

## **Of Rice and Men: Commodity, Hybridity, and Collective Memory in the American Marketplace**

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(Received: 20-4-14 / Accepted: 21-5-14)

### **Abstract**

This study examines the hybridization of ethnic cultures in the U.S., using rice products as a case in point. The paper presents and analyzes photographic observations of various brands of rice from six cultures in local stores in an American Midwestern city. The analysis of the rice brands helps us understand the first and the third of the three levels of hybridity. The first-level hybridity, or merchandizing hybridity, takes place when rice commodities from foreign cultures become available in the host society's market; the second-level hybridity, or consumptive hybridity, occurs when people's practices and lifestyles change by adopting rice and cuisine choices from more than one culture; the third-level hybridity, or symbolic hybridity, involves the mixing of the ideas and collective memory associated with rice of various origins. The analysis suggests that hybridization in America through rice occurs on the first level. Further evidence is necessary to demonstrate hybridization on the second level. On the third level, some hybrid collective memory is contained in two popular rice brands.

**Keywords:** Hybridity, Hybridization, Rice, Marketplace, Collective Memory.

### **Introduction**

This paper concerns issues of multiculturalism, globalization, and hybridization. In the paper, I present a study of an everyday commodity—rice—as a case in point for understanding the process of hybridization in the age of globalization. While many other commodities may serve the purpose, rice is a good example because it is a major source of food supply for many cultures around the world.

First of all, what is hybridization? Hybridization is the act of mixing elements from different species, varieties, or types to produce hybrids, a process that creates hybridity. What is hybridity then? There are different versions and types of hybridity that come in various guises with dissimilar effects (Kraidy, 2005). In this paper, I focus on just one of the definitions of hybridity: the recombination of forms (or elements) for a potentially new social practice (Rowe and Schelling, 1991) and an extension of this definition. In the next section, I elaborate on the definition. What is a good example of hybridity? Rice, as a staple food in Japan, Korea, China, India, and many other cultures, may not be an obvious example for illustrating

hybridity. This paper treats rice in the American marketplace as the subject of cultural hybridity.

Migration can initiate and speed up hybridization; so can modern information and communication technologies, especially the Internet. The U.S. as a major immigrant country has been described as “the melting pot.” Today, the term is used much less often, replaced by newer expressions such as “the salad bowl” and “multiculturalism.” Regardless of what terms we use, immigrants coming from different corners of the world to America bring with them their respective cultures that form the foundation of the American culture as we know it today, and they contribute to many aspects of life in America—from its academia to its economy to its music and its cuisine. While one may regard both multiculturalism and hybridization as resulting processes of globalization, they are distinct in the following way: Whereas multiculturalism refers to the integration of diverse (immigrant) ethnic cultures into the host society (Rattansi, 2011), hybridization, especially cultural hybridization, emphasizes the mixing of cultures out of the integration of the global and the local (Ritzer, 2009). In other words, there can be multiculturalism in a society where diverse cultures co-reside harmoniously without any mixing at all in their daily life practices.

On the remaining pages, I first review the literature on the topic and offer a working definition of hybridization for facilitating the study of rice as a hybrid commodity in the American marketplace. I then describe issues in research design—both in terms of an ideal research design for studying rice as a hybrid culture in America and the simple design used for the current research. That is followed by the analysis of rice in the American marketplace, based on the photographic observations of two local stores in an American Midwestern college town. Through the analysis, we find that rice is indeed a representation of hybrid culture in America. Furthermore, the hybridization of rice can be achieved on three levels. The marketplace can be hybrid by the items it displays from various cultures (Beattie, 2005); *merchandizing hybridity* on the first level defines the practice of retailing a mixture of ethnic rice in the marketplace. Food consumption behavior can be hybrid (Hamlett et al., 2008); *consumptive hybridity* on the second level describes individuals’ practices of buying and consuming more than one type of ethnic rice. Collective memory itself can be a hybrid form (Foroutan, 2010); *symbolic hybridity* on the third level designates hybrid collective memory associated with a particular brand of rice.

Miele (2006, p. 352) highlighted “the importance of seeing consumer practices as hybrid in nature” and called attention to be paid to “the unexamined, routinized aspects of food consumption.” The significance of the current research is twofold: The study examines the marketing of a routine consumer food item, rice, as hybrid, and it studies the merchandizing hybridity and symbolic hybridity of rice in the marketplace. The analysis reported here suggests that hybridization in America through rice occurs certainly on the first level and on the third level where hybrid collective memory is contained in two popular rice brands.

## Definitions of Hybridization

The concept of hybridization/hybridity is related to several important concepts in the social sciences including essentialism, identity, creolization, syncretism, and assemblage. The concept relates to essentialism in the sense that essential properties (as opposed to accidental ones) in an entity are under scrutiny (for an up-to-date review of essentialism, see Pratten, 2012). It relates to issues of identity because hybrid identities can also result from the process of globalization (Smith and Leavy, 2012). Also related is the concept of creolization, which has many layers of meanings, ranging from the term “creoles” referring to the offspring of Old World born and raised in the New World to the process of creolization referring to linguistic restructuring involved in the formation of creoles (Stewart, 2007). While the terms of syncretism and hybridity are often used as synonyms in literary criticism, distinctions can

also be made where syncretism refers to a mere fusion of elements and hybridity denotes a fusion with a new consciousness emerging, as in Homi Bhabha's "Third Space" (Veit-Wild, 1996). Another closely related term is "assemblage," which has been popular in global studies, with its origin from Deleuzian philosophy (DeLanda, 2006; Deleuze & Guattari, 1987). In the review below I focus primarily on the discussions of the concept hybridity in the social sciences.

In the last two decades, social scientists have offered numerous useful definitions of hybridization. For Canclini (2000), hybridization is the mixing of elements from various diverse societies, in such a way that results in something "irreplaceably unique" (Adorno 1991, p. 68). Cut-'n'-mix experiences are common, especially those everyday experiences in consumer behavior and lifestyles, for example in food and menus (Nederveen Pieterse, 2007). Rowe and Schelling (1991, p. 231) defined hybridization of cultural phenomena as "the ways in which forms become separated from existing practices and recombine with new forms in new practices." Nederveen Pieterse (1994) extended this principle to structural forms of social organization. It is common knowledge that the Meiji Restoration adopted various Western institutions such as a form of Western legal system and a quasi-parliamentary constitutional type of government, directly modeled upon the constitutions of France, Germany, and the United States, and combined them with the imperial system that gave the emperor legislative power with the consent of the Diet (which contrasts with Article 41 of the current Japanese constitution that describes the National Diet as the highest organ of state power). Thus, the Meiji government was a hybrid social institution. None of these mixing of forms or elements from forms, however, may relate to another definition of hybridity given by Easthope (1998), according to which an individual can have access to two or more ethnic identities. This is essentially what Kraidy (2002) discussed in Latin America and what Bhabha (1994) explored in the postcolonial context (cf. Moss [2003] in this regard). Or in Joseph's (1999, p. 2) words, hybridity is "a democratic expression of multiple affiliations of cultural citizenship in the United States."

If we regard the mixing of (elements of) forms into new practices as a primary aspect of hybridity, such mixing can occur in the dimensions of space and time. For instance, one may find examples of hybrid sites and spaces in border zones that are the meeting places of different organizational modes such as Free Enterprise Zones and offshore banking facilities (hybrid meeting places of state sovereignty and transnational enterprise) and examples of hybrid or mixed times (*tiempos mixtos*) in Latin America, where premodernity, modernity, and postmodernity coexist and intersperse (Nederveen Pieterse, 1994). Hybridization in these areas is the first stage in the ontogenesis of new culture and new knowledge that provide a new theoretical resource for intercultural studies (Young, 1997).

Practices of hybridization are as old as the hills, with origins in pastoralism, agriculture, and horticulture, as Nederveen Pieterse (2001) stated, even though attempts to thematize mixing as a discourse and a perspective is relatively new. Today's genetic engineering makes hybridization an easier task than the old-fashioned grafting and cross pollination. Genetic technology made possible from the production of new type of hybrid antibiotics (Hopwood et al., 1985) to high yielding, better tasting tomatoes (Barach, 2010). Similar to the cultural examples of hybridization discussed earlier that emphasize the mixing of different cultural elements into new practices, the examples of new hybrid antibiotics and tomato plants describe the blending of genetic components into new entities.

East-West mixing is a particularly meaningful hybridization, for at least three reasons for studying globalization (Nederveen Pieterse, 2007a): the need to develop a polycentric perspective on world history to counter Eurocentrism, the recognition of the rise of Asia, and the importance of understanding globalization from global viewpoints. We cannot properly understand the multiple processes of globalization without an appropriate understanding of the importance of East-West fusion and its implication on globalization and hybridization.

Indeed, in face of recent globalization, it is commonly recognized in cultural anthropology that the East-West dichotomy has become increasingly useless (Hendry & Wong, 2006). At the same time, however, we should not lose sight of the power structure in hybridization. That is, hybridity is often hegemonically constructed to serve the interest of the social elite (Kraidy, 2002). Here the East-West mixing of elements from the two origins uses the arbitrary East-West dichotomy even though such dichotomy has been considered useless and false (e.g., Ohnuki-Tierney, 2006).

Another dimension of hybridization is the degree to which a particular hybrid practice has spread. NederveenPieterse (2009) treated hybridization as a globalization process, and termed the outcome of such a process as a “global *mélange*.” “Cultural *mélange* and cosmopolitanism, then, is not merely a precious elite experience but a collective condition and experience” (NederveenPieterse, 2009, p. 143). Such global *mélange* can be observed everywhere if we care to survey our social environment careful enough.

The theme of hybridity, according to NederveenPieterse (2007b), matches a world of intensive intercultural communication, ubiquitous multiculturalism, international migration and diaspora lives, and the relative erosion of certain types of boundaries; new hybrid phenomena indicate profound changes taking place as a consequence of migration and multiculturalism. Therefore, going hand in hand with multiculturalism and globalization is the omnipresent phenomena of hybridization.

Cultural hybridization is about the mixing of cultures out of the integration of the global and the local (Ritzer, 2009). Along the same lines, Khondher (2004) described the glocalization as the occurrence of blending and mixing two or more processes, one of which must be local. While this is the typical case of hybridity (that integrates the global and the local), Khondher (2004) gave an example of hybridity in Singaporean higher education that comprises the original British and the U.S. model, an example that involves primarily elements from the global.

For studying rice in the American marketplace, I regard practices of hybridization as having meanings on three different levels at least—merchandizing, consumptive, and symbolic—with no processual order assumed between them. Whereas rice can also be genetically engineered and hybridized to achieve better properties, such hybrid rice would be of little interest for cultural and social studies. Hybridity can only be defined relative to non-hybridity (Easthope, 1998). In a similar vein, Hutnyk (2005, p. 81) considered the degree to which hybridity relies on “the positing of an anterior ‘pure’ that precedes mixture.” *Merchandizing hybridity* defines the practice of retailing a mixture of ethnic rice in the marketplace. Bringing together Bhabha’s notion of hybridity, Beattie (2005) regarded the traditional marketplace as the epitome of local identity and the market with trades and goods from elsewhere as a site of hybrid meanings that unsettle local identity. For Kapchan (1993), the marketplace is hybrid in its products and items of consumption. Now we move on to rice as an item of consumption. If at a particular market, the rice shelves contain nothing but uniformly American rice, that is an anterior pure or non-hybridity; if, however, the rice aisle at a given supermarket offers rice from various cultures, then rice retailing as an economic and social practice at this market is hybridized and can disrupt the original local identity. Furthermore, in a Deleuzian sense, a deterritorialized assemblage is formed (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987); the assemblage in terms of its elements is not associated with the local, and similar deterritorialized assemblages can be found elsewhere in a globalized society. The resulting merchandizing hybridity emerges as a new social phenomenon, distinct from the merchandizing “pure” that existed before. Such hybridity has its economic and social implications, economic in terms of the merchant’s dealing with multiple, possible multicultural, suppliers, and social in terms of the multiracial, multicultural clientele of a store. Such a place may serve as a cosmopolitan canopy under which multiracial, multiethnic interactions are encouraged (Anderson, 2011).

*Consumptive hybridity* defines individuals' practices of buying and consuming more than one type of ethnic rice. Mintz (1986) considered the transformative effect of sugar in the processes of globalization and consumption. The role of rice, in a way not dissimilar to sugar consumption, can and should be understood in the process of globalization and in terms of diversity and mixture. Rice is an item found at most markets. For Kapchan (1993), the marketplace is hybrid also in associated lifestyles. Hamlett et al.'s (2008) reported example of the British supermarket Sainsbury's stocked continental foods (to cater for the needs of the Jewish community) and "Indian style" goods. Yet Hamlett et al.'s (2008) South Asian interviewees believed such goods were not provided for the South Asian consumer but because of the demand among "English people." This shows the local British residents' consumptive behavior is hybrid. Similarly, one's dietary lifestyle can be hybrid by consuming on a regular basis American rice, Japanese rice, Indian basmati, and Middle Eastern couscous (which is not rice technically but can be considered as a rice substitute). This is rice consumptive hybridity.

Finally, *symbolic hybridity* defines hybrid collective memory associated with a particular brand of rice. For example, playing the quena is important in Andean music because it symbolizes and identifies with Andean cultures and tribes. Similarly, rice is commonly considered a way of life in Japan, and is viewed as the symbol of Japanese soul and Japanese identity, serving as the vehicle of deliberation of the collective self (Ohnuki-Tierney, 1993). Kapchan (1993, pp. 308-309) categorized the marketplace not just hybrid in products and items of consumption but also in thought and expression and wrote that "[t]he marketplace represents a symbolic locus of contact with the foreign." For Foroutan (2010), collective memory reconstructs the past of a society by bringing together a myriad of individual stories. Therefore, collective memory is hybrid in nature. It goes without saying that this symbolic level of understanding is much more difficult to reach for the individual. For example, someone's music preferences can be multicultural and hybrid, but the person may not at all understand any of the symbolic meanings of the various types of music. By the same token, one may regularly choose rice from different cultures as part of one's diet, but may not know any of the symbolic meanings of the rice consumed.

We should also consider the creation of symbols, not just individuals' understanding of them. Commodity brand logos are created to convey symbolic meanings, often relying on collective memory, and hybridization can occur with the symbolic meanings of brand logos. A brand logo with hybrid collective memory can be at the symbolic level. One may argue that a hybrid brand logo at the symbolic level is the same as the merchandizing hybridity because the symbolic meaning does not reside in a particular individual but physically in the rice packaging. However, merchandizing hybridity refers to the mixing of retailing different ethnic rice by the same store while symbolic hybridity reflects the blended symbolic cultural meaning of rice associated with various cultural origins, in a single or multiple type(s) of rice.

## **Research Design**

There have been a few empirical studies entirely focused on cases of cultural hybridization. One such study is on the diffusion of Asian medical knowledge to Germany by Frank and Stollberg (2004). Selecting physicians practicing acupuncture from the Yellow Pages Berlin and the list of the largest professional organization DÄGfA and physicians practicing Ayurveda in the whole of Germany because of the latter's low density, the authors conducted semi-structured interviews with open-ended questions, 14 with medical acupuncturists and 15 with Ayurvedic physicians, and found four types of hybridization—biomedically dominated coexistence, coexistence under heterodox dominance, biomedically incorporation of Asian medicine, and the Great Medical Melting Pot.

To study rice hybridization in America at the merchandizing, consumptive, and symbolic levels, we would ideally need two kinds of data over time: both the sales and consumption information on all major types of rice over, for example, the last 50 years. In addition, we would also need in-depth interviews or unobtrusive observations of consumers from different cultural backgrounds all across America over the same period of time. The trends in the sales and consumption figures could then be substantiated by either self-reported lifestyle behavior or unobtrusive observations of such behavior as well as interviews with regard to people's knowledge of the symbolic meaning of various rice, thereby assisting us to arrive at a conclusion about the process of the hybridization of rice consumptive culture in America.

Such a research design is ideal but nonetheless impossible to carry because we cannot go back in time to do what was not done. Instead, I rely on a rather simple and practical design for the research reported in this paper. I first conduct a brief review of recent rice consumption trends in the U.S. I then use the unobtrusive method of photographic observations to record rice available in the market in two stores in a Midwestern town, Urbana-Champaign, Illinois, USA. The photographic observations provide a type of data belonging to the group of episodic archival records as nonreactive measures discussed by Webb et al. (1981). One of the two stores is AM-KO, the largest Asian grocery store in town and the other is a Walmart location. The former store caters primarily for the (East) Asian immigrant and nonimmigrant population in this college town though in recent years other residents have increasingly visited it. The latter is visited by people of all ethnic backgrounds.

An observed mixture of various types of ethnic rice in a single grocery store should be an indication of merchandizing hybridity because a store often begins business with rice from one culture. In other words, merchandizing hybridity is preceded by an anterior "pure" (cf. Hutnyk, 2005). For example, selling ethnic rice from multiple cultures in a general grocery store like the Walmart should provide a strong indication of rice merchandizing hybridity in the American marketplace. Put differently, a typical American market such as Walmart provides a container in which rice of various cultural backgrounds mix and display in the same rice aisle; this is mixing at the merchandizing level. The extensity of the cultural origin for rice available in a store should suggest the degree to which such hybridization has occurred.

To study hybridization at the level of consumption is not as straightforward. To definitively study consumptive hybrid behavior, one would have to conduct interviews of consumers. Short of doing that, we could only examine the availability of the types of rice at the general American store Walmart. As Hamlett et al. (2008) suggested, the provision of South Asian foods in the British supermarket Sainsbury's was perceived as for the benefit of the "English population" as much as the South Asians. The provision of ethnic foods, then, may serve as some evidence of hybrid consumptive behavior of the English population. In the same vein, the availability of ethnic rice in the general American supermarket Walmart should suggest hybrid consumptive behavior of the nonethnic Americans. Should the general American store have no ethnic rice at all from any other cultures, then we know that hybridization of rice consumption has not occurred at all at the consumptive level. However, we do not know if such hybrid consumption exists among Asians; even among the nonethnic Americans, we cannot know the degree of hybrid consumption without interviewing them.

Rice hybridization at the symbolic level is not possible to conclusively study with the current simple design. Without extensively interviewing, we cannot assess possible hybridization of individuals' symbolic understanding of rice varieties. However, we can study specific brand logos and their symbolic meanings as cultural objects imbued with collective memory. Through an analysis of two major brand logos, Uncle Ben's and Kokuho Rose, we will gain some insight into rice brand logo hybridization at the symbolic level.

Based on the rich literature on hybridity reviewed in the last section and the research design discussed in this section, I posit two hypotheses below. The 2010 U.S. census reported a population size of over 201 thousands, of which 9.4% were Asians, in the county in which the college town is the only key metropolitan area. The Asian population percentage should actually be higher for the college town because the outlying rural areas in the county are resided primarily by nonimmigrant population. The twin process of forming diaspora and producing cultural hybridity relates to migration (Kalra, Kaur, & Hutnyk, 2005). First, given the diverse diaspora population, *merchandizing hybridity* is expected. We may expect such hybridity take on different forms between the ethnic and the American supermarkets because mainstream supermarkets may carry ethnic foods as well as nonethnic foods (Hamlett et al., 2008) but not necessarily the other way around. Second, rice brands with long history are expected to demonstrate some *symbolic hybridity* when the notion of tradition is employed (cf. Foroutan's [2010] comment on hybrid collective memory for constructing the past of a society). Such symbolic hybridity is often purposefully constructed to speak to the target population.

### **Rice Consumption in the U.S.**

There are over 40,000 varieties of rice worldwide. There are only several categories of rice sold and consumed in the U.S. as chief candidates for hybridization. According to Yang, Dan, Hong, and associates (1997, p. 159), major rice types for the consideration of East-West fusion include the following:

Indica, long-grain rice that is the standard in the West and postcolonial nations; Japonica, short-grain rice that is the standard in East Asian cooking; Basmati, native to India and Pakistan, aromatic and distinctive, strong enough to stand up to the punch of curries and other spicy foods; Glutinous, used for special dishes in China and Japan; Jasmine, a variety of Indica from Thailand, looks much like any other long-grain but cooks up moister and stickier; brown, only in the U.S. is this considered a delicacy, just standard rice that has not gone through the polishing and bleaching.

According to the U.S. Department of Agriculture, rice is the nation's fastest-growing food commodity. Annual American consumption averaged about 25 pounds per capita in the mid-1990s, roughly twice to that of the early 1980s. (This is compared with a worldwide per capita of 145 pounds, the average Burmese of 408 pounds, Vietnamese, 367 pounds, and Japanese, 167 pounds, for example.) Some attribute this trend to the influx of Asian and Latino immigrants, and to the increasing mainstream interest in ethnic cuisines and health foods (Yang, Dan, Hong, & associates, 1997).

These authors attributed the increase in rice consumption to both the increase in the size of the immigrant population and America's general interest in ethnic cuisines and rice. The size of the immigrant population has experienced a sizable increase over the past four decades: 6.2% in 1980, 7.9% in 1990, 11.1% in 2000, and 12.9% in 2010 (Camarota 2012). The publication of the book *Eastern Standard Time* by Yang, Dan, Hong, and associates (1997) is a testimony to the increased interest in ethnic rice. In fact, the per capita consumption of rice increase is even higher if our starting point was 1970 and our end point was the early 2000s because the 2003 level was almost three times that of 1970 (Betres-Marquez & Jensen, 2005).

There exist racial and ethnic differentials in rice consumption, and these differentials did not stay stable over the last decade or so when data were available. Rice consumption in America has been on the rise over the last four decades at least. For the recent two decades we have survey data, about 90% of the U.S. adult population increased their rice consumption, and

relative to the other ethnic groups, non-Hispanic whites' rice consumption gained the most (Betres-Marquez, Jensen, & Upton, 2009, Tables 2 & 6).

### Photographic Observations of the Two Research Sites

I present below photographic data from the two research sites, AM-KO and Walmart. AM-KO is an independent supermarket owned by a Korean woman married to an American (at the time of the study in early 2010). Even the name of the store suggests fusion and hybridity, formed from the first two letters of the words “America” and “Korea.” The Walmart location is a superstore, selling anything from grocery to drugs to clothing. Figure 1 compares the rice aisles of the two supermarkets (Figure 1). The rice aisle in the Asian supermarket consists of four sections of metal shelves, giving one the impression of a warehouse. Unlike a typical American supermarket where bags of rice are stored in a warehouse first before being shelved, bags of rice are brought in and many of them are directly left on the shelves in this Asian supermarket. There is no particular order or locational arrangement of rice; all larger bags are stored together in this space. In comparison, the Walmart rice aisle has shelves well organized and clearly labeled as to what products this aisle is for.

AM-KO



Walmart



Fig. 1: The Rice Aisles in the Two Supermarkets

The Asian supermarket AM-KO does not carry American rice because its clientele would not come here to buy American rice. This is true of other Asian supermarkets in this town as well (there are five Asian supermarkets altogether). Walmart, like most other American supermarkets, carries the brand of Uncle Ben’s (Figure 2). Uncle Ben’s is the biggest brand name of American rice.

AM-KO

Walmart



Fig. 2: American Rice in Only One of the Two Supermarkets



There are several popular types of Indian rice sold in the U.S. The Asian food market shows three varieties in the two photos in the left panel of Figure 3, basmati rice (with the longest grain), idli rice (from South India), and sonamasoori rice (a medium-grain rice). The basmati is sandwiched between a bag of Korean rice and a bag of Thai rice while the lower photo shows the sonamasoori and the idli rice. In comparison, imported Indian rice was not observed in the Walmart store, which carries Uncle Ben's basmati rice, shown as the middle package in the photo in the right panel (Figure 3). Uncle Ben's Ready Rice is a product the company markets to people who are busy and can have rice ready to eat in 90 seconds' cooking with a microwave oven.

AM-KO



Walmart



**Fig. 3: Indian Rice in the Two Supermarkets**

The Asian supermarket shows three brands of Japanese rice in the two photos in the left panel of Figure 4: Kokuho Rose, Kagayaki, and Nishiki (Figure 4). Walmart competes quite well in this regard, selling two brands of Japanese rice, Botan (or Calrose) and Nishiki. Note that typically rice in the Asian supermarket comes in different sized bags up to 40-50 lbs while Walmart has no bags heavier than 20 lbs. Asian supermarkets have the loyal following of local immigrant and nonimmigrant Asian communities, hence the need for selling larger packages and more varieties. It is unclear why Walmart needs two brands of Japanese rice.

Being a Korean-owned store, AM-KO sells various types of Korean rice. Shown in the two photos of Figure 5 are three examples, two types of Han KukMi (Korean Rice) brown rice, the Daipoong brand, and the Cheong-jeong rice in 40 lb bag (Figure 5). In the first photo of Figure 4, next to the Kokuho Rose Japanese rice is a bag of Rhee Chun rice. Walmart, on the other hand, carries no Korean rice. This point is worth noting because, if Walmart is a serious provider of rice to the local East Asian residents from China, Japan, and Korea, then it would have to have Korean rice because it is a short-grained variety, like Chinese and Japanese rice, but has a lower price tag. The fact that it carries no Korean rice indicates that it is not a supplier of rice for the everyday consumption by the local East Asian community.

Walmart, however, is more serious about Thai rice. It has both Uncle Ben’s Ready Rice type and the Imperial Dragon brand of jasmine rice (Figure 6), presumably because jasmine rice is also long-grained, like the American rice. AM-KO shows two brands in the left panel photos of Figure 6, the Three Elephant Brand and the Peach Brand of jasmine rice. Jasmine rice is also known as Milagrosa rice, as shown on the packaging of some of the bags.

AM-KO



Walmart



Fig. 4: Japanese Rice in the Two Supermarkets

AM-KO



Walmart



Fig. 5: Korean Rice in Only One of the Two Supermarkets



## AM-KO



## Walmart



Fig. 6: Thai Rice in the Two Supermarkets

## AM-KO



## Walmart



Fig. 7: Middle Eastern Couscous in the Two Supermarkets

The Asian supermarket AM-KO shelves the Rivoire&Carret brand of couscous away from the rice corner because of its smaller package (Figure 7). Walmart sells the Near East brand of couscous, also in small packaging, and stores it with other health dietary items such as pilaf and wild rice, as shown in the right panel of Figure 7. The smaller packaging of couscous suggests that few local people consume it on a daily basis, like people do with rice, especially Korean, Japanese, and Thai rice. On the other hand, people in the Middle East and North Africa do eat couscous on a daily basis even though immigrants from those regions may not do so in the U.S.

One interesting observation is that neither store sells Chinese rice even though the local Chinese immigrant and nonimmigrant communities are large in size. Such rice is certainly available in supermarket on the West Coast such as the Bay Area and the Greater Los Angeles Area. Locally, however, Korean, Japanese, and Thai rice would suffice especially since these types have occupied the market niche for the East Asian and some Southeast Asian communities. Speaking with a local Chinese restaurant owner reveals that they do purchase Chinese rice (brand name Dasanyuan) from a wholesaler and mix it with Korean rice before cooking.

## **The Three Levels of Hybridization**

### **Merchandizing Hybridity**

The Walmart store taken as a representation of the US marketplace provides some interesting choices as far as the availability of rice goes. The rice aisle at this supermarket offers varieties of American, Japan, Middle Eastern, and Thai grains, and carries Indian rice made by the American company Uncle Ben's. This certainly indicates merchandizing hybridity in the marketplace through the merchant's dealing with multiple, multicultural, and likely multinational suppliers. Judged by the arrangement of the rice aisle, Uncle Ben's or American rice as a whole does not overpower rice representing other cultures.

We cannot exactly use the Asian food store as an example of local hybridization of the collective level because the objective of the store is to sell nonmainstream ethnic foods. Even so, the store's objective is to sell East Asian food items but nevertheless carries Indian, Thai, and Middle Eastern ingredients and products. Therefore, the Asian supermarket shows a type of merchandizing hybridity different from that of the Walmart's. That is, a hybridization taking place between and among the minority cultures in America as opposed to between the minority and majority cultures in the country.

The photographic evidence supports the first hypothesis about merchandizing hybridity. In either the Asian or the American supermarket, the rather mixed shelving style (of rice bags of different cultures), in particular in the Asian food store, offers the customers visiting these stores a chance to see rice from other cultures, and possibly to interact under the cosmopolitan canopy described by Anderson (2011). Thus, the hybrid rice aisle provides a social setting that facilitates multicultural and multiethnic engagement, perhaps communication and interaction as well.

### **Consumptive Hybridity**

It is difficult to establish the degree of consumptive hybridity without additional research. For the sake of argument, let us consider the extreme case of a total, 100 percent rice consumptive hybridity of all cultural backgrounds. When that happens, each of the U.S. resident population would eat the types of rice representing all the different population groups in the country: Whether our ethnic background is Asian, European, African, or Latin American, we would go out and purchase American, Indian, Japanese, Korean, Thai, and Middle Eastern grains, and enjoy them all at our individual homes. This would be consumptive hybridity par excellence. The photographic observations discussed earlier do not support such total hybridity because the mainstream supermarket does not display all kinds of ethnic rice and the Asian food store does not sell American rice.

Past consumer research in Britain shows that a merchandizing hybridity in a mainstream supermarket suggests consumptive hybridity among the nonethnic majority (Hamlett et al., 2008); the same argument cannot be made about ethnic minorities. In addition, we do not

know to what degree people in the majority group consume ethnic rice. To understand consumptive hybridity adequately, another study is necessary.

### Symbolic Hybridity

The symbolic meaning of rice and its hybridization can be better understood as collective memory, especially in the two cultures of studying collective memory described by Olick (1999): Some study national symbols such as monuments as a *collective* form of collective memory while others study peoples' memories of historical events as a *collected* form of collective memory. We may approach the symbolic meaning of rice, hybrid or not, in a similar fashion. Surveying rice consumers to obtain their understanding of the symbolic meaning of a particular type of rice is tantamount to studying the *collected* type of collective memory; analyzing brands of rice is akin to studying the *collective* type of collective memory by way of national symbols. Short of conducting surveys of rice consumers in America, I resort to the approach of studying brands and their symbolic meanings. I analyze below two brands of rice, Uncle Ben's, a brand of American rice and Kokuho Rose, a brand of Japanese rice.

There is a reason why rice had become an important food choice in America even before rice from Asia became widely available. As is well known, rice does not occupy an important place in cuisines of Europe, where wheat is the king and bread rules the day. That is probably why we have the common phrase in English, "bread and butter", meaning a basic means of support or livelihood. By contrast, in East Asia, notably Japan, South Korea, and Southern China, rice is the "bread and butter" for everyone. Naturally, associated with such staple food is one's identity with the land where rice is cultivated as well as with the people of the land.

In the U.S., the most popular brand of rice, Uncle Ben's, features the picture of Uncle Ben, an African American man, as the logo, as shown in the photographs. This logo in itself is already a work of cultural hybridity. The American rice is in fact African in origin. "The development of rice culture" in America, according to Carney (2001, p. 2), "marked not simply the movement of a crop across the Atlantic but also the transfer of an entire cultural system, from production to consumption" when "[a] knowledge system long practiced in West Africa was brought with slaves across the Atlantic." Rice cultivation is central to cultural identity in much of West Africa, where those ethnic groups who consider rice as their dietary staple do not claim that they have eaten unless the meal includes rice, and this cultural identity settled in the Americas with the slaves and their descendants from the rice regions of West Africa (Carney 2001, p. 31). Slaves brought with them other crops of Africa too, but "none proved as significant as rice in affirming African cultural identity" (Carney 2001, p. 137).

The use of Uncle Ben's as a brand name is interesting in itself. In the American culture in the past, "uncle" was used as a familiar title to refer to older black men (like "Uncle Tom" in *Uncle Tom's Cabin*) to whom the larger white society could never offer the more respectful "mister" (White, 2009). The use of the Uncle Ben's logo is to sell rice by drawing on the long history of similar representations of black men presumably having the expertise in cultivating, harvesting, and cooking rice (White, 2009). This is ironic because in West Africa, rice cultivation is often associated with female labor, rice cultivation is referred to as a "woman's sweat" by the Diola people in Senegal, and rice seeds were reportedly tucked away in women's hair aboard the slave ships to smuggle across the Atlantic (Carney, 2001). The Uncle Ben's marketing ploy shows that, to sell rice, a new identity was constructed by shifting the gender emphasis and relying on the image of an older, lovable, black male with knowledge and expertise for rice cultivation.

Today, however, the identity is transformed yet again. At Uncle Ben's corporate website (<http://www.unclebens.com>, accessed in September 2010), Uncle Ben takes on the image of "a genteel, high-powered corporate executive with worldly interests," offering "proverbs and

witticisms that reflect an educated life of the mind, as well as a business-oriented obsession with rice” (White 2009, p. 52). The website features Ben’s Office, a posh executive office with Uncle Ben’s portrait hanging on the wall. Instead of trying to sell the rice through Uncle Ben the “expert” rice grower slave, now the company employs the identity of a CEO-type, knowledgeable, wealthy uncle that people wish they had.

While we may not be able to expect everyone consuming Uncle Ben’s rice to know the newly created meaning of this rice in Uncle Ben the CEO, we can certainly expect the hybrid symbolic meaning intended—a 21<sup>st</sup> century African American business executive knowledgeable in rice (with perhaps just a touch of his roots in Africa hinted upon)—will be acquired by some of the consumers in the U.S.

Without as much fanfare as found at the website of Uncle Ben’s company, the website of Koda Farms in California (<http://www.kodafarms.com>) has a rich cache of historical text and photographic information on the origin of the company. The founder’s story is a compelling one: The founder of today’s Koda Farms, KeisaburoKoda, born in 1882, was from Ogawa in Fukushima Prefecture. His father was a samurai of the Taira Clan but became a miller and broker of rice and rice flour. With this story, KeisaburoKoda’s gentlemanlike photo of 1908 when he came to California, and a photo of his Japanese passport, Koda’s authentic authority in Japanese rice is firmly established. However, Keisaburo was not just a good farmer and businessman; he was active in Asian American civil rights groups and launched the People’s Rights Protection Association in 1945 to lobby against a discriminatory land law, which was declared unconstitutional in 1948. In the 1950s, he established the California Farming Trainees and the Japanese Farming Youth programs so that Japanese trainees could come to the U.S. to study American farming. For these achievements he was awarded the Order of the Sacred Treasure, 4<sup>th</sup> Degree, and the Order of the Sacred Treasure, 3<sup>rd</sup> Degree, from Emperor Hirohito. As we see, two kinds of collective memory are created by the website—one steeped in the Japanese tradition and the other in the American spirit—and intertwined in one brand of rice.

Koda Farms markets two major brands, Kokuho Rose rice and Sho-Chiku-Bai sweet rice. Kokuho Rose is the choice of many Japanese, Japanese Americans, and Asian Americans. The brand logo of Kokuho consists of the three imperial treasures: the jewel, the mirror, and the sword, eliciting memories of the ancient Japanese culture. On the other hand, the rose is a Western flower, regarded as the Queen of Flowers. By combining the two words “Kokuho” and “Rose”, the brand name purports to conjure up two cultural traditions and two collective memories and hybridize them in one rice—a type of rice that is the best of East and West.

Rice is considered a Japanese way of life, generally viewed as a symbol of Japanese soul and Japanese identity (Ohnuki-Tierney, 1993). Japanese expatriates living in Kentucky studied by Yotsumoto, Sakamoto, and Tanaka (2009) felt satisfied and happy with rice produced in California. Some of their interviewees believed that the image of Japanese land (presumably rice paddies where rice is grown) and the rice harvested there were inseparable, and would remind one of Japanese spirit and identity. Rice packaging in Japan, by contrast, does not necessarily need to resort to logos of tradition, such as Yamagata Haenuki rice though one may find examples such as Akita Komachi rice that does relate to tradition. Japanese rice in America, however, is a different matter. Kokuho Rose intentionally draws upon a hybrid set of collective memories of Japanese and Western cultures. To a smaller degree the Nishiki brand also calls upon tradition it may conjure up images of brocade from the past.

A cautionary note is in order here. There are many other types of rice whose brand logos may not possess much symbolic meaning. Furthermore, I do not intend to assess in this paper the efficacy of hybrid logos like Uncle Ben’s and Kokuho Rose. Neither do I know whether individuals regularly consuming more than one type of rice actually internalize or even understand collective memories associated with the types of rice. These issues are beyond this

paper. However, we do know that brand logos like Uncle Ben's and Kokuho Rose combine cultural traditions into one logo and use it as a means for marketing purposes; as such, hybrid collective memory is created and becomes available throughout the nation in supermarkets and on the Internet for the world to view.

## Conclusion

In this paper, I have analyzed rice hybridity in the American marketplace. Rice consumption has been on the rise over the past several decades in the U.S. as a nation. By and large, many ethnic groups have increased their rice consumption though the increase is noticeably larger for non-Hispanic whites, the majority in America, than the other groups.

Using photographic observations as a type of unreactive measures, I studied the rice aisles in two local supermarkets and compared rice varieties on the shelves in these stores. The study of the supermarkets provides evidence for a fairly high degree of rice merchandizing hybridity, supporting the first hypothesis; the study also presents hybrid collective memory at work as reflected in two most popular rice brands though other rice brands may not offer any hybrid collective memory, supporting the second hypothesis. The extensity of consumptive hybridity, however, cannot be properly studied without additional research even though there is some indication of consumptive hybridity among the majority group. The observation is also limited in its scope. Thus, while we can say we observed some degree of rice hybridity at the merchandizing and symbolic levels in one locale, we cannot generalize the observation to the larger American society or even to other college towns in the country. What we do know is that hybridity in rice marketing has occurred in at least one corner of the American marketplace.

The study of rice as a hybrid culture in America tells us that it is possible to conduct a more nuanced analysis of an everyday cultural object that is not so obvious as an example of hybridity. The study shows that many everyday cultural objects around us may all have a story to tell—a story about the hybrid global village in which we all live today.

## Acknowledgement

A lecture based on an earlier version of this paper was given at the International School of Osaka City University, September 14-16, 2010. The author wishes to acknowledge comments by Courtney Cutbertson, SooMee Kim, Jan NederveenPieterse, and Grant Shoffstall.

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