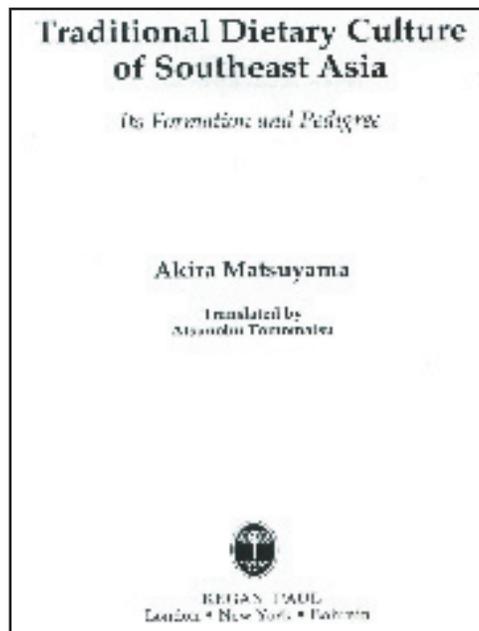


Traditional Dietary Culture of South East Asia*

Akira Mutsuyama



Professor Matsuyama's work on dietary cultures of Southeast Asia represents certainly the work of a lifetime. Its purpose is very ambitious: to present and analyze food habits in this vast and complex area of the world, from prehistoric times to the present.

The volume starts with an extremely detailed description of the past and present geographical aspects of the area, and the history of its population as he could gather from the available data. We follow thus the

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different waves of human occupation of these territories, their languages and their various moves.

Only then we start on the very subject of dietary culture: the available foods. Most of the data for the very early period concern the continent and come from the works of Chester Gorman at Spirit Cave site in Thailand and William Solheim in sites further south realized in the nineteen sixties and seventies. It is interesting to note that already in Palaeolithic times, the food patterns in Southeast Asia seem to be established: the continent on the one hand, and the islands on the other hand, following more or less Wallace's line: tubers in the south and east of the islands, cereals in other parts. Pigs, dogs, chickens, bovines are present, as well as rice (possibly cultivated, cf. C. Gorman's work), taro, sago, yams, and of course the ever-present fish. We discern the birth of that fish and rice culture of later times.

Slowly the author brings us to discover newer plants and agricultural techniques, setting the roots of what this sub-continent is today.

Entering historical times, for the period preceding the arrival of Europeans, we observe the influence of the two great neighbours: India and China. Foods and various production techniques coming from one and the other were adopted and integrated into local cultures to give birth to the specific profile of food production and consumption in this area. Indian culture was introduced through the Hindu kingdoms, in the islands (Borubudur, Sriwijaya in Java for example) Kampuchea or Sukhothai in what is now Cambodia and Thailand. Chinese migrations on the other hand, penetrating into the area, also brought new foods (possibly soy and fermentation techniques for food preservation). Common traits begin to appear: the making of alcoholic beverages with the sweet sap of palms, juice of sugar cane or grains like millet or rice; sugar making with the same sweet saps or cane. Drying fish and fermenting some for fish pastes or sauces: *naam plaa* and *nuoc mam* on Thailand and Vietnam are today the most famous, but such fish sauces and pastes exist practically under the same form in southern China and the islands.

Rice becomes extensively cultivated; irrigation is established wherever possible so that the ancient dry rice of upland production is replaced by low land inundated fields. Around the 10th century rice becomes a staple in most low land areas and in terraced hills on the continent. It occurs

somewhat later, around the 14th century, for the islands. The eastern islands retain their staples: yams, taro and sago as well as other roots.

Spices are present in the food: the native ones – ginger, galingale, nutmeg, cloves, pepper, cinnamon. They are trading goods, and travel as far as the Roman Empire, and later to Venice through Indian then Arab traders and sailboats. Indeed, the trade routes in pre European times did much to generalize the food patterns of the various populations through exchanges of plants and techniques.

This particular part of the book is based on a few manuscripts on lontar (palm leaves) and copper plates, and also on the very rich iconography from all the *bas reliefs* and sculptures of Borubudur and Angkor Wat. Practically all the representations of foods are analyzed. It is evident that the only bases for data were through these two major sites. We have little concerning anything else outside of the early writings of the Chinese, which are recorded extensively in the last part of these chapters.

The European occupation period is then considered and the evolution of food production and consumption, most particularly in Indonesia and the colonized areas of the continent. The major changes in food ways concern the introduction of American plants into the daily diet: capsicum (hot peppers), tomatoes, pineapple, sweet potato, cassava, maize, potatoes, and other fruits and vegetables considerably changed the tastes. They acquired the pungency of contemporary cuisines of Southeast Asia. While the very eastern parts – *i.e.* New Guinea, some of the Lesser Sundas – retain the very basic diet of tubers and sago, pigs for meat, and fish. While Islamisation was completed in the Malay Peninsula and western Indonesia as well as in some parts of the Philippines, it marked the disappearance of pigs, and more discreetly of alcoholic beverages.

Extensive agriculture developed further with tea, coffee and cane plantations, and the even more extensive rice production.

Finally, the last part concerns what was contemporary in the late sixties and early seventies, in post colonial times. The author describes for every ethnic group recorded what is known of their diet, from Hill Tribes of the Continent to the most remote population of forgotten islands. The descriptions are very basic, noting the staple, if any, and food production techniques. Lastly he concerns himself with the production of all the

possible types of alcoholic beverages, from all the possible sources: palm, sugar cane, fruit juice, cereals, and then for traditional sugar making with mostly the same types of juices. These chapters are particularly interesting in that he has noted all the various micro organisms present in various types of starters for fermentation, throughout the whole area. It is precious work for biochemists interested in traditional techniques of food production.

Finally, let me add that for every major part of the book, there are tables giving the vernacular and scientific names (whenever possible) of all the foods mentioned, or present at the times he describes. A very useful ethnolinguistic work.

But it is also necessary now to be critical on many points of this enormous amount of work. First, the great difficulty one has in reading it: the translation into English from Japanese is painstaking, heavy, and often incomprehensible (example: half blooded children, for children from mixed unions). Certain phrases are downright wrong: the Paleolithic would be "A time without language" (!) (p.53). You can't say that to a prehistorian, and I am not sure the author meant precisely that. One is constantly rewording some sentences to make them understandable.

At the very beginning, the concept of "tradition" and "traditional" is questionable; the author links it to the "aboriginal". In contemporary anthropology, this doesn't make sense. Tradition is not immobility and repeated ancient patterns; it is their reinterpretation, and absorption into constantly changing cultures and populations. The process is dynamic, not static. Even if a specific pattern was established in prehistoric times, it evolves and is transformed, breaking up into several sub-patterns. How do we know for example that some "tribes" today have the same or a comparable diet to the one of populations around 10000-6000 B.C.?

When the author mentions that the ancient practice of cannibalism has disappeared in the area, he forgets that up to the early XXth century it was still present in New Guinea, and possibly in some Lesser Sunda Islands (I have met in 1960, in Timor, an old Atoni warrior who told of his own father having eaten an enemy).

If the spread of wet rice cultivation is masterfully analyzed, and the description of native edible plants of all sorts very complete for the periods

between the Neolithic and let's say the first Hindu Kingdoms, the following period, that is the historical one up to the arrival of Europeans, is based mainly on two sites: Angkor and Borubudur. It is certainly a rich source of information based on a few writings, stone *bas reliefs* and carvings, but it presents only a small part of the picture. And we come to another questionable point: the author mentions the possibility of maize having arrived independently to Asia, through the Pacific, in ancient times... as for the sweet potato (this theory was at the origin of the famous Kon Tiki crossing of the Pacific by Thor Heiderdal). The reason is that on some stone carvings a plant resembles ears of maize... There is much to be said against such interpretations: the sculptors can stylize the things they are representing, and we are never quite sure what they actually depicted. Moreover, no European traveller or later colonizer ever mentioned maize as a plant cultivated in the area; indeed, they are the ones who brought it to South East Asia. Such questions should be treated with great prudence.

The largest part of what was intended to be the history of dietary cultures is devoted to making alcoholic drinks: wines, beer, later distilled spirits. This is extremely interesting in itself, but it gives a sort of unbalance to the book. We know more about this type of drink than about the actual foods eaten daily and how they were cooked. It is true however that this type of production is present in the whole of South East Asia and represents a common heritage as for rice and fish in the continent and part of the islands, and tubers out west.

The author also mentions that non sticky rice became the staple everywhere, at the expansion of wet rice cultivation, but he forgets that it has always been and still is the staple for the Lao and the Northern Thai.

The period of post colonial times ends by the exhaustive description of the various ethnic groups' diets. The data is often not correct or lacking precision. And the descriptions only show the immense variety of patterns and foods in the area, demonstrating differences rather than unity in the basic cultures. These are only a few of the numerous criticisms we can make on the very lengthy and detailed description of data from various sources.

It is today inconceivable that one person would undertake such an encyclopaedic type of work. Scientific data is too numerous, too specialized,

making it impossible to collect everything in one single personal work. This nevertheless extremely interesting and useful book is probably one of the last of its type, an heritage of the 19th century scientists, endlessly collecting information, in a rather indiscriminate manner (they could hardly do otherwise) and interpreting it to produce the work of a life time, such as Frazer did when writing *The Golden Bow*.

In any case, it is the only work of its kind on Southeast Asia, and as such it is very useful and full of information, even if the reading is hard.

Book Review by Annie Hubert