Sir James George Frazer (1854–1941). The Golden Bough. 1922.

**Chapter 46. The Corn-mother in Many Lands**

**§ 2. The Rice-mother in the East Indies**IF the reader still feels any doubts as to the meaning of the harvest customs which have been practised within living memory by European peasants, these doubts may perhaps be dispelled by comparing the customs observed at the rice-harvest by the Malays and Dyaks of the East Indies. For these Eastern peoples have not, like our peasantry, advanced beyond the intellectual stage at which the customs originated; their theory and their practice are still in unison; for them the quaint rites which in Europe have long dwindled into mere fossils, the pastime of clowns and the puzzle of the learned, are still living realities of which they can render an intelligible and truthful account. Hence a study of their beliefs and usages concerning the rice may throw some light on the true meaning of the ritual of the corn in ancient Greece and modern Europe.

Now the whole of the ritual which the Malays and Dyaks observe in connexion with the rice is founded on the simple conception of the rice as animated by a soul like that which these people attribute to mankind. They explain the phenomena of reproduction, growth, decay, and death in the rice on the same principles on which they explain the corresponding phenomena in human beings. They imagine that in the fibres of the plant, as in the body of a man, there is a certain vital element, which is so far independent of the plant that it may for a time be completely separated from it without fatal effects, though if its absence be prolonged beyond certain limits the plant will wither and die. This vital yet separable element is what, for the want of a better word, we must call the soul of a plant, just as a similar vital and separable element is commonly supposed to constitute the soul of man; and on this theory or myth of the plant-soul is built the whole worship of the cereals, just as on the theory or myth of the human soul is built the whole worship of the dead,—a towering superstructure reared on a slender and precarious foundation.

Believing the rice to be animated by a soul like that of a man, the Indonesians naturally treat it with the deference and the consideration which they show to their fellows. Thus they behave towards the rice in bloom as they behave towards a pregnant woman; they abstain from firing guns or making loud noises in the field, lest they should so frighten the soul of the rice that it would miscarry and bear no grain; and for the same reason they will not talk of corpses or demons in the rice-fields. Moreover, they feed the blooming rice with foods of various kinds which are believed to be wholesome for women with child; but when the rice-ears are just beginning to form, they are looked upon as infants, and women go through the fields feeding them with rice-pap as if they were human babes. In such natural and obvious comparisons of the breeding plant to a breeding woman, and of the young grain to a young child, is to be sought the origin of the kindred Greek conception of the Corn-mother and the Corn-daughter, Demeter and Persephone. But if the timorous feminine soul of the rice can be frightened into a miscarriage even by loud noises, it is easy to imagine what her feelings must be at harvest, when people are under the sad necessity of cutting down the rice with the knife. At so critical a season every precaution must be used to render the necessary surgical operation of reaping as inconspicuous and as painless as possible. For that reason the reaping of the seed-rice is done with knives of a peculiar pattern, such that the blades are hidden in the reapers’ hands and do not frighten the rice-spirit till the very last moment, when her head is swept off almost before she is aware; and from a like delicate motive the reapers at work in the fields employ a special form of speech, which the rice-spirit cannot be expected to understand, so that she has no warning or inkling of what is going forward till the heads of rice are safely deposited in the basket.

Among the Indonesian peoples who thus personify the rice we may take the Kayans or Bahaus of Central Borneo as typical. In order to secure and detain the volatile soul of the rice the Kayans resort to a number of devices. Among the instruments employed for this purpose are a miniature ladder, a spatula, and a basket containing hooks, thorns, and cords. With the spatula the priestess strokes the soul of the rice down the little ladder into the basket, where it is naturally held fast by the hooks, the thorn, and the cord; and having thus captured and imprisoned the soul she conveys it into the rice-granary. Sometimes a bamboo box and a net are used for the same purpose. And in order to ensure a good harvest for the following year it is necessary not only to detain the soul of all the grains of rice which are safely stored in the granary, but also to attract and recover the soul of all the rice that has been lost through falling to the earth or being eaten by deer, apes, and pigs. For this purpose instruments of various sorts have been invented by the priests. One, for example, is a bamboo vessel provided with four hooks made from the wood of a fruit-tree, by means of which the absent rice-soul may be hooked and drawn back into the vessel, which is then hung up in the house. Sometimes two hands carved out of the wood of a fruit-tree are used for the same purpose. And every time that a Kayan housewife fetches rice from the granary for the use of her household, she must propitiate the souls of the rice in the granary, lest they should be angry at being robbed of their substance.

The same need of securing the soul of the rice, if the crop is to thrive, is keenly felt by the Karens of Burma. When a rice-field does not flourish, they suppose that the soul (*kelah*) of the rice is in some way detained from the rice. If the soul cannot be called back, the crop will fail. The following formula is used in recalling the *kelah* (soul) of the rice: “O come, rice-*kelah,* come! Come to the field. Come to the rice. With seed of each gender, come. Come from the river Kho, come from the river Kaw; from the place where they meet, come. Come from the West, come from the East. From the throat of the bird, from the maw of the ape, from the throat of the elephant. Come from the sources of rivers and their mouths. Come from the country of the Shan and Burman. From the distant kingdoms come. From all granaries come. O rice-*kelah,* come to the rice.”

The Corn-mother of our European peasants has her match in the Rice-mother of the Minangkabauers of Sumatra. The Minangkabauers definitely attribute a soul to rice, and will sometimes assert that rice pounded in the usual way tastes better than rice ground in a mill, because in the mill the body of the rice was so bruised and battered that the soul has fled from it. Like the Javanese they think that the rice is under the special guardianship of a female spirit called Saning Sari, who is conceived as so closely knit up with the plant that the rice often goes by her name, as with the Romans the corn might be called Ceres. In particular Saning Sari is represented by certain stalks or grains called *indoea padi,* that is, literally, “Mother of Rice,” a name that is often given to the guardian spirit herself. This so-called Mother of Rice is the occasion of a number of ceremonies observed at the planting and harvesting of the rice as well as during its preservation in the barn. When the seed of the rice is about to be sown in the nursery or bedding-out ground, where under the wet system of cultivation it is regularly allowed to sprout before being transplanted to the fields, the best grains are picked out to form the Rice-mother. These are then sown in the middle of the bed, and the common seed is planted round about them. The state of the Rice-mother is supposed to exert the greatest influence on the growth of the rice; if she droops or pines away, the harvest will be bad in consequence. The woman who sows the Rice-mother in the nursery lets her hair hang loose and afterwards bathes, as a means of ensuring an abundant harvest. When the time comes to transplant the rice from the nursery to the field, the Rice-mother receives a special place either in the middle or in a corner of the field, and a prayer or charm is uttered as follows: “Saning Sari, may a measure of rice come from a stalk of rice and a basketful from a root; may you be frightened neither by lightning nor by passers-by! Sunshine make you glad; with the storm may you be at peace; and may rain serve to wash your face!” While the rice is growing, the particular plant which was thus treated as the Rice-mother is lost sight of; but before harvest another Rice-mother is found. When the crop is ripe for cutting, the oldest woman of the family or a sorcerer goes out to look for her. The first stalks seen to bend under a passing breeze are the Rice-mother, and they are tied together but not cut until the first-fruits of the field have been carried home to serve as a festal meal for the family and their friends, nay even for the domestic animals; since it is Saning Sari’s pleasure that the beasts also should partake of her good gifts. After the meal has been eaten, the Rice-mother is fetched home by persons in gay attire, who carry her very carefully under an umbrella in a neatly worked bag to the barn, where a place in the middle is assigned to her. Every one believes that she takes care of the rice in the barn and even multiplies it not uncommonly.

When the Tomori of Central Celebes are about to plant the rice, they bury in the field some betel as an offering to the spirits who cause the rice to grow. The rice that is planted round this spot is the last to be reaped at harvest. At the commencement of the reaping the stalks of this patch of rice are tied together into a sheaf, which is called “the Mother of the Rice” (*ineno pae*), and offerings in the shape of rice, fowl’s liver, eggs, and other things are laid down before it. When all the rest of the rice in the field has been reaped, “the Mother of the Rice” is cut down and carried with due honour to the rice-barn, where it is laid on the floor, and all the other sheaves are piled upon it. The Tomori, we are told, regard the Mother of the Rice as a special offering made to the rice-spirit Omonga, who dwells in the moon. If that spirit is not treated with proper respect, for example if the people who fetch rice from the barn are not decently clad, he is angry and punishes the offenders by eating up twice as much rice in the barn as they have taken out of it; some people have heard him smacking his lips in the barn, as he devoured the rice. On the other hand the Toradjas of Central Celebes, who also practice the custom of the Rice-mother at harvest, regard her as the actual mother of the whole harvest, and therefore keep her carefully, lest in her absence the garnered store of rice should all melt away and disappear.

Again, just as in Scotland the old and the young spirit of the corn are represented as an Old Wife (*Cailleach*) and a Maiden respectively, so in the Malay Peninsula we find both the Rice-mother and her child represented by different sheaves or bundles of ears on the harvest-field. The ceremony of cutting and bringing home the Soul of the Rice was witnessed by Mr. W. W. Skeat at Chodoi in Selangor on the twenty-eighth of January 1897. The particular bunch or sheaf which was to serve as the Mother of the Rice-soul had previously been sought and identified by means of the markings or shape of the ears. From this sheaf an aged sorceress, with much solemnity, cut a little bundle of seven ears, anointed them with oil, tied them round with parti-coloured thread, fumigated them with incense, and having wrapt them in a white cloth deposited them in a little oval-shaped basket. These seven ears were the infant Soul of the Rice and the little basket was its cradle. It was carried home to the farmer’s house by another woman, who held up an umbrella to screen the tender infant from the hot rays of the sun. Arrived at the house the Rice-child was welcomed by the women of the family, and laid, cradle and all, on a new sleepingmat with pillows at the head. After that the farmer’s wife was instructed to observe certain rules of taboo for three days, the rules being in many respects identical with those which have to be observed for three days after the birth of a real child. Something of the same tender care which is thus bestowed on the newly-born Rice-child is naturally extended also to its parent, the sheaf from whose body it was taken. This sheaf, which remains standing in the field after the Rice-soul has been carried home and put to bed, is treated as a newly-made mother; that is to say, young shoots of trees are pounded together and scattered broadcast every evening for three successive days, and when the three days are up you take the pulp of a coco-nut and what are called “goat-flowers,” mix them up, eat them with a little sugar, and spit some of the mixture out among the rice. So after a real birth the young shoots of the jack-fruit, the rose-apple, certain kinds of banana, and the thin pulp of young coco-nuts are mixed with dried fish, salt, acid, prawn-condiment, and the like dainties to form a sort of salad, which is administered to mother and child for three successive days. The last sheaf is reaped by the farmer’s wife, who carries it back to the house, where it is threshed and mixed with the Rice-soul. The farmer then takes the Rice-soul and its basket and deposits it, together with the product of the last sheaf, in the big circular rice-bin used by the Malays. Some grains from the Rice-soul are mixed with the seed which is to be sown in the following year. In this Rice-mother and Rice-child of the Malay Peninsula we may see the counterpart and in a sense the prototype of the Demeter and Persephone of ancient Greece.

Once more, the European custom of representing the corn-spirit in the double form of bride and bridegroom has its parallel in a ceremony observed at the rice-harvest in Java. Before the reapers begin to cut the rice, the priest or sorcerer picks out a number of ears of rice, which are tied together, smeared with ointment, and adorned with flowers. Thus decked out, the ears are called the *padi-pe˘ngantèn,* that is, the Rice-bride and the Rice-bridegroom; their wedding feast is celebrated, and the cutting of the rice begins immediately afterwards. Later on, when the rice is being got in, a bridal chamber is partitioned off in the barn, and furnished with a new mat, a lamp, and all kinds of toilet articles. Sheaves of rice, to represent the wedding guests, are placed beside the Rice-bride and the Rice-bridegroom. Not till this has been done may the whole harvest be housed in the barn. And for the first forty days after the rice has been housed, no one may enter the barn, for fear of disturbing the newly-wedded pair.

In the islands of Bali and Lombok, when the time of harvest has come, the owner of the field himself makes a beginning by cutting “the principal rice” with his own hands and binding it into two sheaves, each composed of one hundred and eight stalks with their leaves attached to them. One of the sheaves represents a man and the other a woman, and they are called “husband and wife.” The male sheaf is wound about with thread so that none of the leaves are visible, whereas the female sheaf has its leaves bent over and tied so as to resemble the roll of a woman’s hair. Sometimes, for further distinction, a necklace of rice-straw is tied round the female sheaf. When the rice is brought home from the field, the two sheaves representing the husband and wife are carried by a woman on her head, and are the last of all to be deposited in the barn. There they are laid to rest on a small erection or on a cushion of rice-straw. The whole arrangement, we are informed, has for its object to induce the rice to increase and multiply in the granary, so that the owner may get more out of it than he put in. Hence when the people of Bali bring the two sheaves, the husband and wife, into the barn, they say, “Increase ye and multiply without ceasing.” When all the rice in the barn has been used up, the two sheaves representing the husband and wife remain in the empty building till they have gradually disappeared or been devoured by mice. The pinch of hunger sometimes drives individuals to eat up the rice of these two sheaves, but the wretches who do so are viewed with disgust by their fellows and branded as pigs and dogs. Nobody would ever sell these holy sheaves with the rest of their profane brethren.

The same notion of the propagation of the rice by a male and female power finds expression amongst the Szis of Upper Burma. When the paddy, that is, the rice with the husks still on it, has been dried and piled in a heap for threshing, all the friends of the household are invited to the threshing-floor, and food and drink are brought out. The heap of paddy is divided and one half spread out for threshing, while the other half is left piled up. On the pile food and spirits are set, and one of the elders, addressing “the father and mother of the paddy-plant,” prays for plenteous harvests in future, and begs that the seed may bear many fold. Then the whole party eat, drink, and make merry. This ceremony at the threshing-floor is the only occasion when these people invoke “the father and mother of the paddy.”