

## Shades Of Hopi Amelioration

Food Changes In Japanese Culture: A 1949 Retrospective On SCAP's Trying To Wean The Japanese Away From White To Brown Rice And Corn

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### Preface

During the same week as the 60<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the end of warfare between Japan and the U.S. and allies, the Japanese announced their participation in an international effort to do research on rice genome sequencing. The research was sponsored, in part, by the Japanese Ministry of Agriculture. No mention was made of Japanese subsidies to domestic rice production, and the *sacred* connotation of rice in traditional Japan.

The genome project is considered a major accomplishment for the benefit of improving the quality and quantity of the world's No. 1 food crop. Though not all rice producers are happy, for fear of corporate control of rice production at the expense of the farmer, the scientific achievement called to my mind my own involvement with Japanese rice and food habits during the Occupation.

The notes below were written in 1949 as part of a University of California, Berkeley, student paper. *Bureaucracy without Ethnography*. No changes have been made in the text, though it would be fascinating to explore post-war Japanese changes in food habits and culinary history. The allusion to Hopi Indian culture was made to reflect another example of cultural resistance to outside influences. My use of the media to help Japanese cope with strange food imports was part of my work at the Civil Information and Education Section of MacArthur's headquarters.

Obesity in the United States, including the crisis of children's being overweight, demonstrates the difficulty of changing food habits in any society. Fast food chains and school nutritionists have worked to reduce fat and sugary soft drink consumption. Yet, U.S. newspapers, during the same week as the rice genome discoveries, reported that these efforts have been often ignored in the U.S. and that business has been hurt.

In an age when sushi and sashimi have been added to pizza and hamburgers in some American diets, could this be considered an opening wedge for a wider U.S. acceptance of the healthy *non-sumo* aspects of Japanese cuisine?

### **The 1949 Text: American Anthropologists Ponder Changing the Japanese Diet**

A fruitful field for anthropological research, with immediate opportunities for application, lies in the study of cultural factors affecting food habits and methods of change in postwar Japan. With loss of its rice-bearing possessions in Formosa and Korea, Japan faced a food crisis at the start of the Occupation. American nutrition experts moved in along with tons of can goods to try and relieve the situation. They ran headlong into food habits which were centuries old. To assist these nutritionists, who came with the same zeal for calories as did the technicians who bumped into Hopi mores, I prepared press releases, arranged press conferences and radio broadcasts to try to drum up interest in corned beef hash, Australian "O" rations, grapefruit juice, Vienna sausages and other repugnant items.

This was done in a time of crisis, to alleviate a nation of belly-aches. There was no opportunity for following the results of Margaret Mead's wartime research on food habits for the National Research Council. It was not until later that we read what an anthropologist would have had us do: "A dynamic description of the total food habits pattern of a culture or sub-culture can be approached in a number of different ways: a minute survey of the food eaten at any given time by adults may be combined with careful observations and experimentally instituted attempts to change that pattern." In retrospect, however, the studies of Kurt Lewin, Natalie Joffe, Earl A. Koos and others connected with the food habits committee take on added practicability. The results could well be transferred, and with some modifications, made adaptable to another culture.

Take, for example, the Koos study on "Friendship Patterns in Nutrition Education," published by the National Academy of Sciences in 1943. Its suggestions on techniques developed among Irish mothers' clubs in New York could well be applied to the multifarious women's organizations that have mushroomed in Japan since the War. Through the work of Ethel Weed, SCAP women's information officer, and patroness of the suffrage movement in postwar Japan, numerous contacts had already been made with strategic women's groups through which to funnel data on nutrition. This, however, is the approach of a bureaucrat; an

anthropologist would regard a study of gossip channels, and word of mouth behavior as more fruitful background material to guide administrators in campaigning, say, for brown instead of polished rice.

The question of brown rice is perhaps the greatest since the War. The government, in a measure to cut down power usage during the War, encouraged the eating of unhusked rice. The almost religious deference given to white, polished rice, however, provided an obstacle in Japanese culture to even habit changes instigated in the white heat of wartime patriotism. Americans took up the cry for brown rice when they arrived, involving themselves in an area perhaps more intimate to the Japanese than the other two areas in which they also interested themselves: language reform and taxation.

One of the chief difficulties in introducing a brown rice eating habit is mentioned implicitly by Ruth Benedict and Geoffrey Gorer when they observed that Japanese eat rapidly. Brown rice, with the hull still intact, is harder to chew, and requires a change in cooking “technology,” the use of high pressure. Families who have been seduced by radio appeals to health, with brown rice recommended as a cure for the leg malady, *kakke*, have preferred their poor state of health to the pains which come from eating brown rice as rapidly as they do polished rice.

The tenacity of Japanese to their polished rice habits is best gauged by the widespread sale in department stores of “home rice polishers,” a soy sauce jar with a bamboo pounder, as soon as the government included brown rice in their official food ration. There were no such “cures,” however, to their food dislikes when, through an error in American logistics, they received nothing but sugar on their ration for a whole week.

In the case of corn, which also came to Japan in wholesale quantities as part of food imports, the Japanese had to be sold on the idea that this food of the American aborigines was not entirely alien to their own food habits. To try to “acculturate” corn into their diets, I tried to gather histories of various crops in Japan, which were not indigenous. In news releases and radio broadcasts, through a Japanese counterpart to “Helpful Hints to Housewives,” and soap operas, the finding of this “research” was placed: Corn had been grown in Japan, in the hills of Shikoku, since the Momoyama period; it antedated the Americans. Whether the increased corn consumption which followed was a result of this propaganda, or the more likely possibility that the Japanese were hungry enough to eat anything, I have no experimental data to explain. At any

rate, this demonstrates one technique which bureaucrats without ethnographers have to try in occupying a country.