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Rice in the Filipino Diet and Culture

Filomeno V. Aguilar Jr.



PHILIPPINE INSTITUTE FOR DEVELOPMENT STUDIES
Surian sa mga Pag-aaral Pangkaunlaran ng Pilipinas

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Abstract

This paper deals with a basic question: How central is rice to Philippine culture, as gleaned from its role in Filipino material and cultural life? To answer this question, this paper focuses on the structural position of most Filipinos vis-à-vis rice. Economic changes have rendered most Filipinos, even in rural areas, as consumers rather than as producers of rice. The paper provides a brief social history of rice, from a mainly elite and nonstaple food in precolonial times to a relatively widely available staple food by the end of the nineteenth century. This process was accompanied by two interrelated developments: the diminution of magical elements, and the symbolic displacement of rice. Today, rice reflects the stratification of Philippine society, as supported by the latest quantitative data on rice consumption. The paper concludes with reflections on the significance of rice for commensality at the level of small groups, and on its marginality for the society as a whole, brought about by consumer culture, urbanization, and the Green Revolution.

1 Introduction

Food and culture are intimately related and mutually constitutive. However, their precise relationship is a matter of debate (e.g., Douglas 1966; Harris 1974; Goody 1982; Bourdieu 1984). Moreover, the relationship between food and culture is subject to the specificities of time and place, and must therefore be understood as a historical process.

The celebration of 2004 as the international year of the rice provided the occasion for this paper's analysis. Offhand, it is noteworthy that this celebration did not grab the attention of most Filipinos. The muted celebration is indicative of this paper's main argument. Although some may want to see rice as a glorious manifestation of Philippine culture, I would argue for a view of rice as a register of the complexity of Philippine society, history, and culture. The equation of rice with life, as trumpeted during the 2004 celebration, is a rather simple and even romanticized view that is untenable. In any event, the year of rice offered an opportunity to step back and analyze what we easily take for granted in our collective life.

To answer the basic question about the centrality of rice in Philippine culture, this paper focuses on the structural position of most Filipinos vis-à-vis rice, which, as the data show, is mainly that of consumer rather than producer, even in rural areas. The first part of the paper seeks to explain the symbolic marginality of rice by examining its social history and the cultural changes it underwent during the Spanish colonial period. The second part analyzes quantitative data on recent trends in rice consumption in order to understand the sociology of rice in the context of contemporary Filipino society and food practices. The third and final part offers reflections on the significance of rice for commensality in small groups and its marginality in overall Philippine society and culture.

2 A Brief Social History of Rice

Rice in the prequest period

Scott (1994) and Junker (2000) provide valuable information about rice in the social life of the inhabitants of what would later be known as the Philippines. In the prequest period, rice was highly valued and 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) writes: “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 says: “Despite the abundance of rice in some places and for some people, the staple Bikol food was root crops” (*ibid.*, 182). 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). Based on archeological evidence, Junker argues 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 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 with, 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 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; for instance, it could also be grounded to produce flour and made into rice cakes (ibid., 47–48).

Dictionaries prepared by Spaniards in the early part of the Spanish colonial period recorded numerous words referring to rice. In Fray Miguel Ruiz’s *Diccionario Español en Tagalo*, the second largest grouping of food-related words, 201 in all, consisted of words pertaining to rice. Each step in the cultivation of the rice plant and in the preparation and consumption of the rice grain was denoted by a specific word. The dictionary lists 41 varieties of rice, 16 of which were identified as varieties grown in flooded rice paddies (*de tubigan*) and 20 specifically as grown in upland swidden (*de altos*) (Fernandez 2001, 74–79). Among the Tagalog, concludes Doreen Fernandez, rice “was obviously high in the consciousness, being important to livelihood and lifestyle” (ibid., 74).

As a summary, rice in the precolonial past was:

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

Early on, rice was a marker of social, ecological, and geographic differentiation. It 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 to note, a glimpse of which can be seen in this description by 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....

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. They apparently possessed a belief complex that associated women with the rice plant and justified the near-exclusive application of female labor to rice planting, care, and harvesting.¹ Their magical worldview suggested that spirits resided in the grains of rice. These spirits could become “angry” and “run away” if certain practices were not followed.

Harvesting rice panicle by panicle was a widely observed practice, even among the sixteenth-century Igorot (*ibid.*, 262). Today, among the

¹In the complementary dualism of the Kodi in Eastern Indonesia, male spirit figures are associated with sky powers; female figures, with rice and garden magic. The Kodi rice goddess, Mbiri Kyoni, is said to have been offered as a sacrifice and was transformed to feed the starving. The new sprouts of rice that appear seasonally are believed to contain the soul of her child. Mbiri Kyoni’s nurturance of the spirit-child mirrors the role of women as key ritual actors in planting and harvesting (Hoskins 1990, 280, 283–286).

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,” lest a drastic motion with the sickle 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 is threshed “as needed” (Scott 1994, 39).

The difficulty of growing rice and the crop’s scarcity in the precolonial world could explain the 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 after the storage of the panicles, sociality appeared to have been a priority. As long as the supply lasted, rice occupied an important role in everyday meals, and in feasts and rituals. One could imagine that, after all, 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, present-day Bontok practices offer a clue. Ana Labrador’s (1998) ethnography states 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” (Labrador 1998, 93–94). Thus, rice reinvigorates life, which suggests that rice spirits play a lifegiving role. This belief is most apparent among the Japanese whose mythologies advise 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 may suppose that the rice spirits were believed to perform an analogous role in preserving life and restoring vitality. Rice, therefore, was 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. Although this chapter will not discuss in detail the profound changes that occurred during this period, one fact to note is that the spirit world remained but it began to be dominated by Hispanic rather than by indigenous beings, and the power relations they signified reflected the dynamics of colonial life (Aguilar 1998). Although compelled to live in compact settlements, or at least within hearing distance of the church bells as a result of the *reducción*, the subjugated *indio* was transformed into an individuated peasant. In this context, a peasant adopted his own magical strategies of entreating the spirit world to nurture and protect the farm and its crops. 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 radical change.

To finance the colonial enterprise (Alonso 2003), the Spaniards introduced plow technology that harnessed the carabao—and, along with it, gravity irrigation and the channeling of waterways—that made wet-rice cultivation possible in many areas. The system relied on monsoon rains, and the systematic transplanting of seedlings from seedbeds. 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 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.

For the lowland *indio* peasant, male labor became crucial in land preparation, particularly in plowing the rice field. The preconquest male tasks of clearing forest patches for swidden land and creating holes in the ground for the rice seed were converted to the tasks of preparing the plowed field.

The work of transforming Philippine rice agriculture must have been a protracted endeavor during the three centuries of Spanish colonialism. Observing these changes during his travels in the mid-1840s, Jean Mallat (1983, 245–46) reported that

the religious went around the countryside, showing how to distribute water so that everyone had his share, the manner of gathering water in large reservoirs so that it would never be lacking; they built dams with earth and incorruptible posts, converted marshland into rice-fields, taught Indios how to transplant rice in the fields.

Founded in the late seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, the monastic estates, found mainly in the Tagalog region and also in Cebu, engaged in wet-rice agriculture (Roth 1982; Fenner 1985, 47). In the eighteenth century, migration, 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 also around the same period, midway through which Chinese mestizos gained ascendancy and began to form the new class of native elites (Wickberg 1964, 2000). 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).

These transformations led to the overall increase in rice production in the Spanish colony. Rice surplus was paid as tribute to the state and as rent for landholding arrangements 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. In line with 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 counted 54 registered varieties, another enumerated 93—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 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 crop 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 Philippine vocabularies. Corn and sweet potato became widely accepted staple food in nonirrigated parts of the archipelago. As Fenner (1985, 48–49) puts it: “Gradually, the Cebuanos must have been won over to corn, for by the nineteenth century it was grown extensively on both small and large parcels of land. Because it grows better than rice on unirrigated fields, corn, like millet, was ideally suited to Cebu’s dry climate.”

By the nineteenth century it can be seen that the enchantment over rice cultivation had been eroded. Wet-rice technology made rice abundant as never before. With improved yields and reduced uncertainty, as the classic theoretical proposition goes, reliance on magic could be expected to decline. Peasants retained their spirit beliefs, but these preternatural beings were no longer believed to reside in rice grains, which, by this time in the lowlands, were no longer stored in panicles but threshed soon after harvest. This cosmological shift loosened rigidities in the division of labor, with males joining females in the transplanting, weeding, and harvesting of rice. The degree of gender equality in rice cultivation thus sets the lowland Philippines apart from countries in Southeast Asia such as Indonesia, where transplanting, weeding, and harvesting are seen today as tasks primarily marked out for women.² When the time came to shift to the sickle, starting in the 1960s with the appearance of rice plants of short stature, practicality (rather than cosmology) was the only issue.³

Based also on what was known about the nineteenth century, taro, yam, and millet had been eclipsed and replaced by corn, sweet potato, and rice as staple cereal. Food substitution was dependent on geography, ecology, and social class. For the native elites, rice became the preeminent source of carbohydrates, but one not linked to any substantial ritual practice. Indeed, rice did not have any part in the major ritual of colonial society: the Mass of the Roman Catholic Church. Certainly, rice prepared

² In a rainfed rice village in Iloilo, for instance, “transplanting is traditionally [*sic*] considered an activity shared equally between men and women” and “generally the sexual division of labor is not very rigid” (Res 1985, 97, 107). In contrast, the Javanese case suggests that “women’s main tasks are transplanting (with very few exceptions), weeding, and harvesting (with more exceptions...)” (White 1985, 131; also Sajogyo 1985, 153).

³ In the Iloilo village studied by Res (1985, 106, 109), the small harvesting knife called *kayog* was replaced by the more efficient sickle; by the early 1970s, harvesting arrangements had also been transformed. In the Ilocos, the hand knife continued to be relied upon in harvesting awned varieties of rice, collectively known as *pagay iloko*, which rendered the sickle technologically inappropriate (Lewis 1971, 59–61).

in elaborate ways—*suman*, *bibingka*, and the like—figured as an important food, particularly during town festivities. But rice itself had no place in the “formal” world of ritual, unlike in other parts of Asia. In Indonesia, for instance, the ritual preparations of rice with different colors and rice shaped as balls and pyramids in various sizes were, and continue to be, central to the *slametan* celebrations (Geertz 1960). Linked to Islam, these syncretic *abangan* practices have persisted in a region where Dutch presence since the sixteenth century had not preoccupied itself with proselytizing the natives. In the Philippines, Spanish interventions in the ideational and material fields resulted in the increased production of rice, which concomitantly underwent symbolic marginalization.

Amid changes in the native elite’s composition, as well as in the crop’s cultural significance, 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 rice production as leaseholders, landowners, middlemen, and traders. They were mainly consumers rather than producers of rice. They treated rice as a crop that generated profits and would, thus, view it in mainly instrumentalist terms, even if, at the same time, they consumed rice as their everyday food. Because rice was relatively abundant and readily stored in granaries, it was available 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 in the Cordillera.⁴ 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 without rice.

From abundance to importation and hunger: 1870s to the present

At least in Luzon, rice surpluses made possible exports during the 1830s until about 1870. However, from the 1870s onward, the Philippines became

⁴In Ifugao in the early twentieth century, consumption or nonconsumption of rice distinguished the wealthy from poor and middle-class households (Lambrecht 1932). On one hand, rich households considered rice as the main food eaten throughout the year. On the other hand, 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.

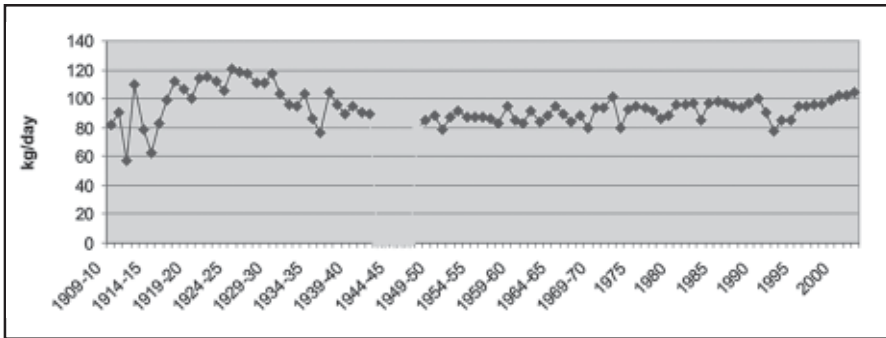
a net importer of rice, as Benito Legarda's (1999, 156–73) classic study of the nineteenth century demonstrates. In the century's last three decades, rice deficiency occurred in the Philippines, a pattern that would persist virtually unbroken until today. The condition of the Spanish Philippines contrasted 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 rice exporters in the world market (Owen 1971; Coclanis 1993). In the island-world of the Philippines, hunger would periodically stalk the land.

One reason for the rice deficiency was the shift in cash crops from rice to noncereal crops such as tobacco (a government monopoly), abaca, and sugar. Rice for subsistence was neglected. This choice of crops did not inconvenience the elites because they either controlled rice fields that assured them of their rice supply or they had sufficient disposable cash to purchase all the rice they needed from the market. Thus, market demand for specific crops may be cited as one reason for the country's rice deficiency. But, recalling Boserup, it can also be argued that the state of technology was no longer suited to the increased population. No further innovations in rice production occurred. Benefits derived 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.

Rather than seeking to understand the constraints to rice production, the American colonial state responded to rice shortages in the early years (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—consistent with the politics of “urban bias”—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 rose to high levels in the 1920s (120.9 kg in 1924–1925), dipped in the 1930s (76.7 kg 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 of per-capita consumption of milled rice rose slightly during the late 1980s and again since 2000

Figure 1. Per-capita crude estimates of availability of milled rice for consumption, Philippines, 1909–2002, in kg/year



Sources: 1909–1974 data, IRRI and PCARR (1976, table 24-a); 1974–2002 data, FAOSTAT database (2004).

(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 kg), but still fell short of the peak in the mid-1920s. Crude figures in the “food balance sheet” also confirmed the existence of rice shortages in the 1930s (76.7 kg in 1935–1936), which was matched by the crisis of the 1990s (77.2 kg in 1992). Precipitous lows were also registered in the 1970s (80 kg 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 permitted 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 root crops that fed many poor people during periodic and seasonal shortages did not belong to “the real,” as the testimony of Benjamin Santos, 18 years old at that time, implies:

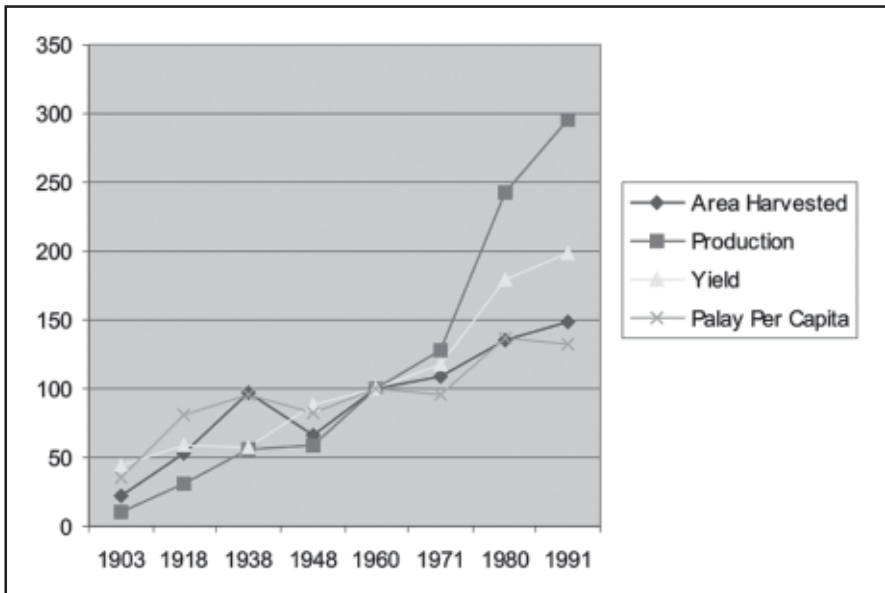
Since the Japanese commandeered most of the food supply, we had a hard time procuring “real” food. The rice grains of our people, especially the farmers’ palay, were seized by the enemy... So in the mountains, we ate only cassava flour made into bibingka (a ricecake), grated corn, cassava, and castanog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

(Karganilla n.d., 204)

For urban dwellers, especially elites, accustomed to plenty by virtue of state intervention, the scarcity of rice highlighted its primordial role in life. As one testimony puts 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. However, census data on total palay production, area harvested, and palay production per capita in Figure 2 show per-

Figure 2. Trends in palay production and consumption, Philippines, census year



Index: 1960=100

Sources: US Bureau of Census (1905); Bureau of Printing (1920–21, 1940–43, 1950, 1962); National Statistics Office (1973, 1982, 1993).

capita data as a rather flat curve from the late 1930s until about 1971, but improved from the late 1970s until 1991. Despite this change, the country has continued to import rice, and the incidence of hunger has not been eradicated. Indeed, 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% of the country's rice supply)—which discouraged peasants from planting and traders from moving stocks (*Philippine Panorama* 1972; *Weekly Graphic* 1972). Affected people supplemented their rice with camote and other tubers.

Severe rice and corn shortages in the Visayas and the Socsargen (South Cotabato-Sultan Kudarat-Sarangani-General Santos) area in the mid- and late 1990s were caused by the El Niño drought. Driven by hunger and without rice or corn to eat, many B'laan and Tiruray families subsisted on a drought-resistant and poisonous root crop known as *kayos*, which, if not prepared properly, could cause seizures, respiratory paralysis, and death. In Cotabato, 17 Tiruray, mostly children, perished after eating the fatal crop. Another 26 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 cooked rice. Those who obtained rice used it to make porridge to feed their families (Oloma 1995; *Philippine Daily Inquirer* 1998a and b; Zonio et al. 1998).

In Metro Manila, the poor who could not afford the expensive varieties, such as *milagrosa* and *dinorado* (costing P20 to P25 a kilo in the mid-1990s), were at least able to buy the cheap rice imported by the National Food Authority (NFA). However, one rice retailer admitted that NFA rice was of such poor quality that “it isn't fit for people to eat.” One consumer, as reported in a daily paper, was aware that the quality of rice sold at government rolling stores was inferior to that of locally produced rice. Nevertheless, 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

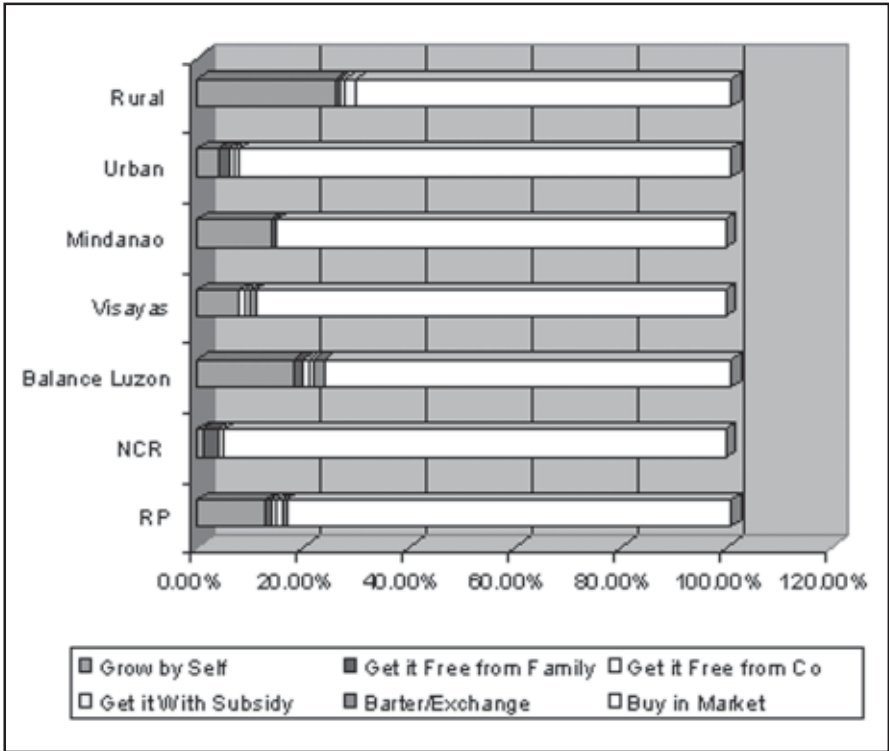
southwesterly winds of the *habagat* increase wave size and wind velocity, severely curtailing fishing activities. During this season, it is said that “the earthen pot hangs” (*bitay an koron*), for the lack of food keeps the pot from being used. When the fish catch is lean, the credit list in local *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 who lack rice are visibly linked to the market. Either they cannot buy rice, or have to purchase it on credit or at a steep price. In addition to highlighting class inequalities, the scarcity of rice underscores the fact that, even in poor rural areas, many people are dependent not on their farms but on market transactions in order to gain access to rice. Consumption, rather than production, defines the social relationship to rice of most Filipinos.

The widespread commoditization of rice is supported by data gathered for the World Bank (2001) by the Social Weather Stations (SWS) in March and April 2000, which show that 84 percent of Filipinos nationwide rely on the market to obtain the rice they consume (Figure 3). In urban areas, the proportion is 93 percent, rising to 95 percent in Metro Manila. However, even in rural areas, the corresponding figure is 71 percent. Only about a quarter of the rural population (26%), and a mere 13 percent nationwide are “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. Although 36 percent of the labor force is engaged in the agriculture, forestry, and fishery sector (NSCB 2004), the rural dwellers’ high dependence on purchased rice 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 subsequently procure rice from the market.

With 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 in one place and consumed in another

Figure 3. Main source of rice consumed



Source: World Bank (2001, 106)

location a great distance away. This disjuncture is now rife in the Philippine world of rice. The country can be described as beset by the “Third World food crisis,” what with its 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; domestic factors need closer scrutiny.

3 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 the Philippines, 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 are mostly from the 1993 survey. In 2003, the FNRI conducted another survey, but the full results are yet to be released; partial releases have been included in this paper.

Evidently, rice occupies a central role in the “average” Filipino diet. The 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. The 2003 FNRI data reveal only a slight deviation from the established pattern: rice accounts for 34.4 percent of total food intake and 84.7 percent of all cereals consumed; corn represents 9.2 percent of all cereals consumed, and other cereal products contribute 6.1 percent to total cereal consumption. Despite the overwhelming role of rice, the category of “other cereal products” points to some ongoing changes in the Filipino diet.

Regional data on corn and rice consumption

The generalization that rice is the country’s staple must be qualified 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

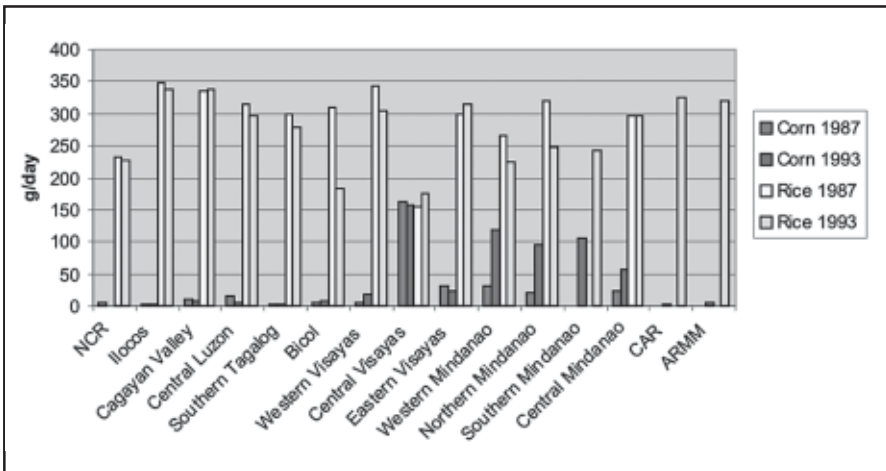
Oriental, and Siquijor), corn is the real staple food. The region shows the highest per-capita consumption of corn (Figure 4).

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 5), which may be indicative of the relative scarcity of rice. However, Western Mindanao's mean per-capita consumption of corn of about 117 g/day is still lower than the 150 g/day consumed in the Central Visayas.

Because national-level FNRI data are not comparable across years, the analysis of milled rice consumption from one survey period to another is not possible. Information on the total consumption of rice and rice products, however, can be compared. The available regionally disaggregated data indicate that rice products other than milled rice contribute a small fraction only of total rice consumption (Figures 6 and 7). In 1993, Filipinos consumed an average of 10 grams of rice products per day.

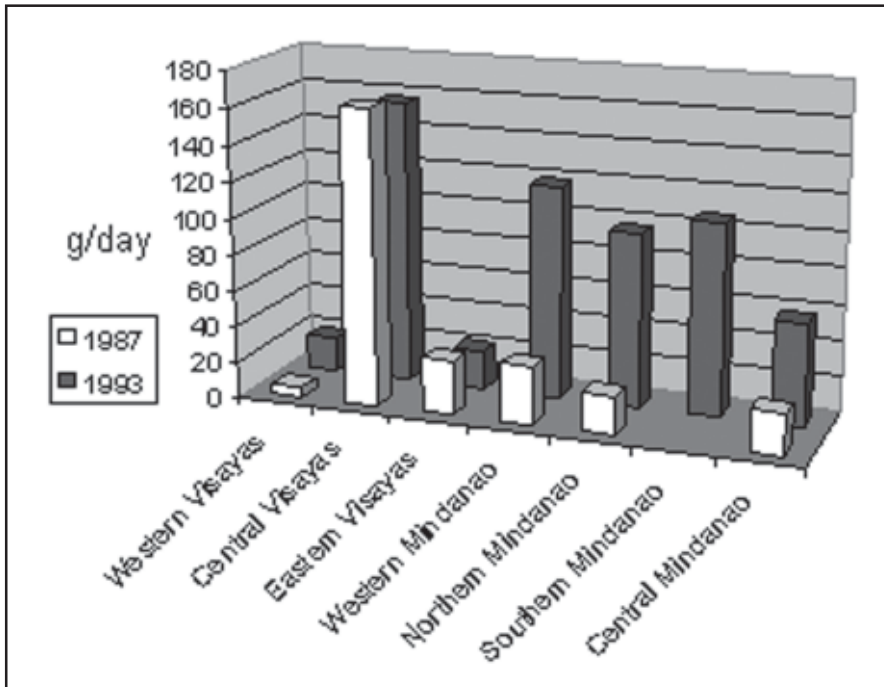
When data on the consumption of rice and rice products are summed up, national-level data show that the mean per-capita consumption of rice in 1987 reached 303 g/day. This figure declined to 282 g/day in 1993.

Figure 4. Consumption of rice and corn by region, Philippines



Source: FNRI-DOST (1987, 1993)

Figure 5. Mean per-capita corn consumption, main corn-eating regions, Philippines

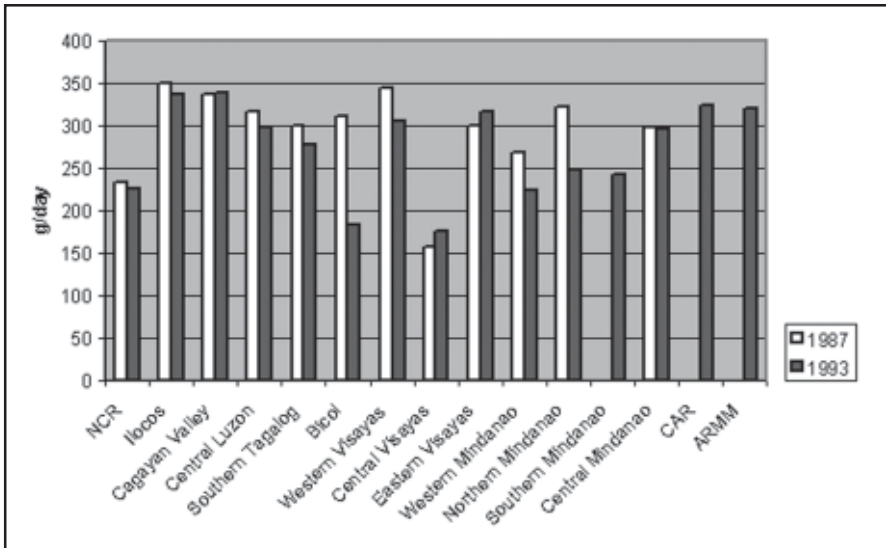


Source: FNRI-DOST (1987, 1993)

Based on PhilRice data, only five regions of the Philippines are *not* rice deficient: 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 g/day; Central Luzon, 310 g/day; Western Visayas, 307 g/day; and Central Mindanao, 299 g/day. Interestingly, four rice-deficient areas exceeded the average daily consumption of rice. These are the Autonomous Region of Muslim Mindanao (ARMM), 331 g/day; Cordillera Administrative Region (CAR), 330 g/day; Eastern Visayas, 321 g/day; and Southern Tagalog, 282 g/day.

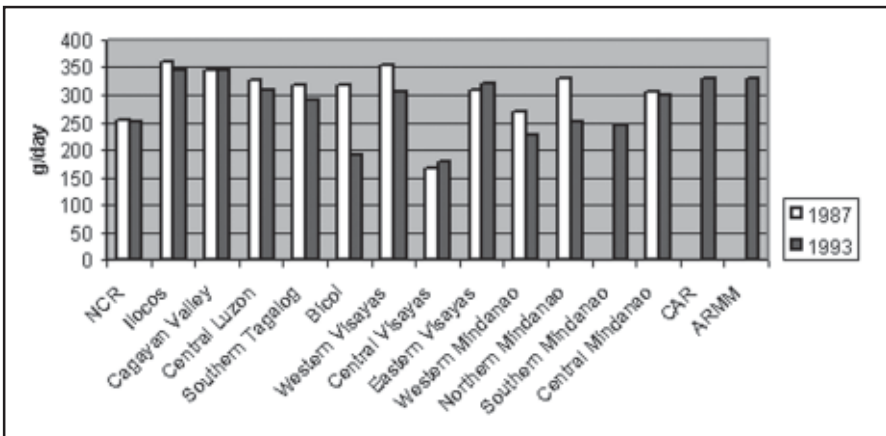
In general, more rice per capita is consumed in rural than in urban areas. But FNRI data suggest that the rural-urban per-capita consumption gap is decreasing. In 1978, rural areas consumed 63 g/capita/day more than urban areas. The gap decreased to 17 g/day in 1993. Residents in

Figure 6. Consumption of rice by region, Philippines



Source: FNRI-DOST (1987, 1993)

Figure 7. Consumption of rice and rice products by region, Philippines



Source: FNRI-DOST (1987, 1993)

rural areas are either shifting to other cereal products, or are eating less rice in absolute terms than before and thus experiencing hunger.

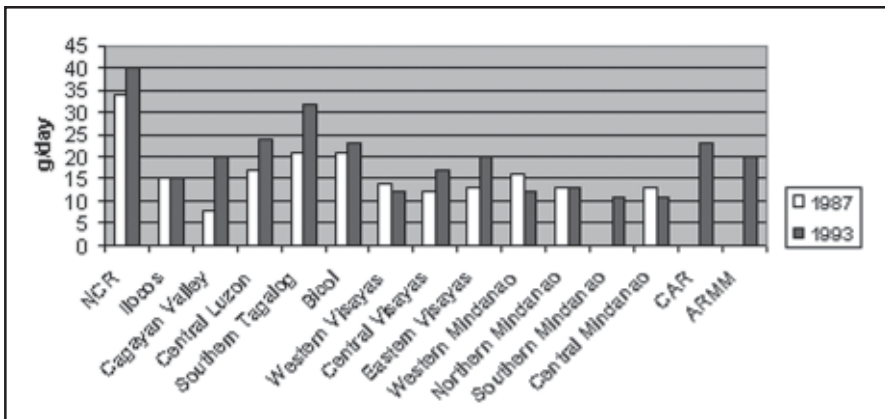
Urbanization and substitution for rice

The average consumption of rice in the National Capital Region (NCR) is considerably less than that of other regions. Clearly, Metro Manila is not a 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 g/capita in 1987 to 226 g/capita in 1993. When other rice products are included, consumption was 254 g/capita/day in 1987, but it declined to 252 g/capita/day in 1993. 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 NCR compared with other regions in the Philippines can easily be explained in terms of the highly urbanized lifestyle. The demands of commuting to the workplace and other lifestyle habits have apparently reduced the daily consumption of rice. For instance, bread (particularly *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 a boom in the fastfood industry, which intuitively (for lack of hard data) can be said to have altered the consumption habits of Metro Manila residents.

What the data suggest is that the NCR has seen a widespread substitution of bread and other cereals in place of rice. This fact is borne out by Figure 8, which shows that Metro Manila has the highest per-

Figure 8. Consumption of other cereal products by region, Philippines



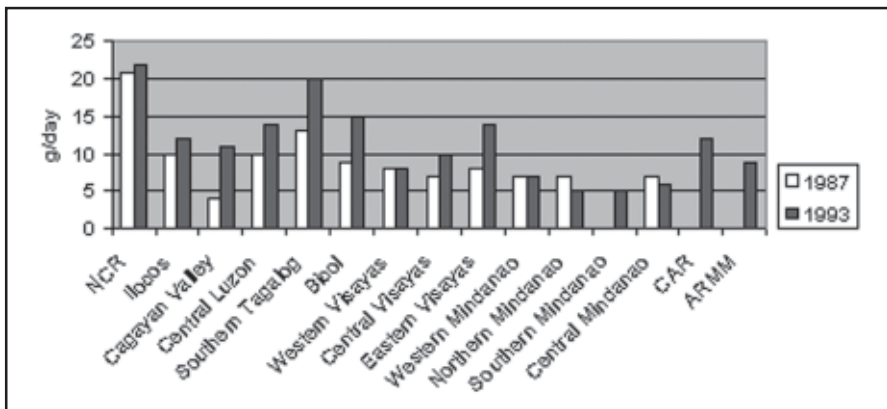
Source: FNRI-DOST (1987, 1993)

capita consumption of other cereal products (i.e., made from flour and consumed in the form of bread, noodles, cookies/biscuits, and the like). As a sign of the displacement of rice, consumption of other cereal products increased from 34 g/day in 1987 to 40 g/day by 1993. The Southern Tagalog region, characterized by a surge in urbanization and industrialization, also tended to consume cereals other than rice. The region consumed 21 g/capita/day in 1987, a figure that rose to 32 g/capita/day in 1993. Also experiencing this pattern is Central Luzon.

Consumption of bread is highest in Metro Manila, followed very closely by Southern Tagalog (Figure 9). The rise in bread consumption in Southern Tagalog from 1987 to 1993 appears to have occurred at a faster rate than in the NCR. 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 NCR, followed by Southern Tagalog (Figure 10).

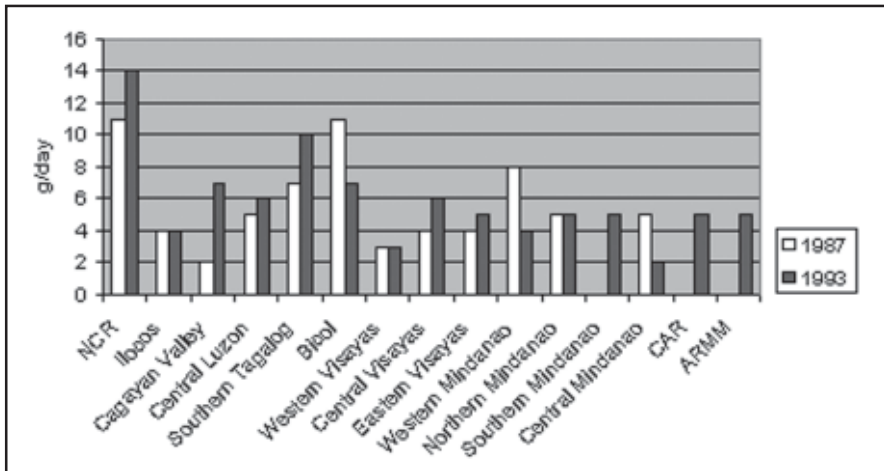
What is odd, however, is the rise in the consumption of other cereal products even in regions that are not highly urbanized. The regions with high incidence of poverty and “subsistence levels” as well as a rather high consumption of other cereal products (at 20 or more g/capita/day) include the CAR, Bicol, Eastern Visayas, and the ARMM. Assuming these patterns are not due to mistakes in data collection and analysis, the results are intriguing. Can it be that bread is cheaper than rice in these regions? One

Figure 9. Consumption of bread and other flour products by region, Philippines



Source: FNRI-DOST (1987, 1993)

Figure 10. Consumption of noodles by region, Philippines



Source: FNRI-DOST (1987, 1993)

can also consider anecdotal evidence about many poor families using instant noodles and the chemically enhanced flavors of these noodles as viand. One pack of instant noodles can make rice palatable for the whole family. In this case, consumption of noodles does not displace rice; rather, it displaces fish, meat, and vegetables, with attendant negative effects on the nutritional value of the food consumed.

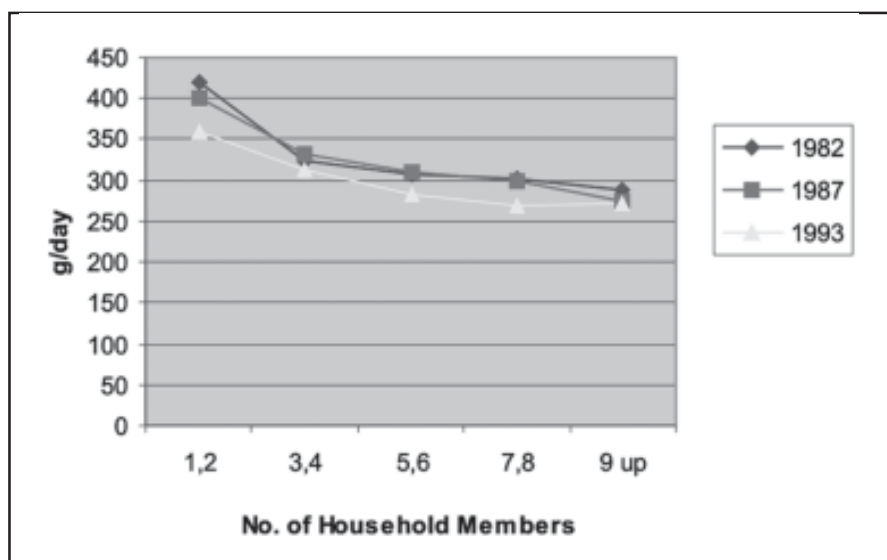
Family size and rice consumption

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 11.

Data on absolute figures of rice consumption for 1993 show that households with one to two members had an average per-capita consumption of 360 g/day (Table 1). With three to four members, the mean declined to 312 g/day, and, in the case of households with five to six members, further dropped to 283 g/day. With seven to eight members, the per-capita consumption was 269 g/day, but households with nine or more members somehow gained an extra 2 g.

Data from the FNRI also show that, as household size increases, total per-capita consumption of food decreases (Figure 12). Again, despite

Figure 11. Per-capita consumption of rice and rice products by household size, Philippines



Source: FNRI-DOST (1982, 1987, 1993)

differences in absolute figures for different survey years, including the latest 2003 data, the trend holds.

One important caveat is that the data do not show the stage in the family life cycle. For example, the third member of a family, in addition to the parents, may either be a small or a grown child, who will have different consumption needs. The data should therefore be treated as a very crude measure. Even so, they strongly indicate the negative impact of household size on average rice consumption.

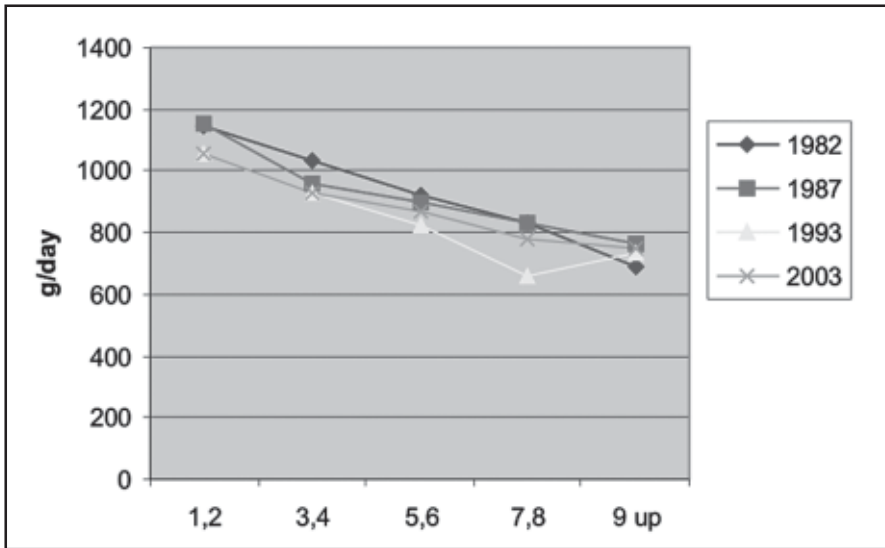
Survey data on how the available rice is actually apportioned among household members are not available. Everyone could be eating porridge,

Table 1. Mean per-capita consumption of rice and rice products by household size, Philippines (g/day)

Household 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

Source: FNRI-DOST (1982, 1987, 1993)

Figure 12. Total mean per-capita consumption by household size



Source: FNRI-DOST (1982, 1987, 1993, 2003)

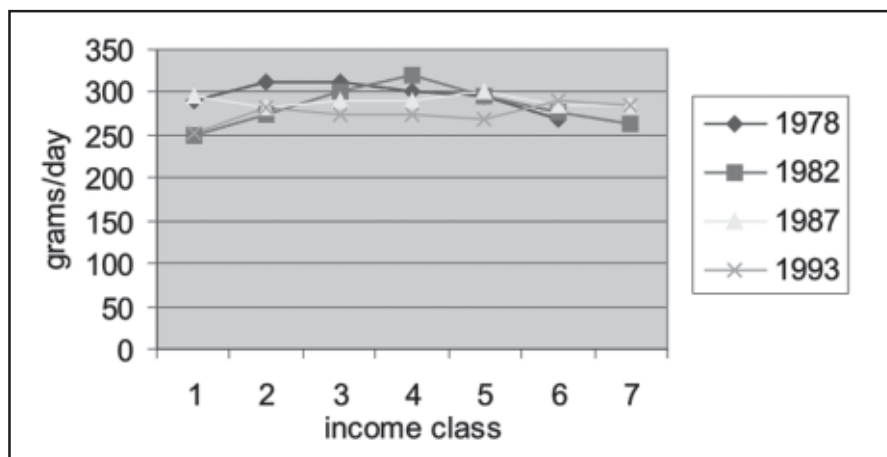
or parents may forego eating rice in favor of their children, or they may allocate more rice to some children at the expense of others. In this connection, in a situation of hunger, it has been suggested that food allocation to children does not follow gender bias, but is rather affected by a bias for a favorite child (Datar 2002). Many young persons leave the parental household to work in urban areas—e.g., females in domestic work, males in stevedoring or similar manual labor—as a strategy to reduce the number of consumers in the household (“one less mouth 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 g to 350 g/day, regardless of income group (Figure 13).

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; however, in terms of absolute figures, what they spend on food far exceeds the absolute amounts spent

Figure 13. Per-capita rice consumption by income class, Philippines, various years



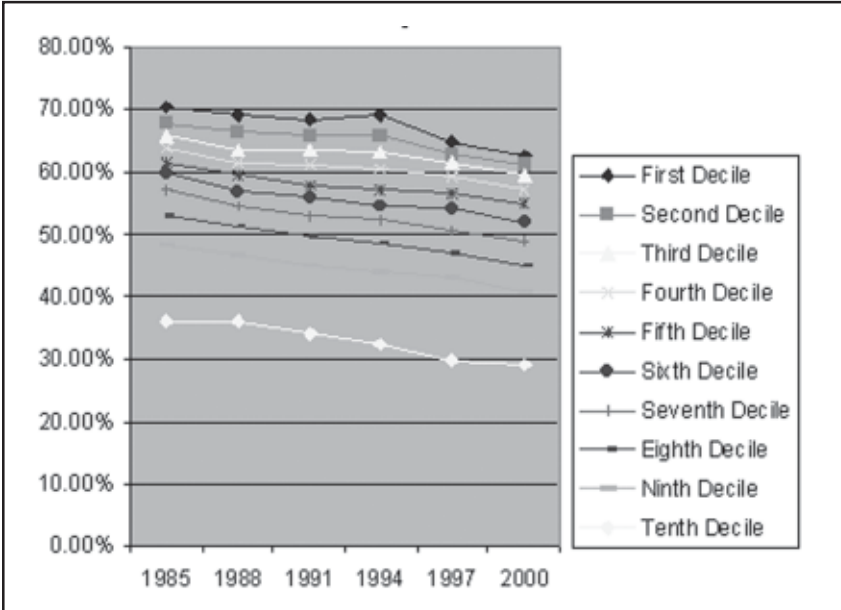
Source: FNRI-DOST (1978, 1982, 1987, 1993)

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 14). Over the years, the proportion of income spent on food has declined for all income deciles. For the seven lowest income deciles, food represents close to 50 percent 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.

The poor also allocates most of its food expenditures to cereals (Figure 15). Among the highest income decile, expenditures on cereals in 2000 accounted for only 17 percent of food expenditures. In contrast, the poorest income decile spent 47.5 percent of food expenditures on cereals; the second poorest decile spent 45 percent. It may be noted that, in terms of relative proportions, the rich spent more on meat and meat products. In 2000, the highest income decile devoted 20 percent of food expenditures on meat products, while the poorest three income deciles spent from 6.5 percent to 8.8 percent of food expenditures on similar products. Interestingly, all income deciles spent more or less the same proportion of their food expenditures on fruits and vegetables (10% to 11% in 2000).

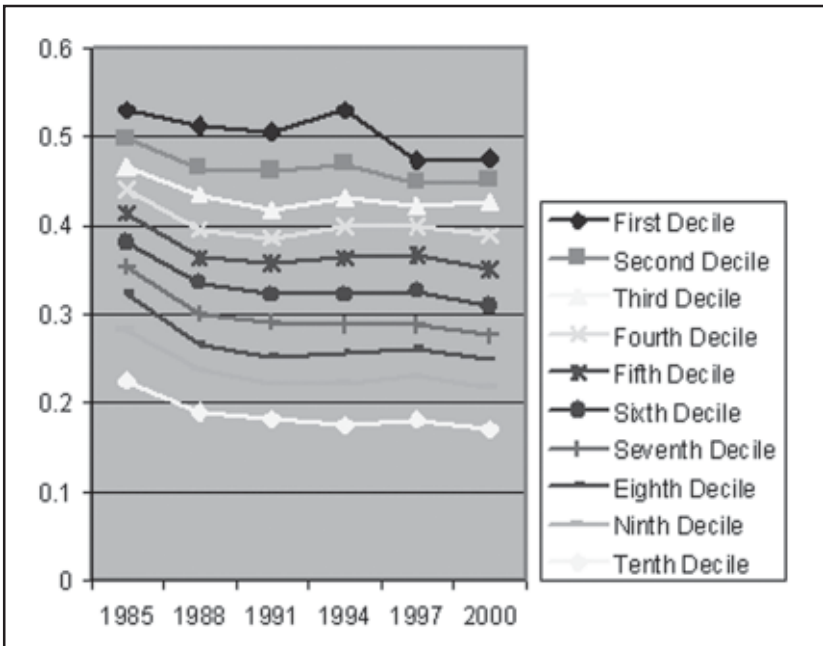
Data from the FIES show that the share of food expenditure to total expenditure has been declining from 51 percent in 1985 to 43.8 percent in 2000. Expenditure share on food, cereals, and fish and fish products of

Figure 14. Percentage of food expenditure to total expenditure



Source: National Statistics Office (1985, 1988, 1991, 1994, 1997, 2000)

Figure 15. Percentage of cereal expenditure to total food expenditure

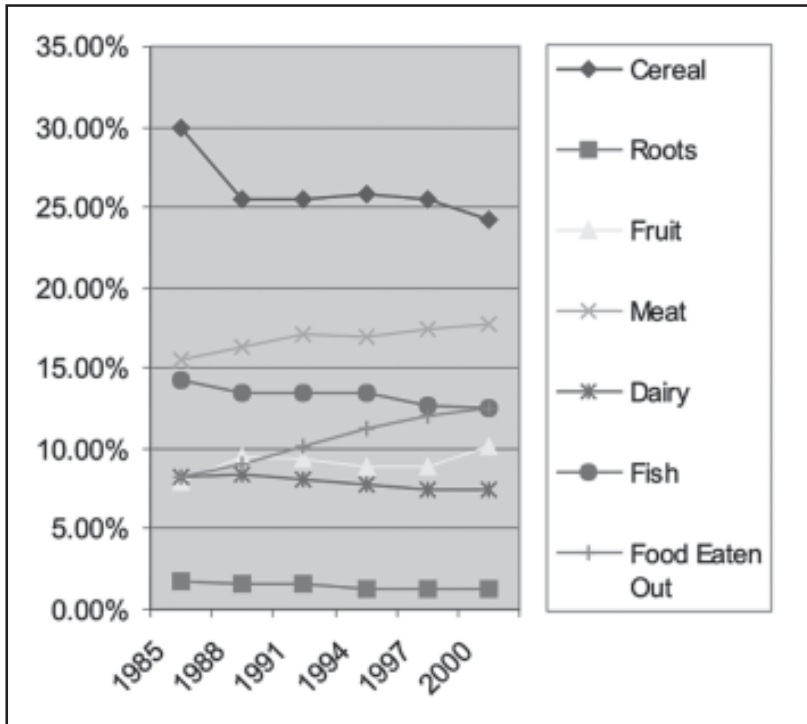


Source: National Statistics Office (1985, 1988, 1991, 1994, 1997, 2000)

rural households tend to be bigger than in the urban ones. For those in urban areas, the expenditure shares on meat, food regularly eaten outside the home, and dairy products are larger than corresponding figures in rural areas. The relative amounts spent on eating out have been increasing in both urban and rural areas (Figures 16 and 17).

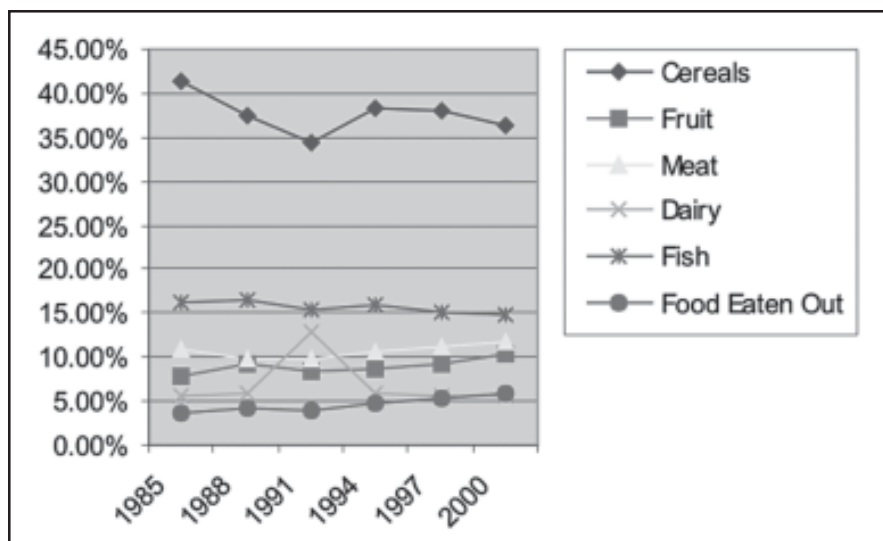
Consistent with the results of the FIES data, SWS data for the World Bank (2001) reveal that about 79 percent of “the rich” eats rice three times a day, some 81 percent of middle-income groups takes rice three times a day, but 91 percent of “the poor” eats rice three times a day (Figure 18). Thus, of these three categories, the poor are the most dependent on rice. Among the poor, a small fraction (1%), the very poorest of the lot, eats rice once a day only.

Figure 16. Percent share of food types to total food expenditure, all urban



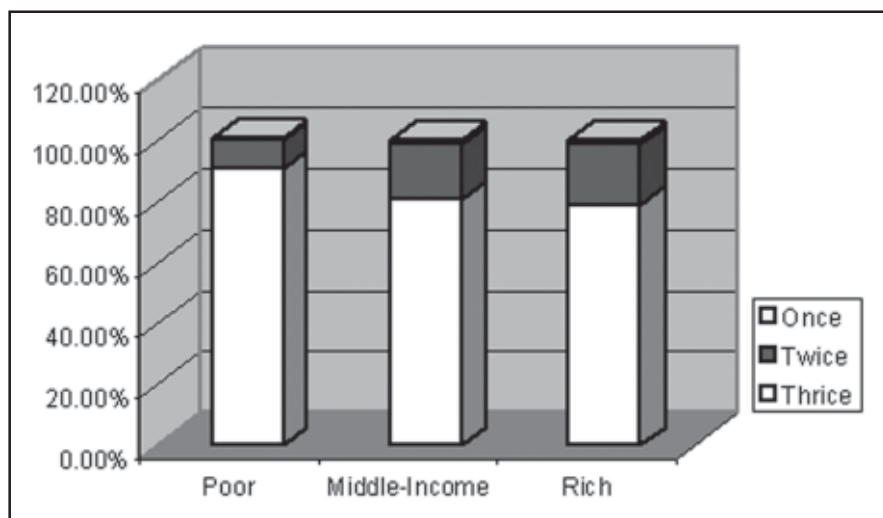
Source: National Statistics Office (1985; 1988; 1991; 1994; 1997; 2000)

Figure 17. Percent share of food types to total food expenditure, all rural



Source: National Statistics Office (1985; 1988; 1991; 1994; 1997; 2000)

Figure 18. Frequency of daily rice consumption



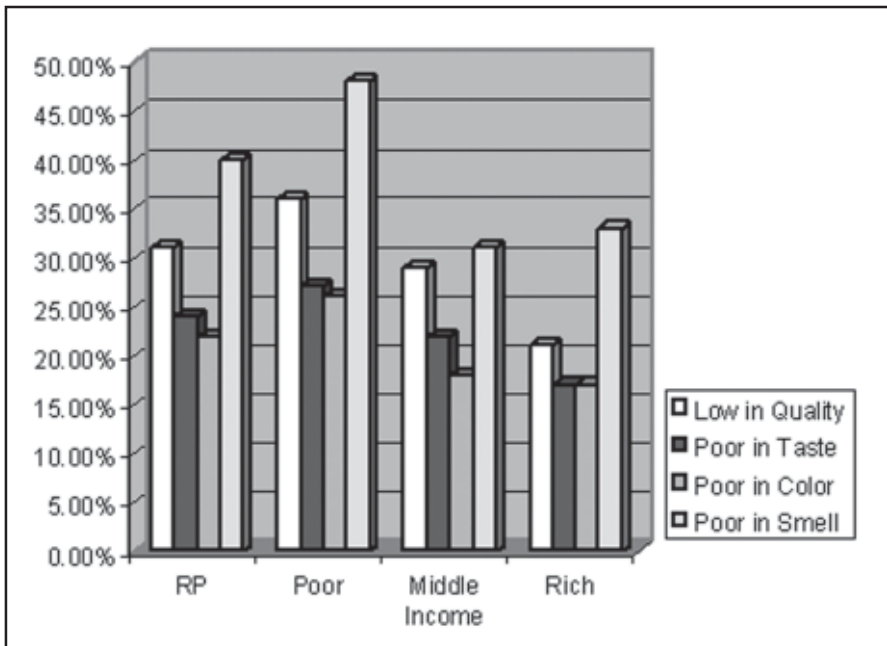
Source: World Bank (2001, 106)

NFA rice

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

The poor rate NFA rice most severely compared with other income groups (Figure 19). They say that NFA rice has a “poor smell” (48%), “low quality” (36%), “poor taste” (27%), and “poor color” (26%). In contrast, remarkably lower proportions of the rich think NFA rice has a “poor smell” (33%), “low quality” (21%), “poor taste” (17%), and “poor color” (17%). Interestingly, unlike the Chinese who put a premium on the whiteness of rice, Filipinos are generally guided by the aroma of the cooked rice in making their evaluation.

Figure 19. Rating of NFA rice by income group



Source: World Bank (2001, 108)

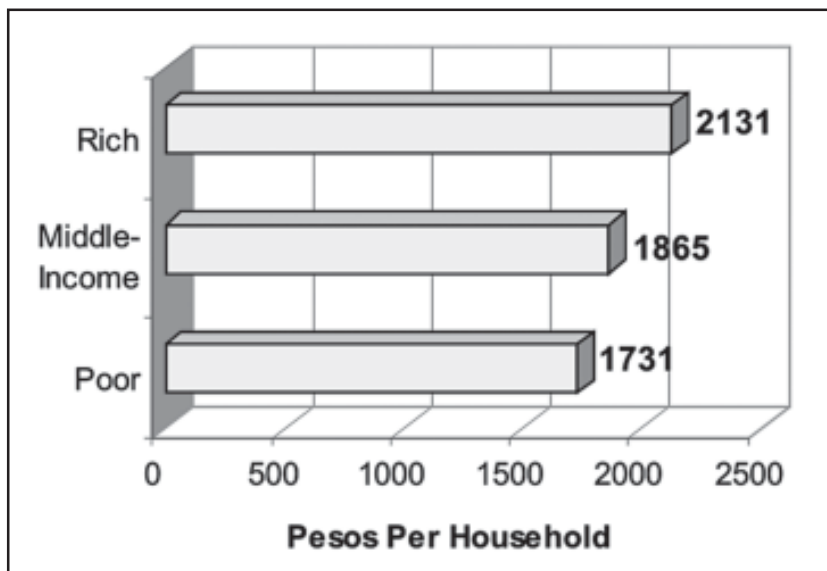
The SWS data prompt the question: Can it be that rich families buy NFA rice for their domestic helpers and pets, but they themselves do not really eat NFA? Can that be why they find the quality of NFA rice acceptable, when in fact the poor do not?

Another ironical point is that, while proportionately poor families buy more NFA rice, the rich and middle classes buy more rice per capita. Because NFA rice is state-subsidized, it is not the poor who enjoy the bulk of the rice subsidy. Figure 20 shows the estimated subsidy per household received by different income groups that purchase NFA rice.

The specter of hunger

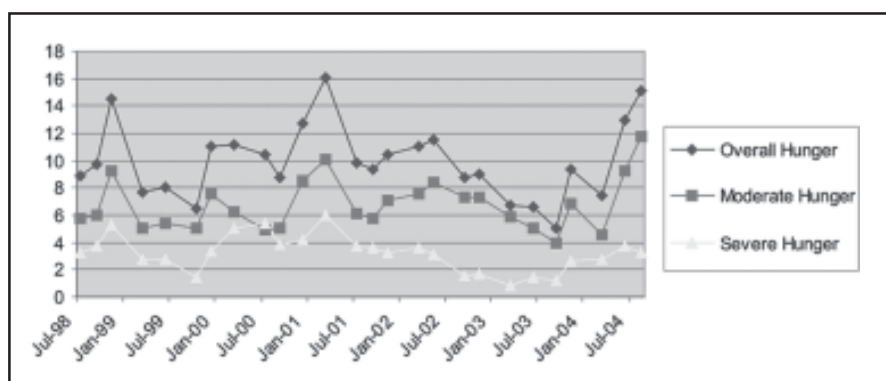
The SWS survey for the third quarter of 2004 reveals that many Filipinos are being hounded by hunger, with Mindanao as the most hard-pressed region. Survey results show that one in seven families experienced not having anything to eat at least once in the three months preceding the survey. The 15.1 percent 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 increase from the third quarter of 2003 (Figure 21).

Figure 20. Estimated subsidy per household from NFA rice



Source: World Bank (2001, 107)

Figure 21. Severity of hunger, Philippines: total households, July 1998 to August 2004



Source: Social Weather Stations (2004)

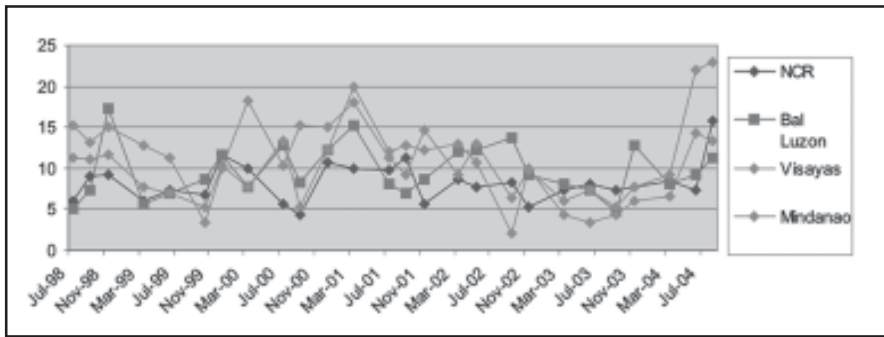
In Mindanao, the incidence of hunger increased sharply by 17.7 percent from the third quarter of 2003 (Figure 22). Hunger incidence in the NCR increased by 8.4 percent, while that for the rest of Luzon and Visayas increased by 6.6 percent and 9 percent, respectively. Moderate hunger, defined as experiencing having nothing to eat at least once in the preceding three months, increased by 7.8 percent from the third quarter of 2003.

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, data sets from the latter two entities show 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 FNRI data on mean per-capita consumption: from 915 g/day in 1982, food consumption fell to 803 g/day in 1993, and recovered somewhat to 886 g/day in 2003, a pattern depicted in Figure 23.

The decrease in food consumption is most evident in the big drop in the consumption of fruits and vegetables, among the various food groups. The 1978 mean consumption figure of 249 g/day of fruits and vegetables declined to 183 g/day in 1993, a reduction of 66 g/day (or about 27%). In 2003, the consumption inched up to 185 g/day, which is still below that of earlier years. The decline in consumption of cereals and cereal products went from 367 g/day in 1978 to 340 g/day in 1993, a reduction of 27 g/day

Figure 22. Incidence of hunger by location: total households, July 1998 to August 2004



Source: Social Weather Stations (2004)

Table 2. Mean one-day per-capita food consumption, Philippines, various years

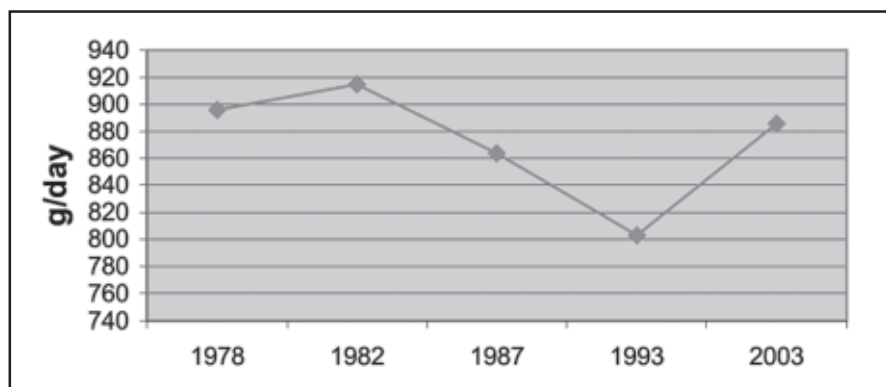
Year	Total Food Consumption	Total Food Consumption, g/day							
		Cereals and Cereal Products	Fish, Meat and Poultry	Fruits and Vegetables	Starchy Roots and Tubers	Milk and Milk Products	Sugars and Syrups	Fats and Oils	Others
1978	896	367	133	249	37	33	27	13	37
1982	915	356	154	232	42	44	22	14	51
1987	864	345	157	218	22	43	24	14	41
1993	803	340	147	183	17	44	19	12	41
2003	886	364	165	185	19	49	24	18	62

Source: FNRI-DOST (1978, 1982, 1987, 1993, 2003)

(or 7%). The 2003 data suggest that consumption of cereals and cereal products, on the aggregate, nearly recovered to the 1978 level, at 364 g/day. Consumption of starchy roots and tubers posted a reduction of 20 g/day from 1978 to 1993, with only a slight improvement seen in 2003. 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.

Data also suggest widespread malnutrition among the poor and “overnutrition” among the rich, as anthropometric data on height, weight, and body mass index (BMI) suggest (Madriaga et al. 1998). For instance, 33 percent of 11- to 19-year-old adolescents falls in the underweight

Figure 23. Mean per-capita total food consumption



Source: FNRI-DOST (1978, 1982, 1987, 2003)

category, 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; the incidence is 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 also increasingly observed among children of elites.

In Table 3, Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) data are suggestive of Filipinos' relatively low caloric supply. Given

the rather meager contributions from protein sources, this situation can be attributed to the overall low per-capita consumption of rice in the Philippines compared with other Southeast Asian countries. The average calorie supply of Filipinos is only somewhat better than that of Cambodia and Laos. The prevalence of hunger and malnutrition puts the Philippines in the league of these recently war-torn countries.

Table 3. Crude estimates of per-capita rice consumption and calorie supply, 1999

Country	Kg/Year	Kilocalories/Day
Cambodia	153	2000
Indonesia	150	2931
Laos	174	2152
Malaysia	78	2947
Myanmar	208	2803
Philippines	100	2357
Thailand	106	2411
Vietnam	170	2564

Source: World Resources Institute (2004)

4 The Contradictory Centrality of Rice

Rice as consumer commodity

As demonstrated in this paper, the predominant relation of most Filipinos to rice is as consumers rather than as producers. The essentially end-user position of the vast majority of Filipinos has eclipsed the complex ties that bind the cultivator to the rice crop.⁵ In a culture where the symbolic value of rice has undergone historic marginalization, as explained in the first part of this chapter, consumers are alienated from the dynamics of production, and treat rice as a mere commodity.

Although I have not been able to ascertain the origins of the song commonly taught to schoolchildren until perhaps the 1970s (the generation in their 20s today do not seem to be familiar with it), its opening line—“planting rice is never fun”—evidently expresses the sensibilities of an urban consumer. Moreover, the statement is a mistranslation of the original Tagalog “magtanim ay di biro”—which conveys the need to take the planting of rice seriously. Nonetheless, the Tagalog version does speak of the drudgery of farm work, and only in the narrow terms of that laboriousness is rice lyricized. Nothing is said about the nutritional value of rice and its importance in the Filipino meal.

In contrast to the drudgery of rice cultivation, which has not been erased even with the use of tractors and other tools, the preparation of rice for the dining table over the years has become easier with the aid of electric cookers. With this gadget, the “perfect” boiled rice can be prepared by virtually everyone. Over- and undercooking can be avoided with the

⁵ A study in a Laguna village found that rice cultivators hardly use agronomic and economic criteria in “discriminating among rice varieties” but rely heavily on gastronomic criteria. In “distinguishing among cultivated plants in general,” functional criteria predominate. These findings are interpreted as suggesting a subsistence orientation rather than a market-oriented focus among rice producers-cum-consumers (Sandoval 1995, 113–116).

simplest know-how. Not surprisingly, the sale of rice cookers has been brisk. 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 sizeable:

1990 to 1995	P15,000/month
1996 to 1997	P23,000/month
1998 to 2004	P20,000 to P21,000/month

The decrease in sales after 1997 is attributed to the entry of imported brands (e.g., American Heritage) from China, Thailand, the United States, and other countries. 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” convenience and of decidedly middle-class kitchen technologies that occlude the tediousness and drudgery of actually growing rice. Still, in the cities, rice cookers represent, even if they somehow ease, the drudgery of women who suffer the double burden of contending with housework even after a day in waged work outside the home.

Imagining the land through rice

In 2003, the National Museum held a symposium on “Rice in the Seven Arts.” As National Artist for Literature, F. Sionil Jose (2003) discussed the place of rice in the literary arena, asserting that his five novels (*Poon*; *My Brother, My Executioner*; *The Pretenders*; *Mass*; and *The God Stealer*) are rice stories. Although Jose is sensitive to rice metaphors, arguably his novels are not so much concerned about the cultural value of rice as they are about the political economy of rice production, tenancy, and land reform.

Only Fernando Amorsolo (1892–1972) can be credited with memorializing rice production and the landscape of ricefields in his famous paintings. *Dalagang Bukid* (now in the possession of Club Filipino) was painted in 1936, while *Planting Rice* (now in the United Coconut Planters Bank’s collection) was completed in 1946. He also produced a painting titled *Ricefields*. It has been argued that Amorsolo painted rural scenes in response to American demand for certain types of mementoes (Roces 1978, 2612). If this observation is correct, it can be said that Amorsolo’s paintings of rice were driven by a specific segment of the art market during the period of American colonialism. His paintings subsequently gained

wide popularity among (educated) Filipinos. However, even if these were responses to a “foreign” demand that valorized the exotic, Amorsolo’s paintings of rice can be understood as quintessential of the fact that only in relation to another does one search for something distinctive to represent one’s culture. In Amorsolo’s art, the landscape of rice at least became a prominent representation of “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, which, after all, are privately owned). 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” placed the rice crop at the forefront. However, these representational types apparently belong to an era that is gone.

After the 1970s, imagining a bucolic landscape of rice has become seemingly impossible. The increasing commoditization as well as politicization of rice can perhaps explain this collective inability to represent the country in terms of quiet 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 of rice.

There was a time when elementary textbooks carried the advice of Manuel L. Quezon’s father: “A man should be like palay. The more it grows solid grains, the more it stoops.” In these words of wisdom, the rice plant embodied the lesson of humility and flexibility acquired with wisdom. This aphorism, however, would make sense only to someone familiar with pre-1960s rice cultivation. It has largely lost its relevance with the Green Revolution’s engineered varieties that were designed precisely to have short stalks. In the “modern” varieties, the plant no longer bends as the grains develop, and thus the old moral lesson can no longer be articulated in terms of the rice plant.

Nonetheless, rice metaphors have not been completely obliterated. Someone who has not learned the lessons of life is said to require a lot more rice to eat (*marami ka pang bigas na kakainin*), reflecting rice as the staple one needs to feed on literally in order to grow and mature. A number of practices in the “small tradition” of rice also persist, as will be discussed shortly.

In general, however, to Filipino intellectuals, rice is not the symbol of the land and the nation. The Philippines has never acted like Japan, which—fuelled by its own mythologies—has resisted the opening of its domestic market to “foreign rice.” Indeed, preoccupied with the national image as victim, Filipino middle classes have been more concerned about the export of labor than about the importation of rice (cf. Aguilar 2002). All this is consistent with what this paper claims as the structural and symbolic marginalization of rice.

The *Pahiyas*: a celebration of rice?

Some may object to the argument advanced here by pointing to the celebrated status that rice occupies in the *Pahiyas* festival. Every 15th of 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 a bountiful harvest. During the feast, people decorate their houses with *pahiyas* (precious offerings) made up of rice, fruits, vegetables, hats, and baskets. They also string together rice wafers called *kiping*, leaf-shaped decorations made from rice flour paste and colored in bright red, fuchsia, orange, green, and yellow.

However, as Mark Dizon (2005, 54) recently pointed out, “Everyone seems to agree that the San Isidro fiesta has an agricultural purpose, yet no one has put the fiesta in the context of Lucban’s agricultural history.” Dizon provides an incisive view into that heretofore missing history by recalling that, throughout the Spanish and American colonial and postcolonial periods, the *pahiyas* has evolved alongside the various festivals celebrated in this town to become what it is today. Thus, rice is not the exclusive focus of the May 15 festival, precisely because Lucban is an upland town that historically has relied on the production of a range of food crops; rice has not been its main crop. The association with San Isidro is less about rice than about water to ensure a bountiful harvest, again for a range of crops. However, with irrigation facilities that have provided a predictable water supply, only a tenuous link ties San Isidro to the festival and to farmers’ ritual practices and beliefs. Dizon argues that the *Pahiyas*, promoted as a national tourist attraction since the 1970s, has ceased to be an agrarian festival (despite its image to outsiders) and has turned primarily into a celebration of Lucban’s identity.

In response to the trumped up tourist-oriented image of *Pahiyas* as an agricultural feast, “rice wafers have been pushed forward in the last several decades as the main display” (Dizon 2005, 81). In the early 1990s,

because Lucban households began to use plastic buntings that bear the logos of corporations such as San Miguel and Purefoods, the municipal government required the use of rice wafers and rice stalks as the main decorative materials before households could qualify, participate, and win in the festival's decoration competition.

A recent study by Lou Antolihao (2004) argues that the Pahiyas has become no more than a tourist spectacle. It has transformed itself from a community celebration to a cultural performance, bringing in corporate sponsors as well as conflicts between those who stress its religious essence and those who treat it as a purely secular event. The role of rice in the Pahiyas is that of an artifact, a signifier to tourists of an era and place imagined, not of the Philippine landscape as a whole but of this particular locality. Moreover, tourists view the kiping as objects in themselves, removed from the labor and ecological processes that produced rice and the rice flour, and from the internal dynamics of Lucban itself. In the Pahiyas, rice figures as a cultural object to be consumed, consistent with the general character of rice as a commodity.

Commensality and commoditization

Despite its diminished status, rice remains the symbol of commensality in the everyday life of Filipinos. Here, a contrast with Thailand's case is instructive. In Thailand as in the Philippines, the majority occupies the structural position as consumers of rice. However, because the Thais have a historically-deepened attachment to rice, they are able to visualize rice as more than just a commodity. In the Philippines, rice was symbolically marginalized during the colonial period even as its physical production was enhanced through wet-rice cultivation.

In the Philippines, the commoditization of rice is demonstrated by the fact that, from the lowliest street food seller (the *carinderia*) to the most elegant restaurant, a specific price tag is attached to rice. In contrast, in Thailand, rice is a "free good" in restaurants, with seemingly no market value in a country where it is grown in abundance. Restaurants in Thailand probably recover the cost of rice through means other than dictating a specific price tag. However, the absence of an economic valuation is emblematic of the cultural value of rice. Free rice signifies a common human bond, such as cold water generously given to one parched and thirsty.

Free rice is also suggestive of noblesse oblige, a patron's assurance that the poor shall meet their subsistence needs. Interestingly, in

restaurants and households in Thailand, rice is usually not served on a large plate from which individual eaters obtain their share, as in the Philippines; rather, rice is apportioned by the host from a large bowl and placed on individual plates. Rice is thus a gift of the authority figure. Rice is free, but marked with hierarchy. The social relations that surround rice seemingly transcend the market.

In contrast, in the Philippines, market relations permeate rice production and market distribution, where most Filipinos are consciously market-dependent consumers. The economic value of rice is undeniable. In addition, in a meal among adults, whether at home or in a commercial establishment, individuals help themselves with their own servings from a common plate of rice. In this private sphere no central authority dispenses rice; rather, each scoops rice from a common serving dish. The commensality around rice is visibly egalitarian, with a strong hint of individualism, a trait that culturally differentiates the Philippines from Thailand. In a Filipino meal, regardless of socioeconomic status, the partaking of rice is marked by a degree of parity and, one may add, the neoclassical economic ideology of consumer sovereignty.⁶

The continuing sumptuary importance of rice

Although marginalized in the formal world of ritual, rice retains symbolic significance for Filipinos, at least within small groups. This is evident in weddings. Even if the practice has been banned in many churches (to conserve the *economic* value of rice), grains of milled rice are showered upon newly-wed couples as they leave the church, ostensibly as a sign of blessing. Interestingly, this practice is a vestige (and seeming inversion) of a precolonial wedding ceremony during which an elder united the hands of the bride and groom “over a bowl of raw rice, which he then threw over the guests” (Scott 1994).⁷ Also in some (rural) places today, it is still believed that a newly-wed couple should eat sticky rice before entering the house or reception area so that their love for and devotion to each would be as sticky as the rice.

⁶ Recent fastfood and restaurant innovations such as rice toppings (with the viand placed on top of a bowl of rice) and separately wrapped servings of rice are in harmony with individualism and the ideology of consumer sovereignty.

⁷ Parenthetically, the precolonial practice may be read as a form of blessing given by the newlyweds to the social group, since the rice emanated from the couple’s hands. In the colonial and postcolonial wedding ceremony, the social group, in throwing rice to the new couple, blesses the latter.

In other private rites, rice retains its place. For example, the presence of rice as well as salt to ward off evil spirits from a new house is a must before the occupants move in their belongings. More importantly, various rice delicacies and rice cakes, such as *biko*, *suman*, and *bibingka*, are necessary elements in festivals and town fiestas. In these somewhat elaborate forms, rice transcends its quotidian character. Moreover, even low-income families strive to serve good quality boiled rice during fiestas and family celebrations, which again highlights the importance of rice in a meal.

Rice remains crucial for commensality in Philippine households. Among the poorest, rice will suffice to constitute a meal. Added flavor may come from salt, soy sauce, or instant noodles. A small amount of viand may be rationed, but rice is still taken from a collective plate. Rice, therefore, stands for the “we” even in the poorest of families. However, any marker of inclusion also implies exclusion. Due to poverty, several households may live in a single dwelling unit. The rice pot prepared and consumed by each household signifies the separateness of these households. The rice pot as a demarcating line is recognized by households concerned as well as by research organizations that conduct surveys and need indicators to define what constitute a household.

In daily life, the sacredness of rice is affirmed in many households. My father used to instruct me as a child to finish every last bit of rice morsel on the 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 substitution of rice by bread, noodles, and other cereal products, rice is still the essential food of Filipinos even in urban centers. Three interviews conducted for this chapter attest that food without rice is not considered 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 she does 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 orders spaghetti. However, Anna does not eat 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 snack foods and not as replacements for her preferred rice meals. She also consumes instant noodles and streetfood such as fishballs and considers these as snacks when eaten alone. To pass these off as lunch or dinner fare, 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 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 would 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. 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 would not engage in physically demanding work during the day.

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*” (with its foul odor, it cannot be eaten, especially when there is no viand). 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*” (regardless of the viand and how simple it is, even with just salt or fish paste, you can eat the rice). Edna has tasted NFA rice when she was younger and clearly remembers its poor smell. Since then, she had never bought or eaten this type of rice. Sometimes, whenever her family craves for it, they eat grounded corn, or what she calls “*bigas ng magsasaka*” (the farmer’s rice), because this gives a “heavier feeling” in the stomach and costs the same as grounded palay. In the end, however, her family still prefers to eat rice paired 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. 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.

Because he is currently on a diet, Allen only eats bread at dinnertime. "You don't need a lot of sustenance at night because you are resting already. I am also trying to lose fat, which is why I don't eat too much rice," he claims. His sisters, likewise, do not eat rice for dinner because they are on a diet. Occasionally, 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*" (my day is not complete).

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

Gastronomic qualities and social inequality

People's preferences regarding rice also provide a window to the local culture. For instance, the Chinese prefer to eat white rice; darker-hued rice varieties are seen as of inferior quality. Color, however, is evidently not the Filipinos' priority, as indicated earlier during the discussion on NFA rice. Both rich and poor respondents, despite their varying judgments, pay least attention to color but consider smell (or aroma) as its most off-putting quality. Such is consistent with the general Filipino concern for somatic odors (Aguilar 1997).

However, Sandoval's (1995) study in a rice-growing village in Laguna reveals class-based distinctions in the valuation of rice, including its aroma. While those in the village's upper ranks look for flavor, aroma, and soft texture as eating qualities, those in lower socioeconomic positions tend to prefer rice

that expands well (*mahilab*), feels heavier on the stomach and satisfies more quickly (*mabigat sa tiyan*), and takes longer to digest (*matagal matunaw*). Highly valued aromatic varieties like *Sinandomeng* and *Malagkit sungsong*, which were considered the most delicious, were also regarded as wasteful (*maaksaya*) because one tends to eat too much of it, too rich (*nakakaumay*) because of the strong flavor and aroma, too easily digested (*madaling matunaw*) because of its soft texture, and too expensive for “ordinary people”.... The salience of hierarchical ranking of categories is also evident in the preoccupation of informants belonging to the lower socioeconomic status with adjectives like “first class” and “second class” in referring to rice varieties.

(Ibid., 127)

As Edna testifies in case 2 above, poor households favor functionality and economy in selecting consumable rice and other cereals. The differentiation in rice varieties thus finds counterparts in the differential socioeconomic positions of consumers.

Organic rice: variation on a theme

Organic rice is bought and consumed by the middle and upper-middle classes, particularly those concerned about their health (to avoid ingesting chemicals from fertilizers, weedicides, and other farm inputs), environmental degradation, and sustainable development. Consumers of organic rice also include expatriates, nongovernmental organization (NGO) advocates, plush restaurants, and elite hospitals in Metro Manila.

Organic rice farming was initiated in 1986 among scientists, community workers, and farmers’ organizations based in Jaen, Nueva Ecija, as a form of resistance against the Green Revolution and as a way of bringing back “traditional” farming practices. The following year, the organization was registered under the name Magsasaka at Seyentipiko Para sa Ikauunlad ng Agham Pang-agrikultura and took the acronym MASIPAG (Yap 2003). The group estimates that a total of 1,897 farmers (tilling 1,754 hectares) are engaged in organic rice farming and 11,052 farmers (cultivating 15,411 hectares) use 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 2004).

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 rice is deemed indispensable to life—individually and collectively—one should eat the best possible rice. Informed by a belief in science rather than magical spirits, organic rice represents a new variant of an old theme: rice reinvigorates life.

5 Conclusion

The role of rice in Filipino social life and culture is best seen in the everyday world. This analysis has argued that, despite recent changes, rice is integral to the Filipino concept of a meal. It is the basis of commensality, defining small local entities, particularly the household and its associated relations. In the private sphere, rice retains its symbolic significance at the quotidian level. However, it does not figure in any ritual in the public sphere and it has no place in any national mythology. The demystified situation of rice makes it apparent that today rice is treated primarily as a consumer commodity. Indeed, the structural relationship of the vast majority of Filipinos vis-à-vis rice is that of consumer rather than producer. As such, ample data demonstrate that the purchase, consumption, and enjoyment of rice are inseparable from the large socioeconomic disparities of Philippine society. Moreover, the manner by which Filipinos eat rice in a meal provides a view to the existing but seldom recognized individualism among Filipinos.

The individuation process is a legacy of the colonial past, which radically transformed indigenous beliefs, including those pertaining to rice. This vital crop was disenchanting, such that Filipinos today no longer believe in rice spirits. Along the way, women were released from a cultural complex that had made them solely responsible for transplanting, weeding, and harvesting, producing today a comparatively flexible division of labor between men and women. These processes occurred during the Spanish introduction of lowland wet-rice production, with its plow and irrigation technologies. Ironically, colonial society offered a technological breakthrough in rice production while simultaneously marginalizing rice from the symbolic center of Catholic ritual.

During the Spanish colonial period, rice production increased. However, by the end of the nineteenth century, the rice deficiency that pervades the country today began to be entrenched. Still, the volume of

locally produced rice allowed it to become the staple food of most, especially elite, Filipinos. The other Spanish-introduced crops from the Americas, corn and camote, have become what they are today: the staple food of the poor, particularly in the Visayas and Mindanao. The social history of rice is ostensibly nonlinear. If there is a persistent aspect in the story of rice (other than its relative scarcity) from its prequest status as prestige food to the currently popular organic rice, it is the social inequality with which it has been inextricably bound.

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