

## Abstract

Rice is the most important crop in Japan. It has been the main diet for the Japanese since ancient times until today. Apart from being the main diet, rice plays important symbolic roles and has a special place in Japanese society. It is said to be the essence of Japanese culture. Many social behaviors and cultural values such as the notion of "Wa" (harmony), consensus-seeking, and the concept of "Amae" (feelings of dependency) originate from wet rice cultivation. When giving a description of Japan, one has to take rice into account. For the Japanese, rice is the metaphor of self and rice fields are the symbol of their ancestral land. Hence, it comes as no surprise that the indigenous name for Japan was "Mizu Ho no Kuni" meaning the land of the stalk of rice grain.

The purpose of this thesis is to study the significance of rice in Japanese culture, emphasizing its symbolic values. This thesis relies mainly on documentary research, including myths, legends, historical and anthropological writings. Malinowski's functionalism is used as a theoretical framework to organize the content of this thesis which can be concluded as follows:

Research on the history of rice and wet-rice farming in Japan, as well as on the consumption of rice and rice products, substantiates the economic and utilitarian values of rice in Japanese society.

Research on the beliefs and rituals concerning rice and rice cultivation illuminates the symbolic significance of rice in Japanese culture.

Research on the relationship between peasants and the ruling class in agrarian Japan during the Tokugawa period (1600-1868 A.D.) reveals that under the Tokugawa rule, when rice was the main source of wealth and power, peasants were severely suppressed by the elites.

Paradoxically, in today's high technology era, when Japan has become urbanised and rice agriculture is quantitatively not important, rice farmers are well protected by the government. This paradox can be understood in terms of rice symbolism.