scott (1994) and Laura Lee Junker (2000) have provided us with valuable information about rice in the social life of the inhabitants of the islands that became the Philippines. In the preconquest period, rice was highly valued and was perhaps considered the most esteemed cereal, but it was not a daily staple. Rice production was insufficient and did not allow year-round consumption: “even *datus* with many slaves ate root crops in certain seasons” (Scott 1990, 291).

In the Visayas, Scott (1994, 35) informs us: “But since only in a few places could a year’s supply of rice be produced, root crops were therefore the most common food for part of the year, or all of the year for part of the people.” Subject to seasonal flooding, the alluvial plains of Bikol produced large quantities of irrigated rice and supported a large population, but even there Scott (*ibid.*, 182) tells us: “Despite the abundance of rice in some places and for some people, the staple Bikol food was root crops.” Taro, yams, and millet were the staple cereals of the islanders. These were planted in swidden fields, and around the margins of swidden patches devoted to dry upland rice.

Rice was relatively abundant in the uplands, and cultivated using a dibble stick or pole that men thrust to the ground to make holes where women placed the rice seeds. In the lowlands, wet-rice cultivation depended on transplanting rice from seedbed to swampland, but water levels could not be controlled and rice plants stood the risk of drowning. Lowlanders desiring to obtain upland rice offered seafood, salt, and pottery in exchange (Scott 1994, 36). At the same time, rice was given to the chiefs as *buwis*, which Spanish chroniclers called tribute (Aguilar 1998, 66). Among the Tagalog “standardized measures of rice were demanded by southern Luzon chiefs from their commoner constituency, with the number of *gantas* (approximately three liters of rice) dependent on the amount of land cultivated by individual families” (Junker 2000, 237). According to Junker (*ibid.*, 331), the limited archeological evidence available indicate that “rice was significantly more prevalent in the presumed elite habitation zone in comparison to the nonelite residential zone (*ibid.*, 331). Early on, rice was implicated with the asymmetries of social power relations and inequalities.

Junker (*ibid.*, 330) also notes that rice was a prestigious and highly valued food because of the “high labor intensity in growing rice” relative to root crops. In addition to its texture and flavor, the ease of pounding rice (compared to, say, millet with its hard husk) might also have made it a highly preferred food (Scott 1994, 39). Like root crops, rice was boiled without seasoning, but with fragrant leaves sometimes mixed with rice in the cooking pot. Cooked rice was combined with viands that were frequently fried in coconut oil, barbecued, or smoked. There were various ways of preparing and consuming rice, which could be grounded to

produce flour and made into rice cakes (ibid., 47-48). Dictionaries prepared by Spaniards recorded countless words referring directly to all aspects of rice and its many different varieties. As Doreen Fernandez (2001, 74) noted among the Tagalog, rice “was obviously high in the consciousness, being important to livelihood and life-style.”

A partial summary of what we know about rice in the precolonial past includes:

- (1) Rice was a prestige food.
- (2) Rice was produced in limited quantities, usually in upland swidden and in some water-logged districts.
- (3) Rice was given as tribute to chiefs and overlords.
- (4) Rice was consumed more by elites than by the non-elites.
- (5) Rice was consumed in large quantities in postharvest feasting.
- (6) Rice was an article of trade.

Early on, rice was a marker of social, ecological, and geographic differentiation. Rice stood for social stratification. It was highly valued and desired, but was not a staple food. In this sense, the archipelago was akin to Japan, where “rice was primarily the food for the upper class throughout most of history, and was not a ‘staple food’ for most Japanese until recently” (Ohnuki-Tierney 1995).

However, there is one more aspect about rice we need to note, a glimpse of which can be seen in this description of Scott (1994, 190):

Harvesting was accompanied by strict religious tabus. For three days before, harvesters had to remain continent and keep away from fire. Neither could outsiders enter the house: otherwise, they believed, the rice would be all straw with very few grains. In some places they even camped in the field all during the harvest, lest the rice decrease—as they said—by running away angry because the house had not been left to it alone. Harvesting was usually done by women, and men could not join them even if the crop would be lost for want of reapers. [...] And once the harvest was finished, more tabus were enforced for seven days—for example, houses were closed to outsiders, and cooking fires had to be rekindled each time.

Rice was reaped panicle by panicle, leaving stalks standing, with a sickle ... or any kind of knife... the rest were sunned and stored unthreshed in field granaries...or under the house... It was threshed as needed by being trampled underfoot...scraped against a seashell...or pulled through with the hands...

This report by Scott alerts us to the fact that, in the preconquest world, rice growing, harvesting and consumption were embedded not only in social relationships but also in the cosmology of the settlers and inhabitants of the islands. Their belief complex justified the near-exclusive application of female labor to rice planting,

care, and harvesting. Their magical worldview suggested that rice plants possessed its own spirits that resided in the stalks and grains of rice. These spirits could become “angry” and “run away” if certain practices were not followed.

A key practice was harvesting rice panicle by panicle, which was widely observed, even among the sixteenth-century Igorot (*ibid.*, 262). Today among the Bontok, as well as the Iban, rice is harvested in the same manner: “taken, as it were, unawares, and with a minimum of shock or disturbance,” otherwise a drastic motion with a sickle (a tool widely used in the lowlands today) might scare the spirits and cause them to flee to other fields (Labrador 1998, 97-98). In panicles, the rice stalks would appear to continue to hold the spirits, and it is in that form that harvested rice is kept by present-day Bontok women. Today as in the past, rice would be threshed “as needed” (Scott 1994, 39).

The difficulty of growing rice and the crop’s scarcity in the precolonial world might explain what seemed an antisocial practice of keeping away “outsiders” from the house during the harvest and immediate postharvest periods. Once the quantity of harvested rice was somehow established with the storage of the panicles, it seemed there was no hindrance to rice being the means for commensality and sociality among groups of islanders, especially as rice occupied an important role in everyday meals and in feasting and rituals. There was no way to hide the inviting aroma of cooking rice, wafting through the physical and social space of commensal beings. Men partook of this social world via women, whose labor linked rice cultivation to food preparation and consumption.

What happened then to the spirits in the rice when it was cooked and ingested? Again we find a cue from present-day Bontok. Ana Labrador’s (1998, 93) ethnography informs us that rice is a crucial food in ritual, during which it “crosses the threshold of the category of mundane food to become part of a feasting fare” that otherwise privileges meat over plant food—meat being the main ritual food in ancient Southeast Asia (Reid 1988, 32-33). “So like meat, rice restores vitality after a potentially lifedrainning and polluting effect of a death in the family. Feasting is also part of conquering vulnerability and transcends liminality. Among the Bontok, these would not be possible without rice” (*ibid.*, 93-94). That rice restores vitality suggests that spirits in the rice play a lifegiving role in this process of reinvigoration. This belief is most apparent among the Japanese whose mythologies advice that one way by which people “rejuvenate themselves” is by “internalizing the divine power through the consumption of rice-cum-deities, which become part of the human body and its growth” (Ohnuki-Tierney 1995). To the islanders of this archipelago, we might suppose that the rice spirits were believed to perform an analogous role in preserving life and restoring vitality. Rice was therefore not a mere source of calories but a life force that linked people to the cosmos and its potencies.

### Colonial Transformations under Spain

The preconquest social world was radically altered by the advent of Spanish colonialism, but there is no space in this paper to discuss the profound changes that occurred (but see Aguilar 1998, 32-93). The spirit-world remained but its characters, that began to be dominated by Hispanic beings, and the power relations they signified reflected the dynamics of colonial life. The subjugated *indios* began to live in compact settlements due to the *reduccion*. One set of significant changes pertained to the production and handling of rice. Without a doubt, rice continued to be an important and highly valued food crop, but the system by which it was grown underwent a radical change.

To finance the colonial enterprise (Alonso 2003), the Spaniards introduced plow technology that harnessed the carabao—and, presumably, they also introduced gravity irrigation and the channeling of waterways—that made wet-rice cultivation possible in many areas. The system relied on monsoon rains, and the transplanting of seedlings from seedbeds, as done previously but not extensively or methodically. To propagate the new technology, a foundry for casting plowshares was established in Manila in 1584, with Panday Pira as the first foundryman (Corpuz 1997, 28). O. D. Corpuz (*ibid.*) recounts that

Plowmaking was made a monopoly, farmed out in auction by the regime. The work of the friars in training the natives in the use of the carabao and plow was a valuable contribution. The friars disseminated the new technology by bringing trained farmers and their families with them when they were transferred to other parishes.

Founded in the late seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, the monastic estates in the Tagalog districts (and perhaps in Cebu as well, but there is a paucity of evidence on this) engaged in wet-rice agriculture (Roth 1982). In the course of the eighteenth century, settlement and rice farming extended to the northern portions of the central Luzon plain (McLennan 1982). Thus, more areas were opened for cultivation.

The large-scale commercialization of Philippine agriculture occurred in the course of the eighteenth century, midway through which saw the ascendancy of Chinese mestizos took began to form the new class of native elites (Wickberg 1964). Later in that century Spanish authorities, especially under the administration of José Basco y Vargas, sought a systematic approach to develop export agriculture. With the *de facto* opening of Manila's port to world trade in 1789, rice production "received great impetus"; for instance, in 1793 Pampanga exported 28,307 piculs of rice (Diaz-Trechuelo 1966, 125-26).

The result of these transformations was the overall increase in rice production in the Spanish colony. The rice surplus was paid as tribute to the state and as rent for complex landholding arrangements that emerged in the monastic estates and elsewhere. Rice production was able to support a rather large population of noncultivators, including native elites, Spanish friars and officials, and Chinese traders. Following Ester Boserup's (1981) famous theory, it can be said that the

technology of rice production kept pace with the rate of population growth during this period.

Nonetheless, the many varieties of rice—one count registered fifty-four varieties, another enumerated ninety-three—continued to be cultivated in different ways. In addition to wet-rice agriculture, rice was grown on swidden fields (or *caingin*) in upland areas and was also sown directly in elevated areas that benefited from monsoon rains (Diaz-Trechuelo 1966, 125).

In addition to plow technology, the Spaniards introduced new crops that would become the staple of many of the colonized natives. Sweet potato was one of the crops that underwent a transpacific journey, leading to the Náhuatl word, *camote*, entering the lexicon of Philippine languages (Albalá 2003). In the same vein, maize became a new dry-land crop, a phenomenon emblemized by the entry of the word *mais*, originally from the Antilles, in our vocabularies (*ibid.*). Corn and sweet potato became widely accepted staple food in nonirrigated parts of the archipelago.

For the lowland indio peasant, wet-rice production required that male labor became crucial in land preparation, particularly in plowing and harrowing of the field. In a sense, the preconquest male labor of creating holes in the ground for the rice seed was transported to the preparation of the plowed field. Female labor continued to predominate in planting, care of the field such as weeding, and harvesting. In this sense, the production-consumption nexus for the peasant household was transformed but in many respects it remained intact. Moreover, each household adopted its own magical strategies of entreating the spirit-world to nurture and protect the rice crop. Yet, by the nineteenth century, the enchantment of rice cultivation had been eroded. Evidently, the use of the sickle for harvesting meant that no precautions need be taken to ensure that rice spirits would not flee. Peasants believed in the spirit-world, but these preternatural beings no longer resided in the stalks and grain of rice. From a functionalist perspective, it can be conjectured that the abundance of the rice crop might have rendered the old belief complex redundant. One result of the passing of this belief system was that, in time, male and female labor began to be applied to the transplanting and harvesting of rice. The degree of gender equality in rice production thus sets the lowland Philippines apart from countries in Southeast Asia, such as Indonesia, where planting and harvesting remain the exclusive responsibility of female labor.

Based on what we know about the nineteenth century, taro, yam and millet had been eclipsed as the staple cereal, replaced by corn, sweet potato, and rice. The process of food substitution was dependent on geography, ecology, and social class. For the native elites, particularly, rice remained a valued food, but one not linked to any substantial ritual function.

Amid the changes in the composition and nature of the native elites, rice remained a marker of social stratification. By the nineteenth century the native elites, largely Chinese mestizos that comprised the *principalia*, were only indirectly involved in

production as leaseholders, landowners, middlemen, and traders. They were mainly consumers rather than producers of rice. As wealthy consumers, rice had become their everyday food. Because of the relative abundance of rice, and their storage in granaries, it was available and could be eaten year-round. In other words, Spanish colonialism saw the transformation of rice into a staple food. At least for the elites, rice had become an indispensable food item—a pattern found in the colonial capital as well as on the Cordillera.<sup>1</sup> But even for the nonelites, especially urban residents, the idea of rice as staple food became entrenched. Soon, for most of Philippine society, a meal could no longer be imagined apart from rice.

### From Abundance to Importation and Hunger: 1870s to the Present

Rice production, at least in Luzon, was said to be abundant such that rice was exported during the 1830s until about 1870. However, from the 1870s onward the Philippines became a net importer of rice, as Benito Legarda's (1999, 156-73) classic study demonstrates. Manifest in the last three decades of the nineteenth century was the rice deficiency of the Philippines, a pattern that would persist virtually unbroken until the present day. The condition of the Spanish Philippines contrasted sharply with Lower Burma, Siam, and CochinChina where large quantities of rice were grown in the great deltas of the Southeast Asian mainland, making these areas major exporters of rice in the world market (Owen 1971, Coclanis 1993). In the islands of the Philippines hunger would periodically stalk the land.

One reason for the rice deficiency was the shift in cash crops from rice to such export crops as tobacco (a government monopoly), abaca, and sugar. Rice for subsistence was neglected, in a manner that did not inconvenience the elites because they either controlled ricefields that assured them of their rice supply or they had enough disposable cash to purchase rice from the market. Market demands for specific crops may be cited as one reason for the rice deficiency. But, going back to Boserup, it can also be argued that the level of technology did not cope with the rise in population. There were no further innovations. The benefits from the earlier technological breakthrough had been depleted. At the end of the nineteenth century, rinderpest infestation and other calamities, including cholera epidemics, had weakened rice production considerably.

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<sup>1</sup> In Ifugao in the early twentieth century, consumption or non-consumption of rice distinguished the wealthy from poor and middle class households (Lambrecht 1932). On one hand, rich households considered rice as their main food that they eat throughout the year. On the other, poor households contented themselves with sweet potatoes, although they had their own small supply of rice obtained from their own fields or as wages (for working the fields, gathering firewood, making baskets, weaving clothes). Poor people ate rice only one or two months each year, and saved the rest for rituals and for their children. Middle class households ate rice more often than poor households, but they too did not continually eat rice after the harvest and, instead, ate sweet potatoes.

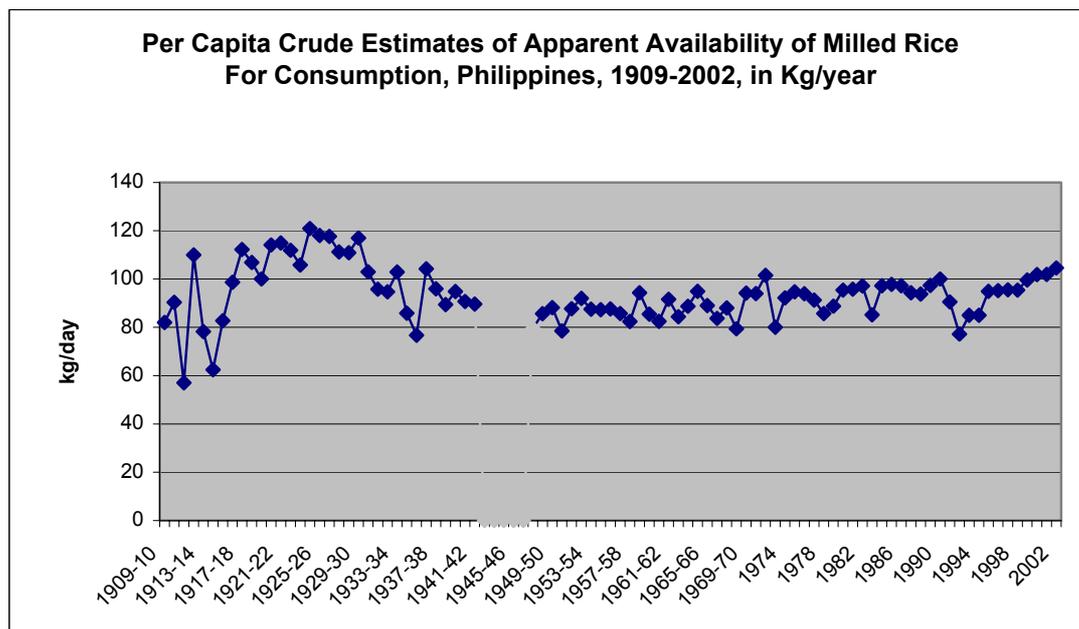


Figure 1.

Rather than seeking to understand the constraints to rice production, the American colonial state responded to rice shortages in the early years (see Figure 1) by following the late Spanish example of importing rice from external sources. Importation was the quickest way to ensure that the new imperial power could quell restiveness and potential disorder, especially in the nonagricultural urban areas (Corpuz 1997, 286). This pattern of appeasing urban consumers amid deficiencies in rice production has become deeply entrenched in Philippine life, skewing terms of trade against rural areas and legitimating rice importations throughout the twentieth century and beyond.

Crude estimates of annual per capita rice consumption suggest that it rose to high levels in the 1920s (120.9 kilograms in 1924-1925), dipped in the 1930s (76.7 kilograms in 1935-1936) and during the Second World War, “and then remaining relatively constant after the war at lower absolute levels,” wrote Mears et al. (1974, 76) in the early 1970s. Crude estimates demonstrate that per capita consumption of milled rice has risen slightly during the late 1980s and again since 2000 (probably due to steady and systematic importation), but these recent levels have not matched the high points of the 1920s (Figure 1). The year 2002 registered the highest mark in the postwar period (at 104.6 kilograms), but still falls short of the peak in the mid-1920s. Crude figures in the “food balance sheet” also confirm the existence of rice shortages in the 1930s (76.7 kilograms in 1935-1936), which was matched by the crisis of the 1990s (77.2 kilograms in 1992). Precipitous lows were also registered in the 1970s (80 kilograms in 1972-1973).

During the rice shortages of the 1930s, people in the Bikol region (where the abaca industry suffered a fatal slump due to the depression) relied on root crops as in ages

past, thus preventing outright starvation (Doeppers 2000). Other groups that suffered hunger could well have included the unskilled landless laborers and sugar sharecroppers in the central Luzon plain, a semiarid zone with a prolonged dry season, in contrast to other regions with relatively equal amounts of rainfall throughout the year that permits continuous food production (Wolters 2000).

Not surprisingly, conditions during the Second World War resulted in cessation of rice production in many areas of conflict. For the first time in many centuries, elites experienced hunger and valued every grain of rice, deemed to be the only “real food.” Corn and roots crops that fed many poor people during periodic and seasonal shortages did not belong to “the real” as this testimony of Benjamin Santos, 18 years old at that time, implies:

Since the Japanese commandeered most of the food supply, we had a hard time procuring ‘real’ food. The rice grains of our people, especially the farmers’ palay, were seized by the enemy... So in the mountains, we ate only cassava flour made into bibingka (a ricecake), grated corn, cassava and castanog (toasted coconut meat).

(Karganilla n.d., 204).

For urban dwellers, especially elites, accustomed to plenty by virtue of state support, the scarcity of rice highlighted its primordial role in life. As one testimony put it, “to have rice, whether in Manila or even rice-producing provinces, was to have everything” (Orendain n.d., 103-4).

In the postwar period, the country’s rice deficiency persisted notwithstanding the miracle rice and the Green Revolution program that commenced in the 1960s. The reasons for such continuing deficiencies are outside the scope of this paper, and should be covered by another chapter in this (planned) volume. Despite steady importation, serious food scarcities have occurred in recent years.

In the early 1970s, the country experienced a rice shortage, which was attributed to all sorts of causal factors: typhoons, pests and diseases (i.e., rats and tungro disease), dearth of agricultural credit, hoarding, U.S. imperialism, blackmarketing, graft and corruption, and the peace and order problem in Cotabato—the rice granary of the south which contributed 7 percent of the country’s rice supply—which discouraged peasants from planting and traders from moving stocks (*Philippine Panorama* 1972; *Weekly Graphic* 1972; *The Weekly Nation* 1971). Affected people supplemented their rice with camote and other tubers (*The Weekly Nation* 1971).

Severe rice and corn shortage in the Visayas and Socsargen areas (South Cotabato-Sultan Kudarat-Sarangani-General Santos) in the mid and late 1990s was caused by the El Niño drought that destroyed the farmers’ corn and ricefields. Driven by hunger and without rice or corn to eat, many families belonging to the B’laan and Tiruray groups subsisted on a drought-resistant and poisonous root crop known as kayos, which, if not prepared properly, can cause seizures, respiratory paralysis, and

death. In Cotabato, approximately seventeen Tiruray, mostly children, perished after eating the fatal crop. Another twenty-six Lumad of Maguindanao died after eating kayos, while several others were hospitalized. Other families subsisted on camote and other tubers, which they sometimes mixed with a small mound of rice. Those who obtained rice turned it to porridge to feed to feed their families (*PDI* 1995, 1998a and b; Zonio et al. 1998; Oloma 1995; *Manila Bulletin* 1998).

In Metro Manila the poor who could not afford the expensive varieties, such as *milagrosa* and *dinorado* (costing in the mid-1990s P20 to P25 a kilo), were at least able to buy the cheap rice imported by the National Food Authority (NFA). One rice retailer admitted that NFA rice was of such poor quality that “it isn’t fit for people to eat.” One consumer reported in the papers was aware that the quality of rice sold at government rolling stores was inferior to that of locally produced rice. But he added that it was good enough for people like himself. “We’re poor,” he said. “We’re not in a position to choose.” In the Visayas, rice and ground corn were mixed (Olivares-Cunanan 1995).

Apart from these well known episodes of rice shortage, many rural communities experience food shortages on a seasonal basis. In a fishing settlement in Sorsogon studied by Francisco Datar (2003), the southwesterly winds of the *habagat* increase wave size and wind velocity, severely curtailing fishing activities. During this season, it is said that “the earthen pot hangs” (*bitay an koron*), for the lack of food keeps the pot from being used. When the fish catch is lean, the credit list in local *sari-sari* stores is extended: “This is evidenced by the long list of loans made to every household for every purchase. The usual items purchased on credit are rice, sugar, kerosene, bread, and the rest are salt, cigarettes, and coffee” (*ibid.*, 61).

Amid recurrent food scarcities and rice deficiencies, rice has continued to be a marker of stratification and social inequality. Not everyone suffers from episodes of want, because the onus is shouldered mainly by the poor. More will be said about this point in the second part of this paper. For now, what is striking is that those reported to lack rice are visibly linked to the market. Either they could not buy rice, or have to purchase it on credit or at a steep price. The scarcity of rice highlights not only the class structure but also the fact that Filipinos are largely consumers rather than producers of rice. Consumption, rather than production, defines the social relationship to rice of most people in this country.

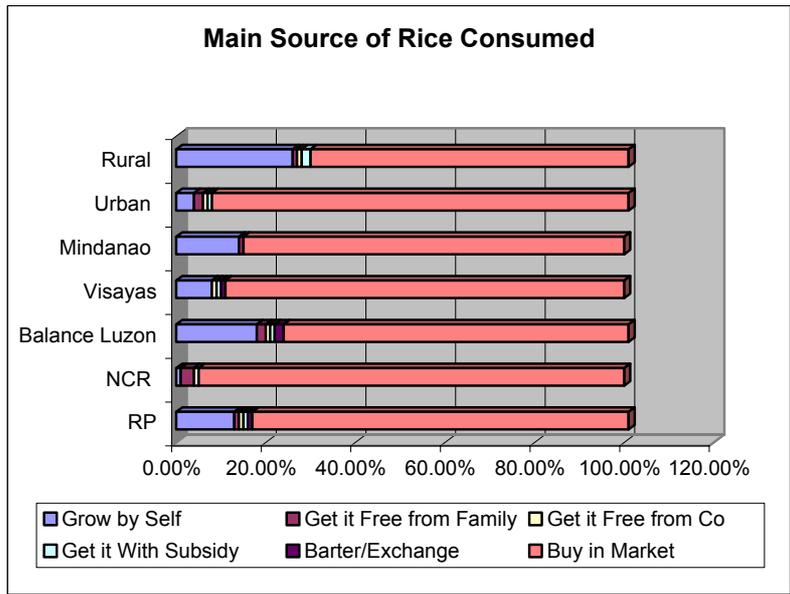


Figure 2.

The widespread commoditization of rice is supported by data gathered for the World Bank (2001) by the Social Weather Station (SWS) in March and April 2000 that show 84 percent of Filipinos nationwide simply buying the rice they consume from the market (Figure 2). In urban areas the proportion is 93 percent, rising to 95 percent in Metro Manila. But even in rural areas 71 percent acquires the rice they eat from the market. Only about a quarter of the rural population (26 percent), and a mere 13 percent nationwide, can be said to be “self-sufficient” in rice, i.e., they grow and consume their own rice. In terms of broad geographic regions, the Visayas has the highest rate of dependence on purchased rice, followed by Mindanao. When one considers the fact that about 43 percent of the labor force is engaged in the primary sector, the high dependence on purchased rice in rural areas indicates that many are not engaged in rice cultivation, do not grow adequate amounts of rice, or, if they do, are compelled to dispose of harvested rice to meet rent, debt or other obligations, necessitating that they then procure rice from the market.

In regard to rice, therefore, the organic connection between production and consumption has been severed for most Filipinos. This sort of estrangement between production and consumption is said to characterize globalization, with many products produced at some place and consumed a great distance away in another location. This disjuncture is now rife in the Philippine world of rice. The country thus fits the description of one beset by the “Third World food crisis”: marginalized traditional agriculture, subsidized food imports, domestic price controls, low rates of productivity growth and innovation, degraded environment—in a word, “disarticulated agriculture” (Goodman and Redclift 1991, 133-66). Yet, one wonders why countries such as Thailand and Vietnam do not seem to be in the same bind.

## Trends in Rice Consumption: Some Quantitative Evidence

Since rice is primarily an item of consumption, and given the large disparities of income and wealth in this country, it is no surprise that the consumption of rice is, on the whole, a portrait of inequality. Needless to say, it is not a very pretty picture. This overall conclusion is derived from an analysis of data from the National Nutrition Survey of the Food and Nutrition Research Institute (FNRI), the Family Income and Expenditure Survey (FIES), and the Social Weather Stations (SWS). The FNRI started to undertake a nationwide survey of actual food consumption in 1978, but the latest available data is from 1993. Last year the FNRI conducted another survey, but the results are yet to be released. Thus, the trends discussed in this paper await revision based on the results of the 2003 FNRI data.

It goes without saying that rice occupies a central role in the Filipino diet. In the "average" diet, FNRI data from 1978 to 1993 very broadly suggest that rice accounts for about 35 percent of the total food intake, and about 85 percent of all cereals consumed. Corn represents 10 percent of all cereals consumed, while other cereal products, such as bread and noodles, account for the remaining 5 percent of total cereal consumption.

### Regional Data on Corn and Rice Consumption

The generalization that rice is the country's staple must be qualified, however, by the fact that corn is consumed in significant amounts in parts of the Visayas and Mindanao. In the Central Visayas (composed of Cebu, Bohol, Negros Oriental, and Siquijor), corn is the real staple of many Filipinos. It is the region that shows the highest per capita consumption of corn (Figure 3).

In addition to the Central Visayas, corn is also consumed in large quantities in Mindanao, as well as in Eastern and Western Visayas. The available data for 1987 and 1993 from the FNRI suggest that average corn consumption has increased considerably in Mindanao (Figure 4), which may be indicative of the relative scarcity of rice. But Western Mindanao's mean per capita consumption of corn at about 117 grams per day is still lower than the 150 grams per day of corn consumed in the Central Visayas (Figure 4).

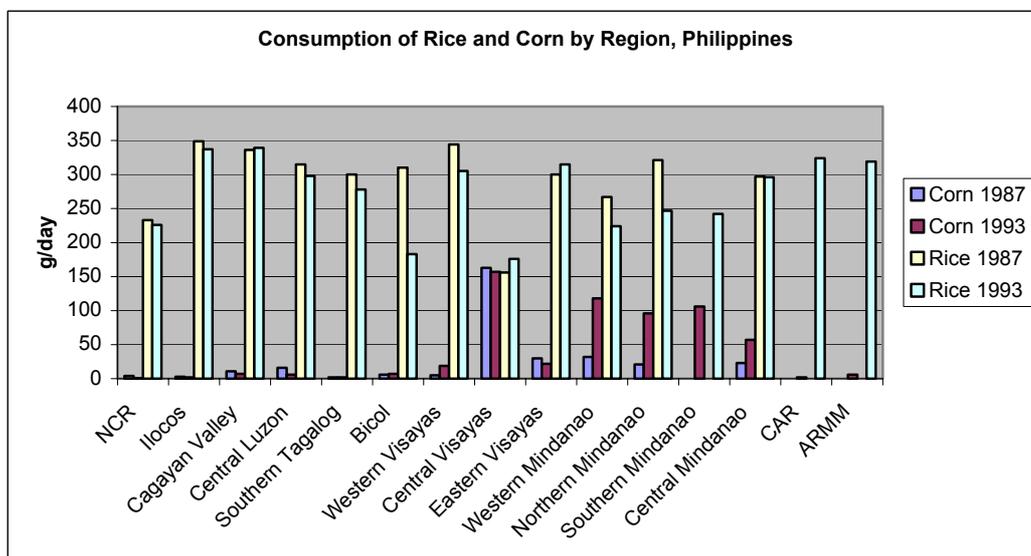


Figure 3.

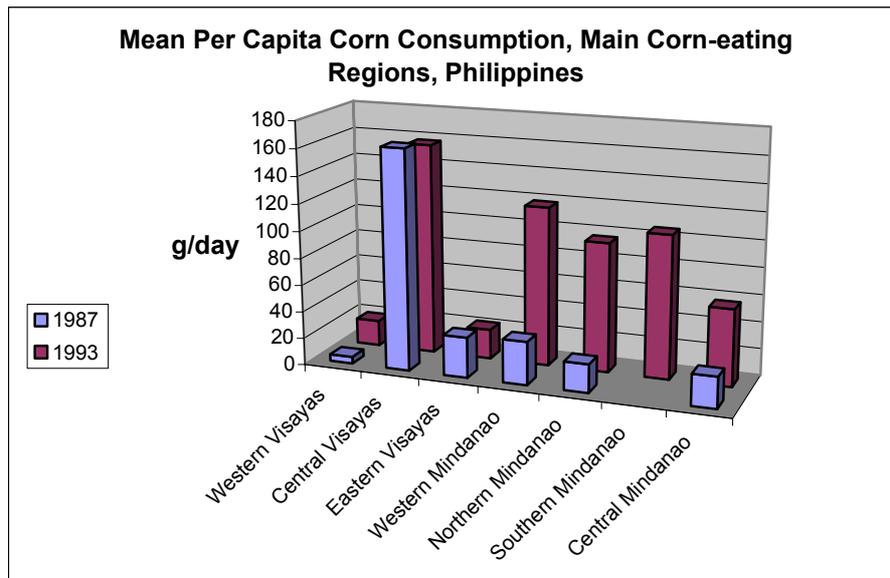


Figure 4.

Because national level FNRI data are not comparable across years, it is not possible to compare consumption of milled rice from one survey period to another. Information on the total consumption of rice and rice products, however, can be compared. It must be noted, however, that the available regionally disaggregated data indicate that rice products other than milled rice contribute a small fraction only of total rice consumption, as Figures 5 and 6 suggest. In 1993, Filipinos consumed an average of 10 grams of rice products per day.

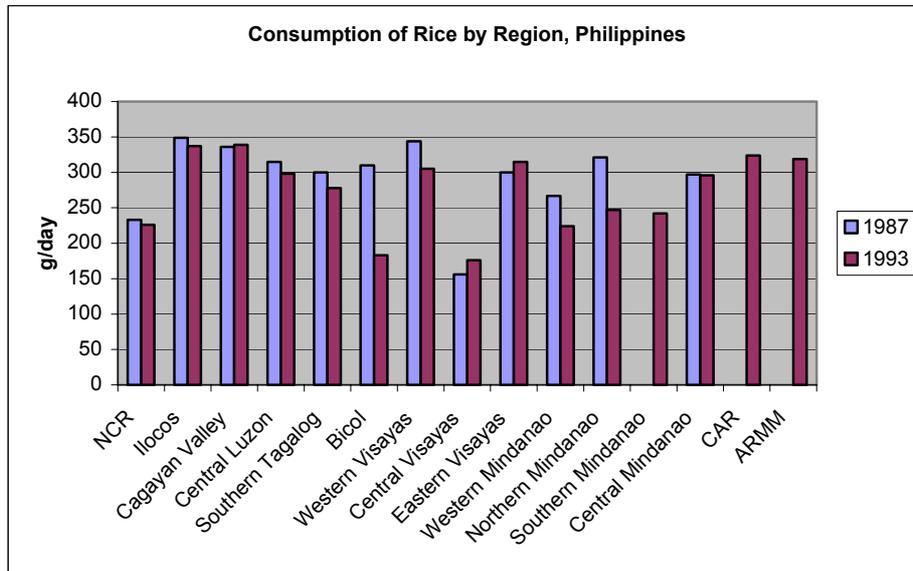


Figure 5.

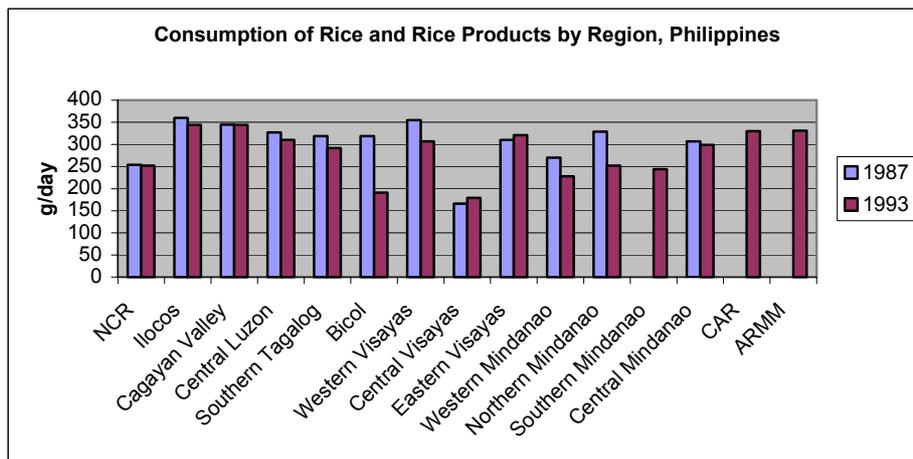


Figure 6.

When consumption of rice and rice products are summed up, national level data show that the mean per capita consumption of rice in 1987 reached 303 grams per day. This figure declined to 282 grams per day in 1993.

Based on PhilRice data, only five regions of the Philippines are not rice deficient, namely, Central Luzon, Cagayan Valley, Western Visayas, Ilocos, and Central Mindanao. Data for 1993 indicate that these five regions exceeded the national average rice consumption (Ilocos and Cagayan Valley, 344 grams per day; Central Luzon, 310 grams per day; Western Visayas, 307 grams per day; and Central Mindanao, 299 grams per day). What is interesting is that four rice deficient areas exceeded the average daily consumption of rice (ARMM, 331 grams per day; CAR, 330 grams per day; Eastern Visayas, 321 grams per day; and Southern Tagalog, 282 grams per day).

In general, more rice per capita is consumed in rural than in urban areas. But FNRI data suggest that the rural-urban per capita consumption gap is decreasing. In 1978 rural areas consumed 63 grams per capita per day more than urban areas. The gap decreased to 17 grams per day in 1993. Residents in rural areas are either shifting to other cereal products, or are eating absolutely less rice than before and suffering hunger.

### Urbanization and Substitution for Rice

It is noteworthy that average consumption of rice in the National Capital Region is considerably less than that of other regions. Clearly, Metro Manila is a non-rice producing region, and whatever rice is consumed in the capital originates from other places. Data from the FNRI indicate a declining daily consumption of milled rice in Metro Manila, from 233 grams per capita in 1987 to 226 grams per capita in 1993. When other rice products are included, the figures show a consumption of 254 grams per capita per day in 1987, which declined to 252 grams per day in 1993. At least during these survey years, Metro Manila residents appear to have compensated for the decline in milled rice consumption by consuming other types of rice products.

The ostensibly lower consumption of rice in the National Capital Region compared with other regions in the country can easily be explained in terms of the highly urbanized context. The demands of commuting to the place of work and other lifestyle habits have apparently reduced the daily consumption of rice. For instance, bread (*pan-de sal*) may be the standard fare for breakfast of many workers in Metro Manila who must leave their homes very early to report for work. Metro Manila has also experienced the most extensive inroad of the fast food industry, which intuitively (for lack of hard data) can be said to have altered the consumption habits of Metro Manila residents.

What the data do suggest is that the NCR has seen a widespread substitution of bread and other cereals for rice. This fact is borne out by Figure 7, which shows that Metro Manila has the highest per capita consumption of other cereal products (made from flour and consumed in the form of bread, noodles, cookies/biscuits, and the like). The displacement of rice by other cereal products has increased from 34 grams per day in 1987 to 40 grams per day in 1993. The Southern Tagalog region, characterized by a heightening tempo of urbanization and industrialization, also shows a marked trend of consuming cereals other than rice. The region consumed 21 grams per capita per day in 1987, a figure that rose to 32 grams per capita per day in 1993. Also fitting into this pattern is Central Luzon (Figure 7).

Consumption of bread is highest in Metro Manila, followed very closely by Southern Tagalog (Figures 8). The rise in bread consumption in Southern Tagalog from 1987 to 1993 appears to have occurred at a faster rate than in the National Capital Region. Again, this is probably linked to urbanization and the rise in

disposable cash incomes in these places. Similarly, consumption of noodles is highest in the National Capital Region, followed again by Southern Tagalog (Figure 9).

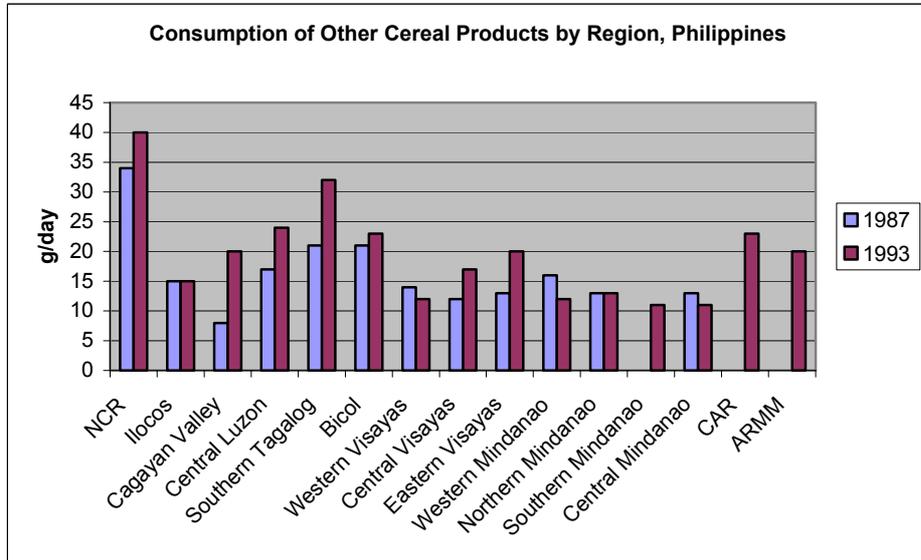


Figure 7.

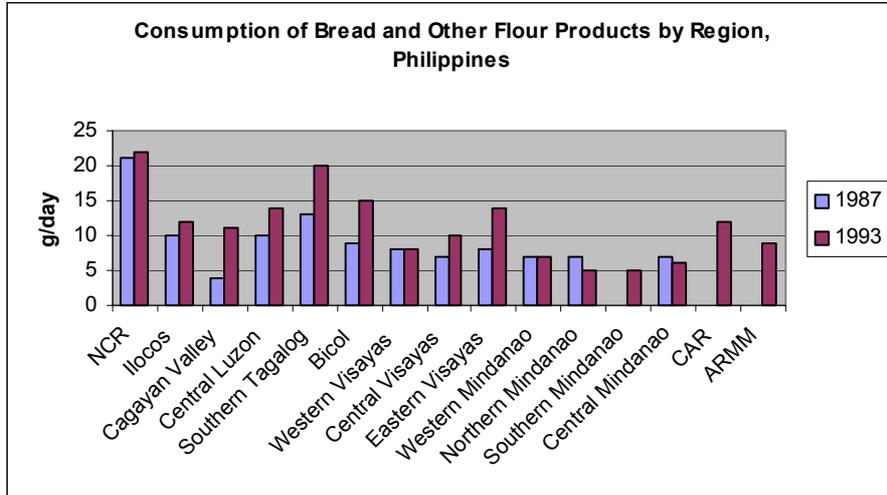


Figure 8.

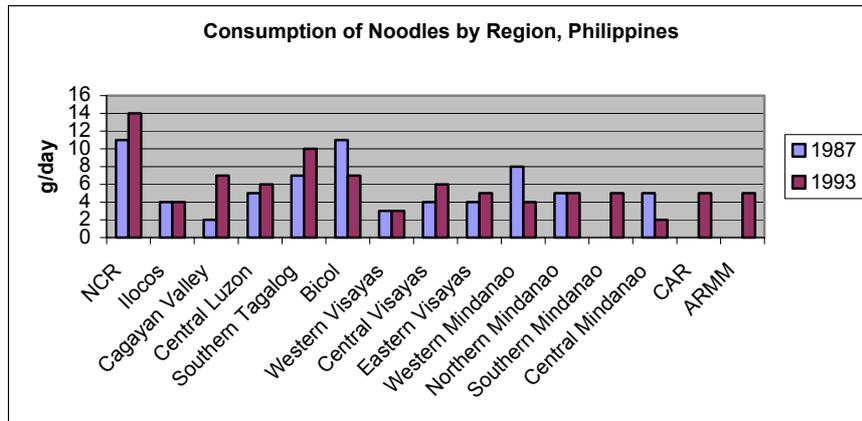


Figure 9.

What is odd, however, is the rise in the consumption of other cereal products even in regions that are not highly urbanized. The regions with high incidence of poverty and “subsistence levels” where there is also rather high consumption of other cereal products (at 20 or more grams per capita per day) include CAR, Bicol, Eastern Visayas, and the ARMM. Assuming these patterns are not due to mistakes in data collection and analysis, the data are intriguing. Can it be that bread is cheaper than rice in these regions? We can also consider anecdotal evidence about many poor families using instant noodles and the chemically enhanced flavors of these noodles as viand. One instant noodle pack can make rice palatable for a whole family. In this case, consumption of noodles does not displace rice, but rather fish, meat, and vegetables.

#### Family Size and Rice Consumption

Data from the FNRI reveal that rice consumption is inversely related to household size. Despite variations in absolute figures for different survey years, the trend is essentially the same as seen in Figure 10.

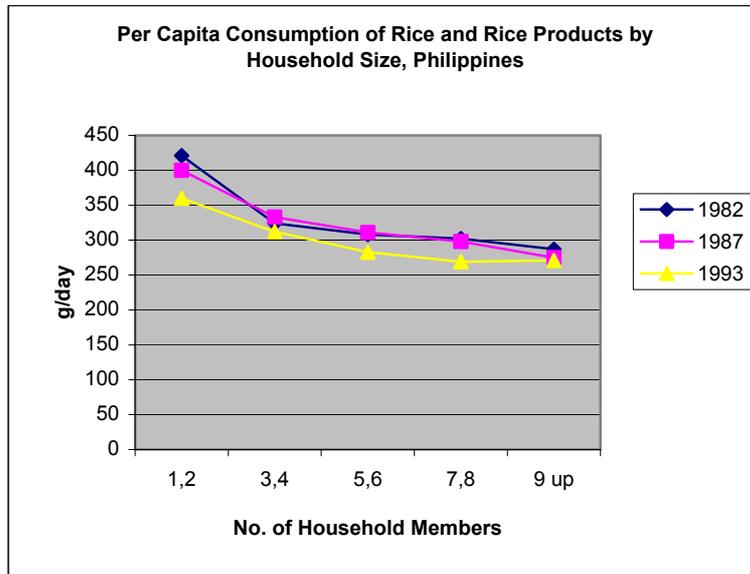


Figure 10.

Table 1.

<b>Mean Per Capita Consumption of Rice and Rice Products by Household Size, Philippines, in g/day</b>			
HH size	1982	1987	1993
1 to 2	421	400	360
3 to 4	324	333	312
5 to 6	308	311	283
7 to 8	302	298	269
9 and above	287	275	271

Data on absolute figures of rice consumption for 1993, which suggest a decline from previous years, show that households with one to two members have an average per capita consumption of 360 grams per day (Table 1). With three to four members, the mean declines to 312 grams per day, and further to 283 grams per day in the case of households with five to six members. With seven to eight members, the per capita consumption is 269 grams per day, but households with nine or more members somehow gain an extra 2 grams.

Data from the FNRI also show that, as household size increases, total per capita consumption of food decreases. Again, despite differences in absolute figures for different survey years, the trend holds (Figure 11).

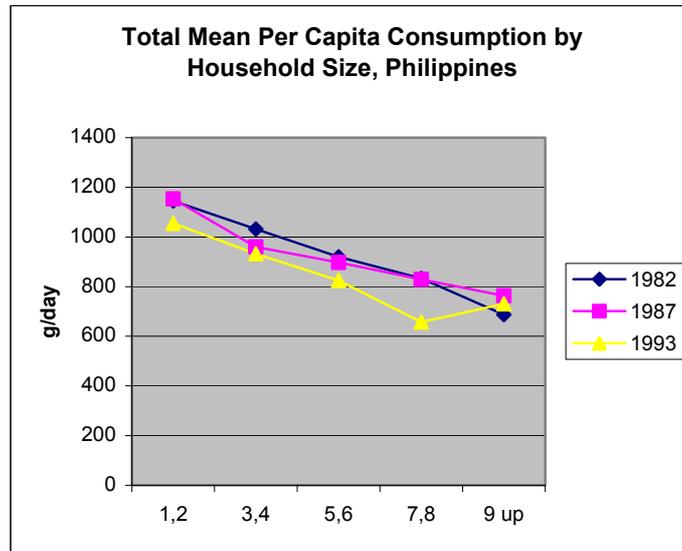


Figure 11.

One important caveat is that the data do not show the stage in the family life cycle. For a family with small children, per capita consumption is expected to be less than that of a two-member household (with husband and wife as members), since the food intake of children is definitely less than that of adults. The data should therefore be treated as a very crude measure. Even so, the data are strongly indicative that household size has a negative impact on average rice consumption.

We also do not know how the available rice is actually apportioned among household members. Everyone could be eating porridge, or parents may forego eating rice and allot the meager servings to young children. In this connection, in a situation of hunger, it has been suggested that food allocation to children does not follow gender bias, but is rather affected by the existence of a favorite child (Datar 2002). Many young persons leave the parental household to enter work in urban areas—females in domestic work, males in stevedoring or similar manual labor—as a strategy of reducing the number of consumers (“one mouth less to feed”).

#### Income, Class, and Rice Consumption

The FNRI data do not show a clear relationship between per capita rice consumption and family income. Rice consumption per capita seems to stay within a narrow band of 250 to 350 grams per day, regardless of income group (Figure 12).

In terms of expenditures, the FIES data show that the lowest income decile spends the most for cereals and cereal products. Predictably, the richest decile spends a considerably smaller proportion of total income on food in comparison to other income deciles, but in terms of absolute figures what they spend on food far exceeds the absolute amounts spent by the lowest decile. Moreover, the ratio of the richest decile’s expenditure on food relative to total expenditure has declined from

36 percent in the 1980s to 29 percent in 2000 (Figure 13). Over the years the proportion of income spent on food has declined for all income deciles, but for the seven lowest income deciles food represents from close to 50 to 62 percent of total expenditures in 2000. On the average, the proportion spent on food by the richest decile is about half of what the poorest decile spends.

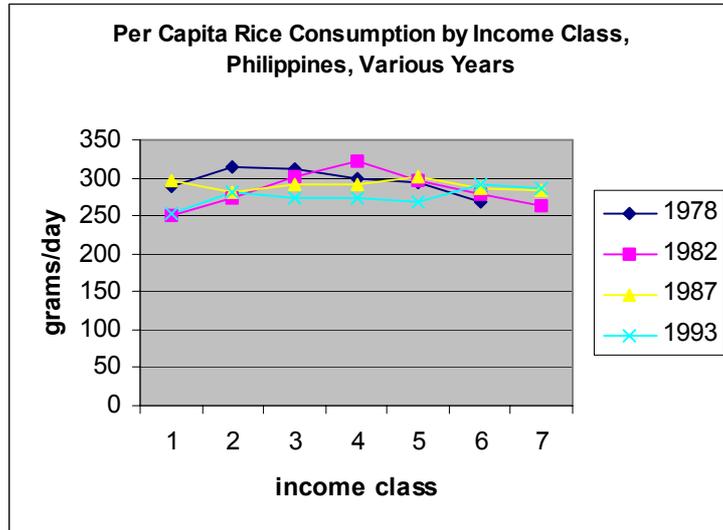


Figure 12.

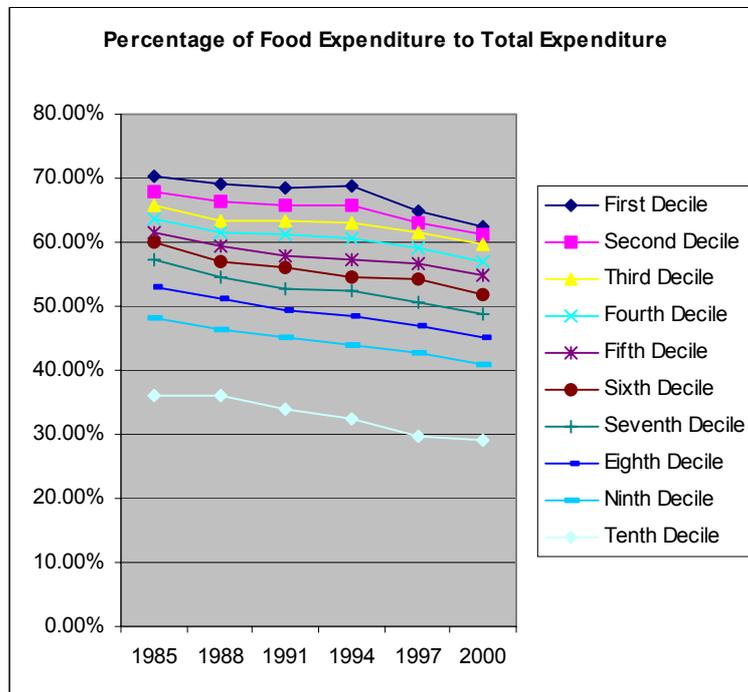


Figure 13.

The poor also allocate most of their food expenditures to cereals (Figure 14). Among the highest income decile, expenditures on cereals in 2000 account for only 17 percent of food expenditures. In contrast, the poorest income decile spent 47.5 percent of their food expenditures on cereals, and the second poorest decile spent 45 percent. It may be noted that, in terms of relative proportions, the rich spend more on meat and meat products. In 2000 the highest income decile spent 20 percent of their food expenditures on meat products, while the poorest three income deciles spent from 6.5 to 8.8 percent of their food expenditures on meat products. Interestingly, all income deciles spend more or less the same proportion of their food expenditures on fruits and vegetables (10 to 11 percent, in 2000).

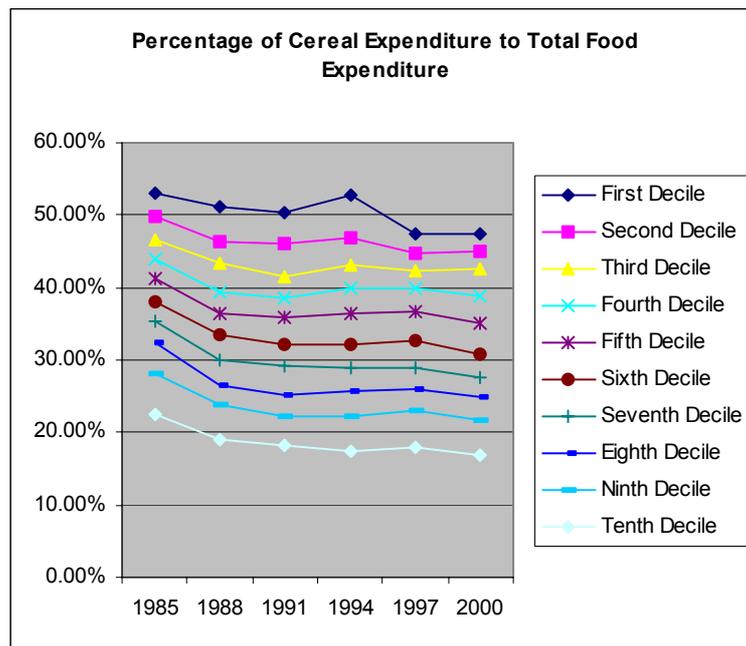


Figure 14.

Data from the FIES show that share of food expenditure to total expenditure has been declining. From 51 percent in 1985, it dropped to 43.8 percent in 2000. Expenditure share on food, cereals, and fish and fish products of rural households tend to be bigger than in the urban ones. For those in the urban areas, the expenditure share on meat, food regularly eaten outside the home, and dairy products are larger than corresponding figures in rural areas. Expenditure on eating out has been increasing in both urban and rural areas (see Figures 15 and 16).

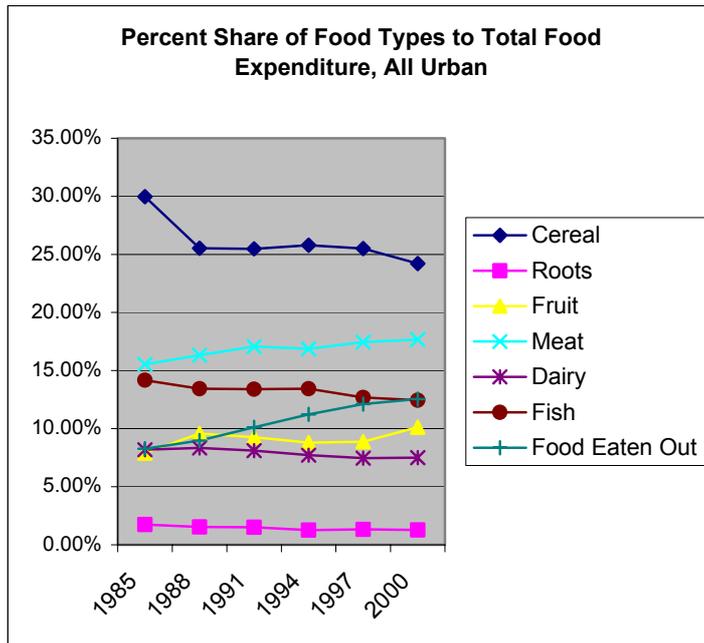


Figure 15.

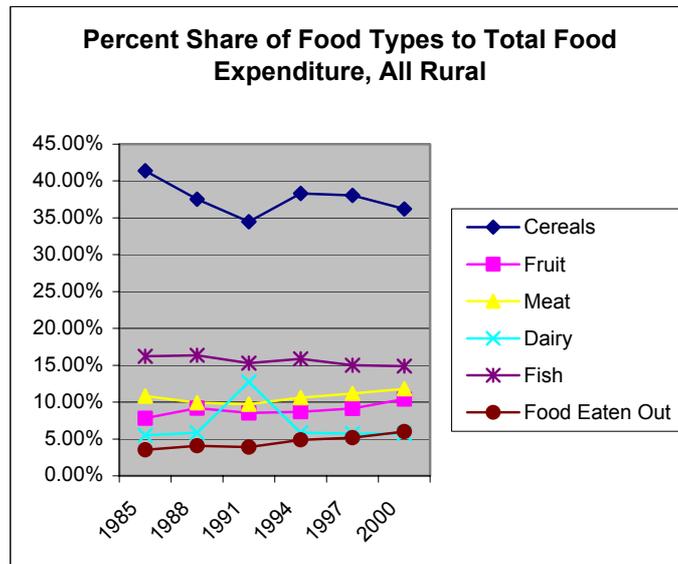


Figure 16.

Consistent with the FIES data that show higher income deciles spend small proportions of their food expenditures on cereals, SWS data for the World Bank (2001) reveal that about 79 percent of “the rich” eats rice three times a day, some 81 percent of middle-income groups eat rice three times a day, but 91 percent of “the poor” eat rice three times a day (Figure 17). Among the poor, a small fraction (1 percent), the very poorest of the lot, eats rice once a day only.

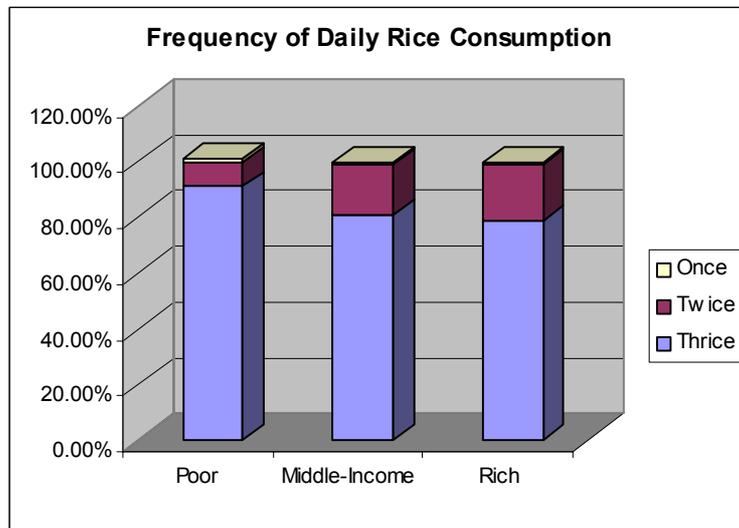


Figure 17.

### NFA Rice

The SWS data for the World Bank (2001) point to some interesting contradictions: the rich eat rice less frequently, but buy NFA rice in greater bulk than the poor. In terms of kilos of NFA rice bought per household per month, the poor buy 39 kilos, the middle income 42 kilos, the rich 48 kilos. Compared with the middle class and the poor, a higher proportion of the rich also think rather highly of NFA rice.

Realistically, the poor rate NFA rice most severely compared with other income groups (Figure 18). The poor admit NFA rice has “poor smell” (48 percent), “low quality” (36 percent), “poor taste” (27 percent), and “poor color” (26 percent). In contrast, remarkably lower proportions of the rich think NFA rice has “poor smell” (33 percent), “low quality” (21 percent), “poor taste” (17 percent), and “poor color” (17 percent). Parenthetically, it is interesting that Filipinos consider “smell” more important than “taste” in evaluating rice.

Can it be that the rich buy NFA rice for their domestic helpers and pets, but do not really eat NFA rice themselves? Can that be the reason why they find the quality of NFA rice acceptable, when in fact the poor do not?

Another ironical point raised by the data is that, while proportionately it is the poor that buy more NFA rice, it is the rich and middle class that buy more rice per capita. Because NFA rice is state subsidized, it is not the poor that enjoy the bulk of the rice subsidy. Figure 19 shows the estimated subsidy per household received by those in different income groups that purchase NFA rice.

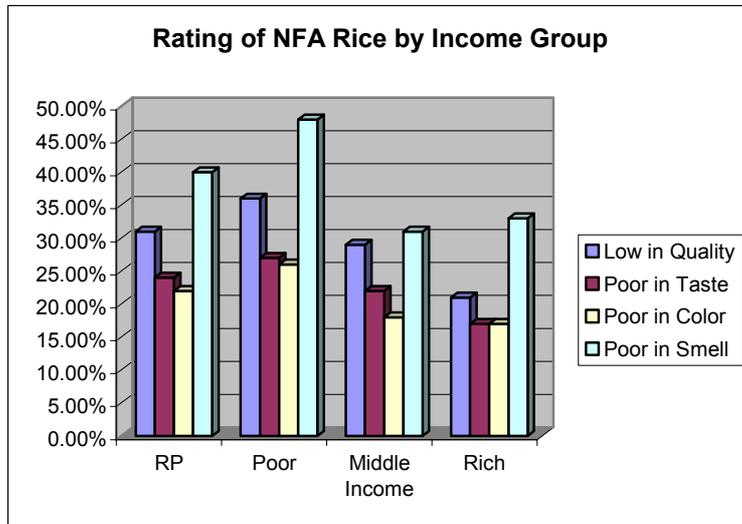


Figure 18.

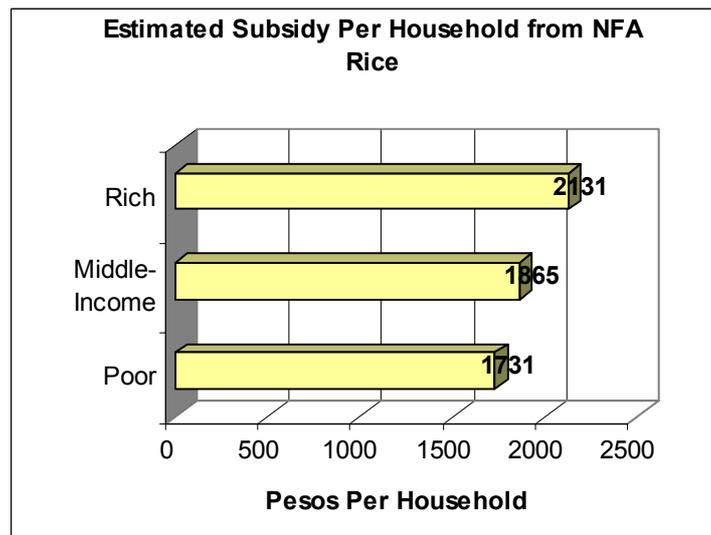


Figure 19.

### The Specter of Hunger

The 2004 SWS third quarter survey on the incidence of hunger reveals that many Filipinos are being hounded by hunger, with Mindanao as the most hard-pressed region. Survey results show that one in seven families experienced not having anything to eat at least once in the three months preceding the survey. The 15.1 percent incidence of hunger in August 2004 closely approximates the highest recorded incidence of 16.1 percent in March 2001. The third quarter figure for 2004 marked a 10 percent from the third quarter of 2003 (Figure 20).

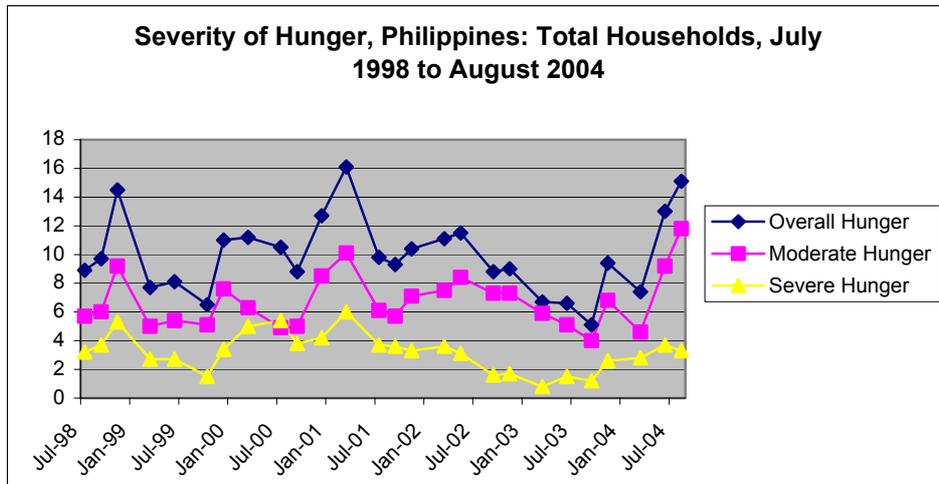


Figure 20.

In Mindanao hunger incidence increased sharply by 17.7 percent from last year's third quarter. Hunger incidence in the NCR increased by 8.4 percent, while that for the rest of Luzon and Visayas increased by 6.6 percent and 9 percent, respectively. Moderate hunger, defined as experiencing having nothing to eat at least once in the preceding three months, increased by 7.8 percent from last year.

Although the survey years of the SWS do not coincide wholly with those of the National Nutrition Surveys of the FNRI and the FIES of the National Statistics Office, it can be observed from the data sets of the latter two entities that Filipinos are consuming less food and spending less on food. This information will need to be correlated with the trend in the cost of food, which is not available at the moment.

Table 2 shows the FNRI data on mean per capita consumption of Filipinos. From a mean per capita consumption of 915 grams per day in 1982, food consumption fell to 803 grams per day in 1993, a pattern depicted graphically in Figure 21.



Figure 21.

<b>Total Food Consumption, g/day</b>									
Year	Total Food Consumption	Cereals and Cereal Products	Fish, Meat and Poultry	Fruits and Vegetables	Starchy Roots and Tubers	Milk and Milk Products	Sugars and Syrups	Fats and Oils	Others
1978	896	367	133	249	37	33	27	13	37
1982	915	356	154	232	42	44	22	14	51
1987	864	345	157	218	22	43	24	14	41
1993	803	340	147	183	17	44	19	12	41

The decrease in food consumption is most evident in the consumption of fruits and vegetables that, of the various food groups, suffered the biggest decline in absolute terms. The 1978 mean consumption figure of 249 grams per day of fruits and vegetables dropped to 183 grams per day in 1993, a reduction of 66 grams per day (or about 27 percent). The decline in consumption of cereals and cereal products went from 367 grams per day in 1978 to 340 grams per day in 1993, a reduction of 27 grams per day (or 7 percent). Consumption of starchy roots and tubers also posted a reduction of 20 grams per day during the two survey periods. Amid poverty and deprivation, poor Filipinos tend to do away with fruits and vegetables. The small amounts of fish, meat and poultry in their diet tend not to be sacrificed.

Nutrition data suggest widespread malnutrition among the poor, and “overnutrition” among the rich, as anthropometric data on height, weight and BMI suggest (Madriaga et al. 1998). For instance, 33 percent of 11-19 year-old adolescents are underweight, and the prevalence of stunting for both males and females is about 31 percent. The prevalence of chronic energy deficiency (CED) among adults (BMI <18.5) is 13.2 percent, with the prevalence of CED higher in females than in males. In contrast, the prevalence of obesity (BMI >30 or 2nd and 3rd obese) is 3.3 percent, a situation increasingly observed also among children of elites.

## **The Contradictory Centrality of Rice**

### Rice as Consumer Commodity

As argued in this paper, the predominant relation of most Filipinos to rice is as consumers rather than producers. The essentially end-user or consumer position of most Filipinos has necessarily eclipsed the complex ties that bind the cultivator to the rice crop, which persisted through the colonial epoch despite its attenuated character. Consumers are increasingly alienated from the dynamics of production, and treat rice as a mere commodity.

Although I cannot ascertain the origins of this song taught in elementary schools until perhaps the 1970s (the generation in their 20s today do not seem to be familiar with it), the song with the opening line, “planting rice is never fun,” expresses the

sensibilities of an urban consumer. The statement, however, is a mistranslation of the Tagalog “magtanim ay ‘di biro”—meaning one needs to take planting rice seriously. But even the Tagalog version of the song speaks of the drudgery of farm work, and only in the narrow terms of that laboriousness is rice lyricized. Nothing is said about the nutrition from rice and its importance in the diet. With the periodic eruption of agrarian unrest since the postwar period, rice has also been associated with social conflict.

In contradistinction to the drudgery of rice cultivation is the ease of cooking rice in electric rice cookers. According to a marketing representative of Matsushita Electric Philippines Corporation (MEPCO), distributor of the Panasonic brand of rice cookers, the average sale of all rice cooker brands (i.e., Standard, Panasonic or National, 3D) is quite hefty:

1990 to 1995	15,000/month
1996 to 1997	23,000/month
1998 to present	20,000 to 21,000/month

The decrease from 1997 up to the present is attributed to the entry of imported brands (i.e., American Heritage) from China, Thailand, U.S., and other countries. It is not surprising that Metro Manila has the biggest sales percentage—50 percent—of rice cookers across the country. Electric rice cookers are mentioned here as an emblem of “modern” and convenient kitchen technologies that are so divorced from the messiness and drudgery of actually growing rice. In the cities, however, rice cookers substitute for the new type of drudgery (and boredom?) of industrial and office work, becoming central to women who must still perform kitchen work after a day in the factory or office.

### Imagining the Land and Life through Rice

Only Fernando Amorsolo (1892-1972) can be credited with memorializing rice production and the landscape of ricefields in his famous paintings. But we should note that *Dalagang Bukid* (now in the possession of Club Filipino) was painted in 1936, while *Planting Rice* (now in the UCPB collection) was completed in 1946. I have not been able to date the painting titled *Ricefields*. It has been argued that he painted rural scenes in response to American demand for certain types of mementoes (Roces 1978, 2612). Nevertheless, his paintings have gained a widespread popularity among (educated) Filipinos. Besides, it is precisely in relation to the foreigner that one searches for something distinctive to represent one’s country. In Amorsolo’s art the landscape of rice depicted “my country” or “my land.”

An analogous type of representing the nation can be found in postcards, a famous one of which depicts Mayon Volcano with ricefields in the foreground. Another popular postcard shows the rice terraces (although for the Bontok the rice is more important than the terraces). For overtly political purposes, Diosdado Macapagal

and Ferdinand Marcos memorialized themselves in stamps that showed them planting rice. Despite the controvertible character of postcards and stamps, these portrayals of “my land” accorded a centrality to rice. These types of representations apparently belong to an era that is gone. After the 1970s, it seems that imagining a bucolic landscape of rice has become impossible. The increasing commoditization as well as politicization of rice can perhaps explain this collective incapacity to represent the country in terms of ricefields. Perhaps the hybrid varieties of the Green Revolution, which made the rice commonly eaten by most Filipinos unpalatable compared with traditional varieties, can be a related factor in the diminution and banality of rice.

There was a time when elementary school textbooks carried the advice given by Manuel Quezon’s father to his son: “a man should be like palay, the more it grows solid grains, the more it stoops.” The rice plant embodied the lesson of humility and flexibility. But this aphorism would make sense only to someone familiar with rice cultivation. In any case, it has also largely lost its relevance with the Green Revolution’s hybrid varieties that were engineered precisely to grow short stalks.

If the proposition about the structural and symbolic marginalization of rice is unconvincing, we need to ask: Why is the country seemingly more concerned about the export of labor than the importation of rice? Can we imagine the Philippines acting like Japan that strenuously resists the opening of its domestic market to “foreign rice”?

#### The Invented Tradition of *Pahiyas*

Some may point to the celebrated status that rice occupies in the Pahiyas festival. Every 15 May, the town of Lucban in Quezon Province celebrates the feast of San Isidro Labrador, the patron saint of farmers. Pahiyas is regarded as a thanksgiving feast for the bountiful harvest. During the feast, people decorate their houses with *pahiyas* (precious offerings) made up of rice, fruit and vegetables, hats, and baskets. They also string together *kiping* or leaf-shaped decorations made from rice flour paste and colored in bright red, fuchsia, orange, green and yellow. Brochures circulated at the festival and authored by Dr. Palermo C. Salvacion, President of the Lucban Historical Committee, state that the *kiping* is an imitation of the Mexican taco that started in the eighteenth century.

The *pahiyas* can indeed be seen as celebrating rice. On the other hand, research by IPC Research Associate Lou Antolihao (2004) reveals that the *pahiyas* has become no more than a tourist spectacle:

The shift in the celebration of the Pahiyas from a local ritual into a cultural recital marks the movement in the conception of culture from a common set of reflexive practices to deliberately constructed signifying actions. The original meaning that inspired and perpetrated the festival had all but given way to a social scene that is determined less and less by the tacit logics of

long-standing practices and more and more by conscious choices calculated with respect to the opportunities of the tourism structures.

The transformation of pahiyas from community celebration to cultural performance and spectacle has brought in corporate sponsors and conflicts between those that stress its sacredness with those that treat it as a purely secular event. Even people of the town who are not rice farmers engage in the festival and display kiping acquired from other households.

In this process of profound change, rice too has lost its place. Tourists view the kiping as objects in themselves, abstracted from the labor and ecological processes that produced rice and the rice flour. In the pahiyas, rice figures as a mere object, conformable with its generally commodified character and the touristification of the event.

### The Continuing Sumptuary Importance of Rice

Despite commoditization, it can still be said that rice does acquire significance as symbols of prosperity and “good luck” on certain occasions. Until the practice was banned, grains of milled rice were thrown to newly wed couples as they leave the church as a sign of blessing. In some (rural) places, it is still believed that a newly wed couple should eat sticky rice before entering the house or reception area so that their love and devotion to each other will mimic the stickiness of rice. Still commonly practiced is the provisioning of a newly built house with rice (as well as salt—to ward off evil spirits) before the occupants move in with their belongings.

Importantly, various rice delicacies and rice cakes, such as *biko*, *suman*, and *bibingka*, remain as important parts of meals served during festivals and town fiestas. In these elaborate forms, rice transcends its quotidian character. Even low-income families strive to serve good-quality boiled rice during fiestas, suggestive of the importance of rice in a meal. Rice remains crucial for commensality in many Philippine households. Even on a daily basis, the sacredness of rice is also affirmed. My father used to instruct me as a child to finish every last bit of rice morsel on my plate as a sign of respect for the grace of God. Other parents point to hunger and famine in this or that place to prod children to finish the food on their plate.

Despite the spread of the fastfood industry, and the increasing replacement of rice by bread, noodles and other cereal products, rice remains the essential food of many Filipinos even in urban centers. Three interviews conducted for this paper attests to the indispensable place of rice in a meal. Indeed, these testimonies indicate that food without rice is not seen as a meal.

### Case 1

Anna, 29 years old, is a part-time student and full-time employee in a research organization. She lives in Laguna, but works and studies in Manila where she rents an apartment with a friend.

Anna confesses that she orders food from fastfood restaurants only when they do not have food for lunch or dinner. Most of the time, Anna orders meals consisting of rice and a choice of chicken, lumpiang shanghai, or burger patties. When these rice meals are not enough, she usually adds a piece of burger or makes an order of spaghetti. However, Anna does not order a burger or spaghetti alone for dinner or lunch. She has to have rice to complete her meal. Anna prefers having the traditional rice meals, consisting of rice and a viand, over burgers and spaghetti, which she considers as “snack” foods and not as replacements for the rice meals she usually takes for lunch and dinner. Anna also consumes instant noodles and streetfood such as fishballs, which she considers as snacks when eaten alone. To pass off for lunch or dinner, she combines these with rice.

## Case 2

Edna, a 45-year-old mother of seven, lives in San Jose Del Monte, Bulacan and works as a “stay-out” househelper and laundrywoman. Edna finished second year high school and hails from the province of Isabela.

Edna and her children regularly eat rice with a little viand for the main meals, and even during snack time. She prefers to have rice during meals because “mabigat ito at matagal kang magutom” (it is heavy and you don’t get hungry easily). If they do not have meat or fish at home, they will instead buy instant noodles and mix this with rice. Rice is a staple food in their home, “hindi puwedeng walang kanin sa bahay,” she says. Rarely does she buy food from fastfood restaurants. But in those few instances when she does, she usually orders spaghetti and softdrinks. This type of meal, she says, can serve as her lunch as long as she will not engage in physically demanding work during the day and hence, get tired easily.

Edna says that she and her children do not like eating rice distributed by the NFA because “mabaho na ito, tapos wala ka pang ulam, hindi talaga makakain.” Although the wagwag rice variety is costlier than NFA rice, she prefers to buy this because, “kahit na anong ulam, kahit hindi masyado masarap, kahit asin o bagoong lang, makakain mo.” Edna has tasted NFA rice when she was younger and clearly remembers its poor smell. Since then, she has never bought or eaten this rice variety. Sometimes, whenever her family craves for it, they eat grounded corn or what she calls, “bigas ng magsasaka,” because this gives a “heavier feeling” in the stomach and costs the same as grounded palay. But her family still prefers to eat rice which she can pair off with any viand.

### Case 3

Allen, 18 years old, is a student at one of the upscale universities in Metro Manila and is the youngest of three children. His mother is a businesswoman while his father works at the Philippine Air Force.

Allen consumes rice or bread for breakfast depending on the available viand. When he is in a hurry, he usually opts for bread and then supplements this with a midmorning snack (i.e., bread). Eating bread for breakfast, he says, is usually not enough. However, if he has rice for breakfast, there is no need for him to have a midmorning snack. For lunch, his choice of food at the school canteen depends on his mood at that time. At home, lunch is always served with rice. People at his home, he claims, are meticulous when it comes to food. If rice is not available, they will usually order food with rice outside. Since he is currently on a diet, Allen only eats bread during dinner. "You don't need a lot of sustenance at night because you are resting already. I am also trying to lose fat that is why I don't eat too much rice," he claims. His sisters, likewise, do not eat rice for dinner because they are dieting. On occasion, he can have rice as part of his midnight snack if he likes the food. Allen confesses that he needs to eat rice even for just one meal or else "hindi kumpleto ang araw ko."

When dining in fastfood restaurants, Allen combines non-rice meals (such as spaghetti) with rice. Depending on the pasta, he can eat this separately or in combination with rice.

### The Rise of Organic Rice Farming

The rise of organic rice farming and consumption is evidence of the indispensability of rice in the Filipino diet and the concomitant tendency of rice to mark social distinctions. Organic rice is bought and consumed by members of the middle and upper middle classes, particularly those concerned about health (to avoid ingesting chemicals in fertilizers, weedicides, and other farm inputs), environmental degradation, and sustainable development. Consumers of organic rice also include expatriates, NGO advocates, plush restaurants, and elite hospitals in Metro Manila.

Among a group of scientists, community workers and farmers called MASIPAG (Magsasaka at Seyentipiko Para sa Ikaunlad ng Agham Pang-agrikultura), organic rice farming was initiated as a form of resistance against the Green Revolution and as a way of bringing back "traditional" farming practices. The group estimates that there are 1,897 farmers (tilling 1,754 hectares) engaged in organic rice farming and 11,052 farmers (cultivating 15,411 hectares) using low chemical and pesticide inputs. Another estimate puts organic farming in 1997 as an industry worth P250 million, with around 2,250 hectares committed to total organic farming and another 10,000 hectares to partial organic cultivation (PhilDHRRA 2003).

With rice entering the terrain of biotechnology, organic rice will probably continue to symbolize an act of resistance which will spread among various elite groups. But the message will be the same. Precisely because life—individual and social—is incomplete without it, one should eat the best possible rice. Organic rice, therefore, represents a new variant of an old theme: rice reinvigorates life.

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