The meaning of culture-specific food: rice and its webs of significance in Sri Lanka

by Wim Van Daele

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A B S T R A C T

Sinhalese farmers in Sri Lanka seem to have an ambiguous relation to the Green Revolution. On the one hand, most have adopted the use of these high yielding varieties of paddy, but on the other hand one can easily observe practices and discourses that rather implicitly critique biotechnology. This article explores the various cultural uses of pre-green revolution varieties in relation to those cultivated since. More specifically, their role in social and sexual reproduction are investigated as well as their religious roles. Furthermore, it becomes clear that the so-called new and old varieties in everyday discourse allude to the experience of a temporal breach, in social reproduction and cultural evolution, brought about by the green revolution, as these contrasted varieties of rice are related to 'modern' and 'traditional' ways of living respectively. Finally, it is shown that epistemology and ontology contained within the green revolution clash with the ontology of sociality, constituted in relation to nature, of a Sinhalese community based on a cosmo-sensitive agriculture.

A R T I C L E I N F O

Keywords

Sri Lanka, Green Revolution, social change, life-cycle rituals, human-nature relations

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Context and Introduction

After embarking enthusiastically on the study of social and cultural anthropology, I quickly became confused and disillusioned by the degree of applicability of my acquired knowledge about different worldviews and related practices. This confusion worsened while doing voluntary work at an NGO working on food security in various countries all over the world. How can one integrate the knowledge of, for instance, sorcery practices into a development aid project or program? Ever since, I have been betwixt in-between, the aim to integrate local knowledge and worldviews into development programs and their logical frameworks (log-frames), and the critical analysis of development thinking in its own regard.

Evolving to the latter stance, which seeks to sensitise us about the power hierarchies inherent in the idea of development- the educated raising the underdeveloped 'children' to our Western standard (Gupta 1998), the issue of how to make anthropological knowledge useful and applicable for development organisations still remains a challenge to me.

During my voluntary work at the NGO, I noticed a sensitivity to the cultures of the people their partner-organisations are working with. Taking into account the local cultures is something which is mentioned in action plans of various NGO's. However, it is generally not clearly indicated how local cultures are integrated in the development programs. If it is, it seems only to happen at a superficial level, for instance by performing rituals, working with local artists, and by stimulating participation of the 'target people'. After my anthropology studies and my voluntary work, I only could feel that this approach to culture is not sufficiently culturally engaged.

Finding a solution to the applicability of anthropology, the aim is not to stick to only the tangible and superficial aspects of culture nor should it be confined to only 'mind exercises' of meaning. Being culturally engaged requires transcending the current opposition and tensed relation between so-called applied anthropology and fundamental anthropology, and in the case of development; a development anthropology and an anthropology of development. Starting my journey out of this tension between a 'development anthropology', in which anthropologists try to reform development, and an 'anthropology of development', which critiques (the notion of) development itself (Escobar 1995, Van Willigen 2002, Edelman & Haugerud 2005, Rahnema & Bawtree 1997), I selected a particular issue, agriculture, which would serve as an exemplatory vehicle with which to transcend this opposition.

Taking the subject of agriculture as an entry point to the question of how to make culture sensitivity a profound approach into development work, I want to show how culture is non-reflexively structuring our lives and, ways of seeing and experiencing the world around us, while culture at the same time is being produced by our activities.

Culture, indeed being produced by agents, who are embedded within it, is more fundamental than only being some values and norms. Therefore, taking a culturally engaged approach seriously requires a thorough understanding how culture works and how development programs and their epistemologies- how the world as it has to be acted upon is explained- can influence the works of culture.

As a case study showing the 'depth' of culture and the challenges this can pose for development practitioners, my inquiry has focused on the way agriculture is interwoven with the tissue of sociality in the North-Central province of Sri Lanka. More specifically, the influence of the introduction of the green revolution technologies on the cultural meaning of rice among paddy cultivators in Sri Lanka is scrutinised.

The idea of a culturally embedded agriculture may seem strange to us Westerners because, generally, our concept of food is viewed in terms of staple foods. This means that food is perceived to both fulfil a basic human need as well as to be a commodity upon which prosperity depends. This is in contrast to the view of food as a good that enables human beings to reach their full (personal, social and cultural) potential. (Mead 1997) The description of the social and cultural embeddedness of paddy cultivation enables us to understand better the impact of the introduction of a staple food approach by way of an entrepreneurial-technology, in this case the green revolution varieties of paddy, aiming at a higher and faster yield.

First of all, I will show how rice cultivation and consumption are locally embedded. I use rice as an entry point through which to explore the links with religious life and life transition rituals in order to look at its role in the production of particular subjectivities. The guideline for researching these connections entails a rice chain approach. This approach requires that all stages in the life-cycle of rice are followed and that it looks into how each of these stages may be connected to certain religious rituals or ceremonies, in their turn often linked to social and sexual reproduction of human life. This chain is explored until its limits (see figure 1). It means that the chain is not only studied until the harvest and its associated religious rituals, but it is also followed in the 'afterlife', more specifically in its consumption and particularly at ceremonial occasions, which brings us to the human life-cycle. (Appadurai 1986) Describing the whole chain from an endogenous (culture-specific) perspective requires us to alter it indeed into a kind of cycle-approach, as the cyclical concept of time is central to Buddhist philosophy. This concept is intrinsically related to the theory of death and rebirth. Cyclical time refers on the one hand to situations that occur again and again, but on the other hand to moments of renewal. (Jackson 2005) Therefore, in the rice-cycle approach we have to explore the life from birth (seeds) to 'death' (harvest), but also from 'death' to birth (selection of seeds for sowing or consumption). Death enables life in this view, and out of that perspective, the description starts with the harvest process. Following this discussion, we arrive at consump-

tion and thus how rice is (often metaphorically) related to the human life cycle and its transitions. During the whole cycle the green revolution varieties are contrasted with the old (pre-green revolution) varieties in these links.

Throughout this cycle description it will become clear that rice has to posses certain properties and that it by way of these assigned properties has the ability to give meaning to the life transition ceremonies. (Barthes 1997)

The rice used at a particular occasion has to have contained particular values and properties suited for this occasion. These values and properties are transferred to thepaddy throughout the production cycle of the rice by way of actions of the cultivator. Therefore the way rice is cultivated has bearing on how it can signify ceremonial and ritual occasions. The way these are performed have in turn bearing on the qualities of people and, through people's actions, again on the properties of rice. This interrelation and interchangeability of properties indicates that I am not only writing about merely symbolic or methaphorical relations, but also about a lived social reproduction- the process of passing on and gradually changing a particular way of life- through exchanges with rice. It also refers to a particular cosmological view on human-nature relations, to which I will return later in order to place this research in a wider research frame for further in-depth study.

Here, I will show that the green revolution varieties are not as capable as the older varieties to play a central role in the social reproduction of life. Only the older varieties are used in certain life-transition rituals of human beings, but also in rituals related to transitions in the rice production process and in transitions in relation to the lives of deities. The ongoing regeneration of life is sustained by the old varieties of rice. At least, these are best suited for this function, but as these varieties are sometimes hard to find, new varieties approaching the properties of the old ones can be used. This is a form of reappropriation and it urges me to nuance the exclusivity of the ability of old varieties to reproduce life. In the description of various rituals, the related social, metaphorical and symbolic uses of rice will be discussed. However, indicating the profoundness of the changes brought about by the introduction of the green revolution, I will show that its significance is not only metaphorical by nature, but it also influences how people perceive social change and the change in their relation to the environment, and thereby producing 'real' effects.

The way farmers particularly name the green revolution varieties already shows the perceived profoundness of the change induced by its introduction. They refer to these high yielding varieties as new or modern varieties, whereas the pre-green revolution varieties are referred to as old or traditional. It alludes to a temporal breach in life, a breach in the social reproduction of a particular way of life, which is intrinsically related to paddy farming. Each type of seeds (new, old) relates to a particular way of life (modern, traditional respectively). A community based on a cosmo-sensitive type of agriculture, as will be described below, is indeed likely to go through a profound change, however not passively, when it is influenced by an intrusive technology.

This dichotomical way of expressing agri-cultural change is very similar to the situation in India as described by Aninhalli Vasavi (1994).

Being aware of the analytical problems of 'traditional' and 'modern', as these concepts are not suitable to describe on-going processes of change in social reproduction (Edelman & Haugerud 2005, Bourdieu 1977, 1990), I will continue to use 'old' and 'new' when making statements from the perspective of farmers. From a more theoretical perspective I will use the concepts of endogenous and exogenous (non culture-specific) to refer to the source of values inherent in the particular varieties and to the ownership over the process of tillage of seeds- by farmers in the field or by scientists in laboratories (Frossard 2005, Shiva 1991). The experience of a breach in social reproduction indicates that the ability to sustain and reproduce life, as an essential quality of the 'old' varieties, is not a merely metaphorical property. Even more, this quality has bearing on the way that human ontology- the way the existence of a human category or collective of being is explained and experienced- relates to food, which touches upon the foundations of human experience.

The profoundness of the change brought about by the green revolution becomes indeed clearer when looking at the human ontology in the context of human-nature relations as conceived of locally. In the context of inter-exchangeability of properties or qualities between natural entities and human beings, the question of social reproduction in relation to food takes on additional importance when food is modified through biotechnology. In the West, people identify themselves, as a human category or collective of being, in a culture-specific way with their natural environment. They generally perceive themselves as having evolved out of monkeys throughout a process of natural selection and evolution. This process in the evolution of our physical form is what binds us together in a continuity. However, in contrast to this continuity in exteriority, there is a wide gap between human and non-human beings regarding their intrinsic properties and values. In the West, one often says

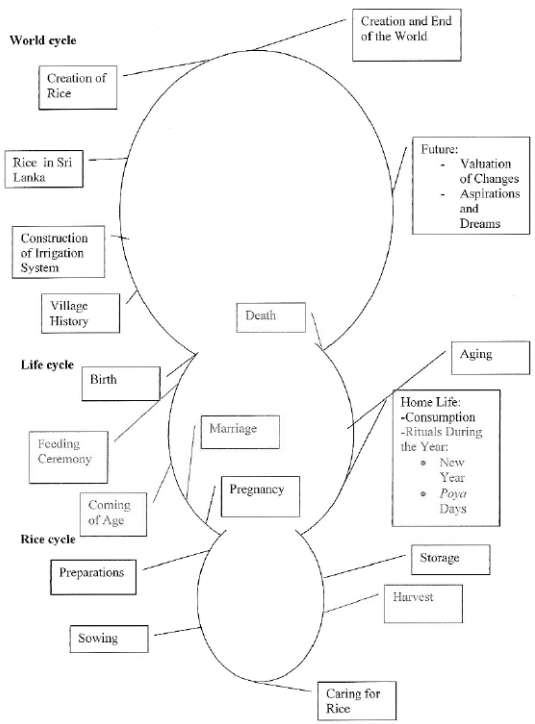

Figure 1: The extended rice chain.

that human beings are the only ones that can think, reason, reflect, have a will, have real emotions and so on. The intrinsic properties of intentionality and agency belong exclusively to the human collective of being. Nature, then, is projected outside the human realm and hence it is external to us. Therefore, we can speak of a breach in interiority as opposed to a continuity in exteriority. Philippe Descola (2005) has described this particular combination of interiority and exteriority into a Western collective of being (a human one) in his magnum opus on identifications of human beings with their natural environments throughout various cultures.

The Western or naturalist form of identification, as described above, is fairly different from the Buddhist and Hinduist forms of identification in Sri Lanka in which interior properties can be exchanged between human and non-human beings, such as deities, animals and plants. The human-nature relations can here be described in terms of an analogue identification. Intrinsic properties or qualifications (eg health, fertility) between rice plants and human beings can be analogue, which means that they are similar, but there are however tiny differences and thus at the same time interchangeable. Throughout the cycle of death and rebirth, one can turn into any physical form having a particular place in the cosmological order. Each form is thus different, but can be potentially another one. Again, there are analogies (residing in the potential), entailing tiny differences, on the level of physicality and exteriority. In this analogue identification there is thus no continuity in interiority nor in exteriority. However, the differences are tiny enough to allow for a re-assembling of these intrinsic and physical properties, for instance through the process of rebirth. Because of these small differences in interiority and exteriority, essences can be exchanged between, for instance, rice and human beings, and can be recomposed under influence of karma-sum of good and bad deeds-determining into which totality one will be reborn. Therefore, performing 'killing' agriculture by way of using pesticides deteriorates the properties of paddy, properties which will enter the person by way of consumption, impacting his deeds and actions, and thus his karma. In this context of analogue identification, we will be able to understand the various rituals to be described in the following in a wider context.

The introduction of a biotechnology rooted in the Western human-nature identification, a necessary precondition for an instrumental relation to nature, into a context of a cosmosensitive agriculture founded upon an analogue identification with nature cannot but have far-reaching consequences. Embedded within particular power relations (Gupta 1998), this introduction can easily lead to "epistemological violence" (Shiva 1991). Leaving this discussion aside for the moment, I will first present an example of how identity in Sri Lanka is constructed in relation to rice and thus how the natural surrounding plays a key role in identity. This example puts us in the right atmosphere for the actual body of the article in which I will describe various rituals and more specifically the role of rice in these. I will subsequently discuss the harvesting process, the marriage ritual, the feeding ceremony, the seclusion period, funerals, the New Year and the poya or full moon days, marked in blue in figure 1.

These are selections out of the total life cycles of rice, human beings, and the world. All these cycles relate to the lifecycles of the deities and the Buddha. The following image should clarify and visualise this selection, but does not include the links to the "otherworldly cycles", central to the discussion. Seeming to be omnipresent, the links with the otherworldly are extremely difficult to visualise here.

Indicating the central role of rice in the construction of identity in Sri Lanka, journalist Malinda Seneviratne, writes the following: "Everyone has a folder full of images that are labelled 'Sacred'... In my sacred Folder is a special locket: paddy fields. Like most people in this country I have seen their full wardrobe of seasonality, from the dry, cracked and thinly grassed pre-season, through the rich brown of preparation, blue-green promise into light green and gold... These images are not un-peopled. Say 'rice' and I see 'labour', I see 'buffaloes', ploughing, transplanting, weeding, harvesting, threshing and also the skewed exchanges at all phases of production which leaves the tiller impoverished and the entrepreneur fat. This is not all I see. I see a temple, a way of life, certain reverences, a sense of being, dignity, identity, history and civilisation. Rice, to me at least, is all this... Forget me, just pursue a random selection of our rich tradition of folk poetry. Think of dance and other forms of art. It is about rice if it is about anything. We are what we eat, someone said. Rice, then, is arguably who we are. It makes us as it made our ancestors. As it is transformed so too do we change and if it were to die, then we die too... Rice is not a landscape beautifying, wholesome grain, but it is ingrained in the cultural history of this country and inextricably tied to politics in general. This is why an attack on rice should be seen as a far more serious proposition than a terrorist threat, because it is an attack on the collective heart of our peoples." (Personal selection out of article, Seneviratne in "the nation" 25-06-2006)

Let us now turn to the description of particular phases of the lifecycles of rice, human beings and, deities and the Buddha.

Harvest

Harvesting is associated with various activities and rituals that Westerners would easily disregard from the idea of Harvest. These rituals vary widely between regions within Sri Lanka. Therefore, my description cannot pretend to be complete. I draw upon my observations in the Eppawela area in the North-Central province and the interviews conducted there during two periods of three and five months subsequently. Furthermore, the nature of the rituals in harvesting is changing (Sasanka Perera, personal communication, 28 August 2006). Some rituals totally disappear, others become shortened and still others turn into mere enactments, void of lived meanings and their production. Turning now towards the description of the structure of the harvesting process, some of these aforementioned facts will be referred to.

Before the actual start of the harvest work, respect is shown to the harvest tools by holding the hands together so that the palms touch each other with straight fingers. The instruments used for reaping, threshing and so forth are held in between the hands. This sign is called weddima, which literally means worshipping, but it also refers to paying respect. It is also performed when greeting each other.

Before reaping the paddy, the farmers prepare the threshing fields so the bundles can be disposed of when women start reaping. During the whole rice cycle there is a clear gendered division of labour and it is only during the harvest that women play a major role, even though in some parts of the harvest 'procedure' they are strictly left out. As such, they are not allowed to enter the threshing field. The possibility of menstruation forms a taboo, especially when approaching sacred areas. Therefore they are not allowed to enter a temple during menstruation and thus, indicating the sacredness of it, the threshing field is also strictly forbidden for women at all times. I observed this taboo on all types of farms, ranging from family subsistence farming to 'chemical' farm enterprises. Another indication of the sacredness of the threshing ground is shown through the various rituals performed there, although these rituals have become less common.

One ritual I was able to observe at a chemical farm was a very short one. At an auspicious time and day, the farmer performed the weddima with the reaping tool. He cut the first bundle of paddy and then performed this sign again with both the tool and the bundle. Following that, he hung the first bundle on a stick. This signified the farmer's gift to the gods and more specifically to the deity "Ayanayake", responsible for that area.

At the start of the cultivation season, the farmer has made a 'contract' with this deity. The deity takes care of the fields and the paddy. At the end, when the paddy is to be harvested, the farmer thanks Ayanayake for fulfilling his part of the contract. The gifts offered by the farmer in return, conclude the contract between both parties. The coconut hanging on the stick to which the bundle is added, symbolises the contractual nature of this offer. Interesting would be to see whether speaking of a contractual relation with deities would be new and part of a more instrumental approach to the natural environment, indeed including entities that Westerners would disregard as belonging to the realm of nature. The question of instrumentality relates to the argument that the green revolution is embedded in the naturalist form of identification with a strict separation between human and non-human, which is an enabling precondition for an instrumental use and exploitation of natural resources. However, here I argue that the contractual should be understood in terms of a cooperation, which does not mean that it cannot easily slip into an instrumental relation within the changing context of an economically oriented agriculture in which rational 'calculation' features centrally (Bourdieu 1977)

The ritual described above is a shorter version of a more elaborated one, which is nowadays hardly being performed. An old man, who was a ritual drummer, explained to me that they used to make ash drawings or yantereha in the threshing fields before the reaping started. At the centre of these drawings (of which the content and symbolism are still unknown to me), a small hole used to be dug and a piece of iron and neem wood were put in the hole. Additionally, an astrologically favourable or auspicious day and hour determined the start of the threshing. People prayed to various gods and asked for their blessings and protection. Furthermore, respect used to be shown to the implements as well. Thereafter, a male would bring a bundle of paddy and place it on the sticks as an offering. It is clear that similarities with the observed ritual can be discerned, but it has currently become much shorter and faster.

Another sign of the sacredness of threshing is the fact that the paddy is referred to by way of a different name. In Sinhalese, paddy is normally referred to as vi, but in the threshing field it is called batta, which means something that gives bath, meaning rice. This word is an example of the fact that the whole process of harvesting is associated with a specific vocabulary, of both words and actions, which is more respectful. Additionally, respect is also shown by taking off shoes when entering the round threshing field.

As pointed out before, there is a clear gendered division of tasks throughout harvesting, where men thresh, and women reap with a harvesting hook. The women take a bundle, cut it and lay it softly on the ground. These bundles are left on the ground until one parcel is finished. Afterwards, they gather these bundles and sometimes bring them to the border of the threshing ground, not being allowed to enter, and where men move them to the right place for threshing. Generally, however, young men instead of women gather these bundles and carry them straight to the threshing field. The threshing used to be done by buffaloes walking in circles over the paddy laid out for them, but nowadays, tractors or threshing machines are used, with similar observances of respect.

A significant change that farmers mentioned during interviews was the lack of a collective rhythm in the process of harvesting in particular and of cultivation in general. They used to reap the entire harvest together, keep it for some days, and when everybody in the village finished this task, the threshing was done collectively. Everyone shared the labour and the harvest was brought home when all threshing was finished. Nowadays, competition urges farmers to compete against each other, or according to one particular farmer to "completely thresh my thing and finish off the other." The members of the community are individualised and the rhythm that prevails is one of economic competitiveness, not one of sharing and caring for each other, primordial values in Buddhism that were engrained in the 'old' varieties. Buffaloes used to be shared, but now the machines have to be rented or bought. Although it makes the process faster, which is a benefit, it increases the input price and further weakens the social tissue. This feeling was also expressed in several other discussions, especially talking about the disintegration of village life in general and in many particular occasions such as the organisation of village festivals. People have become less interested in investing their time into the organisation of social events, such as temple festivities or marriages.

The diversity of the old varieties allowed for different harvest occasions which entailed less amount of work in each occasion. This enabled a sharing of labour and mutual cooperation ideally. There is a smaller amount of new varieties, around 50, none of them requiring a half year to grow. The fact that they ripen at a similar speed leads to a sudden large supply of paddy leaving the farmers with no time but to work on their own plots of land.

Leaving aside the fact that a less continuous inflow of paddy in the barn turns farmers more vulnerable in their food supply, an additional consequence of a massive introduction of the high and fast yielding varieties entails a monotonous cultivation and a monoculture of the mind (Shiva 1993). Unexpectedly, this monotony does not lead to a common social rhythm and a strengthening of the social tissue. On the contrary, the new seeds seem to bear in them the ability to push forward a particular economic rationale of putting people into an atomic relation vis-à-vis their social environment, and into an instrumental relationship towards each other and the natural environment (Taylor 2004). People show less caring attitudes in such a sphere of competition, a situation exacerbated by the consumption of seeds grown under these competitive circumstances and in the context of analogue human-nature identification. A farmer explained to me that because of the time pressure, they had to use all kinds of herbicides, pesticides and other chemicals to be the first to harvest to have the best price. He blamed these chemical additions for an alleged increased violence in the community. Figures of the World Health Organisation (2006a, 2006b) indeed indicate a certain link between the introduction of the green revolution and the increase of self-directed violence and/or suicides, however, more research would be required to understand the nature of this particular relation and with violence in general. From an endogenous point of view, the non-Buddhist, killing way of farming seems to lead to more violence towards nature as well as to others, leading people away from the path of liberation through the exercise of compassion to all living beings.

Let us now turn to a focus on the human life cycle and the role of rice within that, starting with marriage.

Marriage

In Sri Lanka, a division is being made between love marriage and proposed marriage. The first type is based on the romantic ideal whereas the latter type is based on the view that a family is a unit of production and cooperation. Both of these are idealised types, for analytical purposes, however in practice, characteristics of both are generally intermingled. I am not going to describe in depth the whole marriage process here, but it is important to note that in both types of marriages, the profession and caste of the partner forms a major consideration in the choice. As the family is often viewed as a cooperative unit, the partner should have deep knowledge and understanding of the profession of the other in order to divide the tasks within the unit in a complementary way.

There is a particular ritual during the marriage ceremony, which is extremely relevant to this article and to the point which I would like to make. It marks the most important moment of the marriage. This poruwa ceremony starts

when the bride washes the feet of the groom in front of the platform, which is called the poruwa and from which the name of this ritual is derived. On this poruwa, unhusked rice is placed and at a prosperous astrological time the couple is helped onto the platform. The fact that the wife and husband to be are placed on top of the unhusked paddy symbolises the wish for good fertility for the couple. The unhusked paddy refers to the potential of life contained inside the husk. Relevant to note is that the name of this platform is the same as the 'platforms' onto which the paddy is sown to bring forth the seedlings which will be transplanted in a later stage, thereby linking linguistically and metaphorically the sphere of paddy production and sexual reproduction. It is on this poruwa where the couple makes their vows. Thereafter, long recitals are sung about how to achieve happiness according to the Buddhist teachings and, again, at an auspicious time, the couple descends the poruwa and feeds each other food and water. The varieties of paddy used on the platform are always 'old' ones. This draws attention to the widely held conviction that, in contrast to the 'old' varieties, many high yielding varieties don't bring forth seeds that are strong enough to bring forth decent plants. I conclude that the use of 'old' varieties on the poruwa is a metaphorical reference to the potential of life and fertility which is, according to most interviewees, present only in these varieties. The claim that 'old' varieties are a metaphor of life will be further substantiated in the description of the feeding and seclusion rituals.

In light of the analogue identification between human and non-human spheres, we can assume that these endogenous varieties are even more than just a metaphor of life. They are actually perceived as life. It would be unsuitable to use rice which is infertile at a fertility ceremony during marriage. What if that infertile property influences the abilities of the couple to bring forth children? However, this induction should be nuanced. In spite of these convictions, views and practices, I have seen that often new varieties are used at these ceremonies. Asking why this is the case, I received often the answer that if they would have the choice, they would prefer to use old varieties. These are not easy to find and therefore they will use new varieties which look and taste alike an old variety.

This raises interesting issues to which I have no clear answers yet. The use of exogenous varieties in this ceremony may point at a cultural reappropriation of these new varieties. However, it seems that this recent practice is not really the preferred one in the popular idealising discourse. The question which remains to be solved is whether this cultural flexibility is only superficial or is it also taking place at the deeper level of lived and motivating experience? Can we speak in the first case of a form of alienation of the ritual from an endogenous cultural genius? In the second case, can we speak of a true hybridisation or a complete "colonisation by a monoculture of the mind?" (Shiva 1993)

These two latter thoughts remain also relevant to the following description of the feeding and seclusion rituals.

Feeding ceremony

After a period of breastfeeding, children enter into the rice-eating world by way of a rice feeding ceremony. However, this ceremony is not always the first contact with a 'hard' food such as rice. If a mother cannot produce milk or cannot afford to buy it, she will grind the rice and give it as porridge instead. In this latter case the child is already acquainted with rice and it links rice in a symbolical way to breastfeeding and to the most basic human relationship- the primary bond between a mother and her offspring (Ohnuki-Tierney 1993). The ceremony is therefore not exactly celebrating the transition between mothermilk and rice as such, but more specifically the transition from soft food to solid rice and other 'adult' food.

Again, this ritual, for both son and daughter, is performed at a prosperous day. I have not been able to observe this ritual yet and therefore I refer to Deema de Silva (2002:93):

"On the auspicious day, the child is bathed and dressed in new clothes. A white tablecloth is put on the dining table. On the table are placed gold coins, paper money, a book, jewellery, and a variety of foods. This consists of sweets and traditional foods that fill the dining table. The important guest (the 'lucky' person who will feed the child) positions the child looking at a predetermined auspicious direction bringing good luck and feeds a few grains of milk rice to the child at a predetermined time. This milk rice is specially prepared from newly harvested rice and boiled in coconut milk."

I was told that during these occasions only 'old' varieties are used. Again, this statement should be nuanced because it could refer to either a reality or to an ideal. In any case, even when it is an ideal expressed by the interviewees, it still shapes the ceremony in the sense that farmers will try to put this ideal in practice whenever and however possible. As mentioned before, this is done, for instance, by using the 'best' type of the new varieties having some similar properties as endogenous varieties.

The same remark goes for the seclusion ritual which is less observed in Colombo nowadays.

Seclusion ritual

In the area of Eppawela, the seclusion ritual is fairly common. It is a rite of passage, which only occurs in the lives of girls. For boys, there is no specific (institutionalised) ritual to mark the transition into puberty and manhood.

When a girl gets her first menstruation she is secluded for some time, varying from one day to one week, depending on the auspicious times. She stays in a room for the whole time, accompanied by a close female friend. During this seclusion period, she is not allowed to eat meat, fish, eggs or spices, as these are generally considered 'hot' foods within the endogenous food classification, intrinsically linked to the ayurvedic health system . She can only eat 'cold' foods, such as specific vegetables and fruits. Rice is considered neutral and can be consumed as well. The 'hot' and 'cold' properties of food interplay with bodily substances that are also categorised in terms of 'hot' and 'cold'. Eating 'hot' foods during a period of an increased presence of a 'hot' bodily substance, menstrual blood, would disrupt a healthy balance of 'hot' and 'cold' in the body. These taboos and the relation with health are another clear indication of an interchangeability of properties between food, as transformed nature, and people within the analogue form of identification.

The day she comes out, the mother bathes her on a mat full of unhusked rice. This rice has the potential for sprouting and thus symbolises the potential of life and fertility, which the, new woman possesses. The change of status from girl to woman contains a phase in which she finds herself betwixt in-between the two. This phase is a 'blank' space of seclusion, from which she has to enter into a new status in social life (Turner 1974). Coming out of that in-betweenness, she is dressed totally in white, which is a sign of purity. She walks out of the back of the house with her mother and she enters again through the front door into her new status as a menstruating female.

Once inside, she is led towards an altar full of milk rice and sweets, where her mother removes the white cloth from her face. She is then presented as a woman to the people attending this ceremony. After that, a big meal is consumed together.

Again, it is important to point out that the mat, on which the girl is washed, is sprinkled with 'old' varieties of unhusked rice. The 'new', 'weaker' varieties can only be used at a life transition ritual, which is not about bringing forth life. This brings us to the following ritual related to another type of transition: death.

Funeral

During my last stay, I witnessed a whole funeral process of an old man who used to be a village elder. When I arrived at the house, the body was being prepared- embalmed and dressed up- to be exposed in the home in which he died. During the following three to five days, depending on the calculated astrological time, visitors came to pay their respects to the deceased member of the community. Understanding the suffering caused by the loss of a family member, the funeral association, a group of volunteers from the village, generally organises the funeral related events in order to lighten the burden for the mourning family.

One of these tasks performed by the funeral association entails the preparation of foods in the adjoining house for the guests and the relatives of the deceased. Food is never cooked in the home until after the burial, as death is understood as potentially (morally) polluting and this temporary property should not be spread in the community by way of the food served (in the context of analogue relations). Non-alcoholic beverages are served and people spend time together and, from time to time, with the dead body. For the good of the spirit or the astral body of the deceased, it is important that as many people as possible sit up with the dead person. It knows then that people care for it and its family. This enables the astral body to leave the home in peace and move to the afterlife. Furthermore, the activities of sleeping over, playing cards, chatting and so on, fill the void left in the lives of the relatives.

The day of the burial, all relatives and friends are invited again to attend the ceremonies. The body is carried outside in its coffin and thus leaves the home from that time on. Various people make speeches about the deceased person to remember his contribution to society and religion, not his economic nor technological achievements. It is the farmer as a community caretaker, not the farmer as an entrepreneur, who is remembered on this occasion. When the monks have preached about impermanence and non-attachment the body is taken to the grave.

Before the coffin is closed and carried to the village cemetery, the women have to bid farewell to the deceased, as they are not allowed to bury the body nor to be present at that moment for reasons of possible mutual pollution. The coffin is carried by the men following a route decorated by white flags. In this particular occasion everything had to go very quickly as the rains were coming. There was no time to open the coffin at the cemetery to pay the last respect to the deceased. Nor was there time available to observe

the following ritual described by Deema de Silva (2002) in which a white yardage is place on the route that the coffin passes. As the coffin passes over the yardage, two people take it and place it back in front of the coffin. On this white cloth, sand and popped rice are strewn. "The popped rice, in contrast to the seed with the husk, is unable to give rise to a new plant. It is not a source of potential life and is symbolic of death" (de Silva 2002:149). It is important to note that it does not matter on this occasion whether old or new varieties of rice are used. Nor does it matter for the Maha Batha, which is the name of the meal consumed after returning from the graveyard and a purifying bath in the village reservoir. It is the first meal cooked in the home after the death.

Milk rice is never served throughout the period from death until the first dane, a ritual to transfer merit to the deceased to improve his karma, bringing the astral body closer to liberation, one week after death. Milk rice is made by boiling rice in coconut milk until it overflows. It is only cooked on occasions that mark a transition from one phase to another in life. Therefore, it is never served at funerals. Furthermore, in Asia the coconut tree is often referred to as the 'tree of life' (Parvanta 2003). The combination of 'old' varieties of rice, having the potential to sprout new life, and coconut then constitute a core symbol of sustenance and creation of life. However, milk rice is not only used in transitions in human life, such as marriages, but also at other important transitions in time, such as the Sinhalese New Year and the poya days, the latter being related to transitions in the life of the Buddha.

New Year

The endogenous New Year takes place around the middle of April. The whole ceremony consists of an Old Year and a New Year celebration.

During the Old Year celebration, there is an allocated time at which all activities are stopped. It is a moment where everyone stays at home and does no cooking, eating or bathing. One stays with the nuclear family and pays no visits to neighbours nor friends. This period serves to reflect about ones deeds during the last year and takes a little less than a day.

The New Year arrives at an auspicious time and at that point people will start boiling milk rice. Some people use rice that has been kept especially for this occasion. Others use rice normally designated for religious rituals. Anyway, this occasion requires the 'best' rice, which is often expressed in terms of taste. The 'best' refers to rice of an old variety or of a new variety which approaches the quality of the endogenous ones. When they are finished with cooking, people perform a ritual at the well, as it is the source of life. The mother ties a few grains of paddy, chillies and some coins together and puts these in the well. She offers something before pulling a pot of water from the well. Sometimes, part of that water is kept until the next year to give water back along with the offerings.

After this, people get into contact with each other again through a specific order. The younger children start paying their respect to their grandparents, parents and older siblings subsequently. They go the whole round and show the elders their respect by applying oil to their feet. Each younger person thus greets all their relative elders within the extended family. When the social tissue within the family is re-woven, it is time to do this with the gods and the Buddha by way of offerings. After these observances they start eating from the same rice that has been offered to the deities and the temple. It is as if they are (symbolically) dining together with the Buddha and the deities (Ohnuki-Tierney 1993). However, there is something specific about the dinner at this occasion. The head of the family, which can be either the father or the mother, feeds the family. Life, symbolised by milk rice, is fed to their progenitors for the New Year.

Another phase arrives when they start relating to their neighbours. It is the time to renew the relationships with them and to ask forgiveness in some cases. Again, food is shared and used as a means of social bonding.

All these activities take place at specified times worked out by an astrologer. This person's final task around New Year is to determine the day and time when everybody can start to work or cultivate again. Then people say that New Year has arrived and life has begun again. Throughout the coming year, 12 full moon or Poya days will occur until another New Year arrives.

Poya Days

The day of the full moon or Poya day is central to the endogenous calendar, which is largely based on astrology and the life of the Buddha. Each Poya day is related to a certain phase in Buddha's life and Buddhism. For instance, the Vesak Poya in late April or early May marks the birth and attainment of Enlightenment and Paranirvana of the Buddha, whereas the Poson Poya in late May, early June, reminds of the arrival of Buddhism in Sri Lanka. (Geiger 2003) During Poya day, people don't work but instead

take the time to go to the temple to make offerings and to meditate. The offerings include milk rice or kiribath made out of the 'best' rice available. The kiribath constitutes the main element of breakfast on that day. It is often combined with pol sambol, a mixture of chillies, scraped coconut and honey, which ensures the right balance between 'hot' and 'cold' foods for that day.

Again, the 'best' varieties of rice are used to make the milk rice. The qualities are often expressed in terms of shape and taste, but as I have discussed, these also refer to values and related practices engrained within, and constitutive of, particular varieties of rice. Examples of this are the value of fertility and the Buddhist precept of non-killing. This 'epistemology of rice' in its relation to various other aspects of life will be elaborated further upon in the conclusion.

Conclusion

It is clear that rice provides an impressive entry point through which it is possible to explore various aspects of social and religious life . In this article I have pointed out a clear connection between religious beliefs and practices on the one hand, and consumption and production patterns on the other. The harvest process and the Poya days are examples that clarify this link. Furthermore, it has become clear that 'old' varieties serve as a metaphor for life sustenance and Self-as culture-specific way of being. It does not only bring prosperity in the staple-food sense, but it also enables people to reach their full personal, social and cultural potential.

The green revolution varieties seem to be less able to contribute to the workout of these potentials. This is exemplified by the fact that in various life-transition and religious rituals only the 'best' varieties of rice are used. This entails the 'old' varieties or close 'relatives' with similar qualities to the former.

The ability to sustain and reproduce life is an essential quality of these endogenous varieties, which enables them to be used in these rituals.

It refers to the ideas that farmers have on the green revolution varieties. For instance, it was often stated that the immunity of the 'green revolution plants' was weaker. These plants were designed in such a way that they are more susceptible to fertilisers, and as they grow faster, their cells are weaker in resisting intrusions of all kind of parasites and diseases. They are also weaker in their competition with weeds. Therefore, various chemicals are needed to help the plant in resisting them. Furthermore, people feel that the seeds are weak because the seeds that are produced by these plants are not able to reproduce new strong plants. Therefore they have to buy new seeds every year. This is not the case with the 'old' varieties, which are strong enough to reproduce themselves and therefore are used in rituals celebrating fertility in the seclusion and Poruwa rituals. Finally, it would be disrespectful to offer infertile 'dead' rice to the Buddha or to the various deities.

In the context of an analogue identification with the natural environment, as explained in the introduction, these changes of properties have a direct bearing on the way human beings perceive themselves. The fact that people nowadays eat those weaker plants is believed to make them less immune to various diseases. Furthermore, many older people find themselves stronger than the youngsters. Some people have even related a perceived increase in violence to the 'aggressive' products used, as they intrude the food chain and enter the body by way of the food eaten. There is thus a clear exchange between the properties of these plants and human beings, as also described by Akhil Gupta (1998) in India. This exchange between plants and human beings takes place in two directions. First, the way the plants are treated by human beings will impact their qualities. Secondly, the qualities of the plants will in their turn influence the properties of the person consuming them. Often an opposition was made between killing and Buddhist (non-killing) farming, both having ramifications on the communities as a whole and their (spiritual) qualities in one way or another.

This interrelatedness further enables to understand the impact of the green revolution on a community based on such a cosmo-sensitive type of agriculture. When nature changes by way of a specific bio-technology in this analogue context, the influence it will have on human beings and their sociality would seem more profound than when it occurs within the Western context of naturalist human-nature identification. However, further study on this is required before making informed statements on this.

This particular relation of interchangeability between rice and human beings is not merely metaphoric or symbolic. The discussion of only rituals throughout the text may indeed lead to such conclusion. It is easy to conclude out of this 'ritualistic' approach that rice serves merely as a metaphor of social and sexual reproduction by providing a symbol of life and its sustenance. In this case, the sense of a temporal breach between a 'traditional' and 'modern' way of life would just be symbolic. However, as everyday

discourses on decrease in health and increase in (self-directed) violence indicate, it is more profound than this. Rice-as a way of life- is part of how people ontologically perceive themselves to be in dialogical relation to their environment.

There was no more space to discuss the 'common uses' of rice, which would further clarify the fact that rice is constitutive of Self, and not merely a metaphor or symbol of this culture-specific way of life. For instance, the balance between 'hot' and 'cold' foods, always served with 'neutral' rice, and drinks has to be continuously respected in order to remain healthy according to the ayurvedic health system. Furthermore, daily consumption is subjected to rules of commensality with regard to sexes and castes. Men and women rarely eat together at the same table, just as people coming from different castes. Food symbolism and taboos not only pervade rituals but also daily life and common consumption patterns. This shows how rice goes to the core of life of these people. I selected particular rituals as they were heuristic in clarifying the reproductive and cosmo-sensitive nature of the relation between human beings and rice.

A farmer explained to me that the temple is the mind, the village irrigation reservoir the soul, the canals the veins and, the rice the heart of the people. When rice is changed the heart will change, as well as all the rest. As such, there is also a clear link with physical and mental well-being. The human right to food recognizes this intrinsic link and therefore a human rights approach to a rural development program can be elusive. Jean Ziegler (2001), who is the Special Rapporteur on the right to food for the UN defines the human right to food as: "The right to...quantitatively and qualitatively adequate and sufficient food corresponding to the cultural traditions of the people to which the consumer belongs, and which ensures a physical and mental, individual and collective, fulfilling and dignified life free of fear." It follows from this definition that food should not only be approached in the staple-food sense, but also in its ability to fulfil human potentials and well-being, as locally conceived of. When aiming for development, the project should not only try to seek an increase of production, but also an improvement of well-being as experienced locally. This is quintessential if the project seeks to be sustainable and culturally engaged.

To end with, I present a poem which further indicates the importance of rice (an old variety) to life:

Q: Do you know the viya that flies on the sky?
A: The viya that flies on the sky is the paraviya (the pigeon)
Q: Do you know the viya that runs on the ground?
A: The viya that runs on the ground is the saviya (she-rabbit)
Q: Do you know the viya that fits into the palace?
A: The viya that fits into the palace is the deviya (queen)
Q: Do you know the viya that suits us?
A: The viya that suits us is the mahavi (A big grain old variety)

Footnotes

The caste system is based on a division of labour. These professions relate in a hierarchical way to each other. For instance, the govigamma caste, which denotes the farmers caste, is situated at the top of the hierarchy.

Ayurveda literally means 'science of life' and constitutes the basic endogenous health system. Herein it is important to achieve good health by balancing the intake of what is labelled as 'hot' and 'cold' foods. (Ayurveda Institute 2003) It indicates an intrinsic relation between food and, health and well-being.

There is also clearly a link to political life, even to such an extent that connections with the civil war can be discerned. (Peebles 1990)

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