



The Goddess of Rice

(Indonesia)

A long, long time ago, on the island of Java there were no rice plants. The people of the earth had only grown cassava for their daily food. Rice was only permitted to be grown in heaven. At that time rice was the food of the gods.

At that time man was permitted to visit heaven by walking on the clouds. The gods and goddesses often came down to earth to chat with man.

One day a youth went to heaven. He happened to see the gods dining on food that he had not seen on earth. The youth did not know that the food he saw was rice.

The fragrant smell of the rice made the youth's mouth water. How he wished to taste the delicious rice!

He sought a way to get his wish. He went to see Dewi Sri, the Goddess of Rice. He found the courage to beg Dewi Sri to be permitted to stay in heaven and to learn to grow rice.

He said, "Dewi Sri, Goddess of Rice. I beg to be permitted to stay for a while in heaven. Please allow me to help plant, harvest, and pound your rice. Even if I get only a handful of rice, I want to help. I want to taste this rice, even if only a little."

Dewi Sri, who was wise and kind-hearted, agreed. "Did you know that rice comes from this plant?" She showed him a rice plant. "You may work here and learn to be a farmer and cultivate rice."



How joyful was the youth to get permission to stay in heaven. Dewi Sri taught the youth how to plant rice. First she taught him how to plough the rice field with a kind of tool to turn over the soil. It was called waluku.

Then she taught him how to soften the soil with a harrow called a garu.

After the soil was softened, the youth learned how to irrigate, raise seedlings, plant, and harvest. When the rice plant ripened, the goddess showed him how to cut the stalk using a small palm-held reaping knife called an ani-ani.

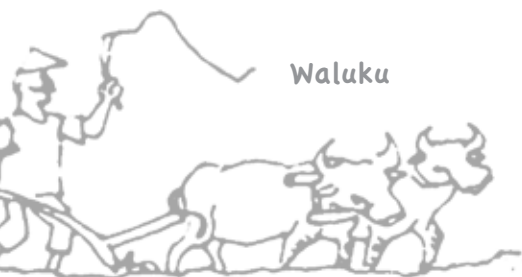
Dewi Sri also taught the youth how to pound the rice in a rice mortar called lesung. When all of this work was done, the youth was at last allowed to taste a small handful of the rice. It was delicious! Just as he had imagined it would be.

The youth stayed on in heaven and learned rice farming well. He also enjoyed delicious rice many times.

But after several years of hard work as a farmer in heaven, the youth decided to go back home to earth. He longed for his family, relatives, and neighbours.



Cutting rice using ani-ani



Waluku

“How happy they would be if the people on Java Island could enjoy this delicious rice,” he thought. “By eating rice, the people could become as healthy and strong as the gods.”

The youth approached Dewi Sri and asked permission to go down to earth to visit his family and friends, whom he had not seen in such a long time. Dewi Sri agreed. But very early in the morning, without the gods' knowledge, the youth took several ripe rice stalks. He carried them with him to earth.

Arriving on earth, the youth planted the rice grains just the way he had learned in heaven. The rice grew rapidly. He worked hard and his plants developed well.

As soon as he had a harvest, he gave rice seeds to all of his neighbours and showed them how to plant and care for the rice.

Eventually all places on Java Island were covered with rice plants. When the rice was ripening for harvest, a golden yellow colour covered the entire land of Java Island.

One day the gods came to visit earth. How startled they were to see golden rice plants stretching in all directions. They hurried back to heaven and reported to Dewi Sri. The gods were furious. Rice was permitted only in heaven.

Dewi Sri descended to earth. She knew this must be because of the youth who had helped grow rice in heaven. He must have stolen the rice seeds when he left heaven.

She soon met that youth.

At first Dewi Sri was angry, "Young man, why did you betray my trust? You should not have stolen rice. This is the food of the gods."

Lesung



**Garu**

“Forgive me, Dewi Sri,” said the youth.

“I did take rice seeds back from heaven without asking permission first. I did not do this for my own interest, Dewi Sri.

I brought this rice back for the benefit of all the people on Java Island. These

people had only cassavas to eat. I took pity on my fellow men and shared with them the rice seeds so that they also could taste delicious rice. I know I have angered you, Dewi Sri. I am willing to accept punishment for what I have done.”

Dewi Sri's anger subsided. The kind-hearted youth had intended to do something sincere and noble because he thought of other people.

“I forgive you,” replied Dewi Sri. “But you should always ask permission first and not take things by stealing. As punishment for this, I will never allow another human to come to heaven, the place where the gods live.”

“However,” she continued, “You will be allowed to cultivate this rice. But take notice that this rice plant is like my child. Take good care of it just as I have taught you.”

Dewi Sri gave clear instructions. “Irrigate the rice field regularly. Weed the wild plants around the rice plants. Fertilize the soil. Harvest carefully with the ani-ani knife, so that you do not waste any grains or damage them. Let the birds also enjoy a bit of the delicious rice. Don't kill them, because the birds are the beloved animals of the gods. If you don't pay attention to my orders, I will send natural calamities to destroy your work.” That was Dewi Sri's advice.

Before Dewi Sri flew back to heaven, she spoke once more. “In order to make the rice plants grow best, follow nature’s rules. Plant the rice at the right time. I will give a sign from heaven by dropping jasmine flowers from my hair bun. These flowers will become waluku stars (Orion). This is the sign that the season for planting has come.”

Supplementary information

- **Cassava** is a widely-cultivated tropical crop for its roots which are staple food for about 500 million people worldwide. Highly nutritious, the cassava root is used as vegetables in dishes, grated to make cakes, or ground into tapioca flour. It is also called singkong (Indonesia), ubi kayu (Malaysia), kamoteng kahoy (Philippines), man sampalang (Thailand), and cu san or khoai mi (Vietnam).
- **Dewi Sri** is the goddess associated with rice, abundance, and fertility among the Balinese, Javanese, and Sundanese of Indonesia.
- **Orion** is a formation of stars (or constellation) easily visible in the sky through the alignment of three bright stars making up Orion’s belt. The name Orion is derived from a hunter in Greek mythology.
- For the terms of **rice** in the languages of Southeast Asia and Korea, refer to page 143.