

**Gourou, Pierre (1984) Riz et civilisation. Paris, Fayard, 299 p.**

Joachim Voss

---

Volume 30, Number 79, 1986

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/021787ar>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7202/021787ar>

[See table of contents](#)

---

**Publisher(s)**

Département de géographie de l'Université Laval

**ISSN**

0007-9766 (print)

1708-8968 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

---

**Cite this review**

Voss, J. (1986). Review of [Gourou, Pierre (1984) Riz et civilisation. Paris, Fayard, 299 p.] *Cahiers de géographie du Québec*, 30(79), 105–106.  
<https://doi.org/10.7202/021787ar>

De la même manière, le chapitre sur les Grands itinéraires semble inutile. À lui seul, un pareil sujet commande tout un livre et en conséquence, on ne pouvait y dire que des généralités.

Durant trois longs chapitres, l'auteur expose tous les moyens de transport qui permettent de se rendre et de voyager en pays tropical. Le souci du détail est poussé à ce point que le lecteur bénéficiera d'un exemple de billet d'avion et de la carte d'embarquement. Plus loin, on nous propose même un aménagement astucieux d'un véhicule de type Land Rover. Enfin, au chapitre 12, tous les autres moyens de transport sont rapidement passés en revue, de l'autobus local (ou ce qui en tient lieu) au chameau.

La pièce de résistance demeure sans contredit les pages consacrées au « Respect de la culture des autres ». Qui n'a pas rencontré de ces Québécois se comportant ailleurs comme en pays conquis et pour qui seul leur Québec de banlieusards est le modèle? On souhaitera alors que ces Québécois lisent et relisent ces pages. Jacques Hébert y propose la recherche de contacts profonds et enrichissants; les expériences culinaires pouvant amorcer ces contacts. Le respect des autres se traduit aussi par le respect des traditions hospitalières ou religieuses et la pudeur dans l'utilisation de l'appareil photographique. Enfin, les nombreuses annexes contiennent surtout des adresses d'ambassades, bureaux de passeport, etc. On aurait souhaité une amorce de bibliographie même si, à l'occasion, l'auteur glisse dans son texte quelques titres utiles.

Ce livre, au contenu si riche, intéresse aussi bien le débutant que le voyageur chevronné en passant par le géographe. Lorsque Jacques Hébert mentionne le contenu des bagages, il passe sous silence son livre. Il semble qu'il y a là un oubli très grave que le lecteur devrait corriger.

Michel LECLERC  
Département de géographie  
Cégep François-Xavier-Garneau

GOUROU, pierre (1984) *Riz et civilisation*. Paris, Fayard, 299 p.

In *Riz et civilisation*, Pierre Gourou gives us a remarkably comprehensive account of one of the world's most important cereals. What makes the book both unusual and interesting is the author's cross cultural examination of the relationship between the demands and possibilities of the crop and the forms of social organization, technology, techniques and beliefs related to its production and consumption. To do so, he draws on an impressive array and diversity of case materials spanning Asia, South East Asia and Africa.

Gourou aptly illustrates how thoroughly rice occupies the culinary core of most of Asia and South East Asia. It is this very centrality of rice, its undeniable place in what Julian Stewart calls the "cultural core" of the examined societies, which makes the cross cultural comparisons meaningful. The book is also strong in the way it balances the social and biological aspects of rice. We see rice as a crop of great range and potential, capable of supporting extremely high population densities. In comparison with the other major cereals its range of adaptation is truly incredible from sea level to over 2000 meters, from the equator to over 50° north, from mountainside swiddens to carefully controlled pond field systems.

The author's treatment of his material has a distinct evolutionary flavour. Gourou takes us for an excursion from pre-historical beginnings of rice to its likely future in an increasingly industrialized Asia. The scene is set by introducing us to the biological and culinary qualities of rice, and some of its associated production tasks, beliefs and rituals — thus neatly juxtaposing the profane and the sacred. The rest of the book is laid out in a roughly developmental sequence. This starts with slash and burn dry swidden production, goes on to consider the many traditional forms of irrigated rice production and finally examines the impact of Japan's industrialization on traditional rice production.

The spread of rice into Africa and Madagascar is also treated briefly. In its organization and intensity of production this still lags far behind the elaborate hydraulic systems and rich cultural associations found in Asia. The future potential is, however, shown to be enormous.

Very much to his credit, Gourou rejects facile relationships between rice as a culture — in its agricultural sense — and the types of human cultures in which it plays a central nutritive and even religious role. Just as the plant itself admits to a great range and diversity of adaptation, so the human cultural means of its production and appreciation are also varied. More importantly, this variation is also found between very similar agro-ecological zones. The section on Ifugao in the northern Philippines, which draws heavily on Harold Conklin's excellent ecological anthropological work in that area, shows clearly that the relationship between elaborate infrastructures of terraces and irrigation and centralized state administration — as posited by Wittvogel and others — is by no means a necessary one.

Any book that attempts to be as comprehensive as this one inevitably sacrifices some depth. The section on the rituals and beliefs related to rice falls especially short on this count. It ends up being little more than a listing of cultural curiosities stripped of their context: interesting but not really explanatory of anything. Also somewhat disappointing is the author's wholehearted, uncritical embrace of the International Rice Research Institute (IRRI) "green revolution" rice production technology. The numerous critical studies of this subject — such as those of Keith Griffin and Rodolphe De Koninck — which document the many labour dislocations and negative distributional or equity effects of this technology, are simply not considered and implicitly are treated as part of a natural evolutionary progression. This is especially clear in his final chapter on the future of traditional labour intensive forms of rice production.

By using the example of Japan, Gourou examines the impact of the increasing returns to labour associated with industrialization. Not surprisingly he finds — somewhat nostalgically — that "traditional" small scale rice production has lost its cultural and economic centrality and concludes that it must be on its way out: "Le Japon a réussi sa révolution économique; le sort de la vieille riziculture et des beaux paysages de rizières est, à notre regret, probablement scellé".

Although it is indubitably true that Japan is paving over its rice fields at a tremendous rate, that the economic returns on rice — even with high price supports — are lower than those in industry, and that other crops, particularly vegetables, are playing an increasingly important role, his conclusion is far from certain. Although there have been many changes, to my mind it is singularly striking how well small scale intensive rice production has made the transition into the industrial age. The reasons for this are complex and require an analysis of Japan's changing agrarian structure and the strategies of farm households within that structure. Briefly, agricultural production has become predominantly a part-time activity and largely the domain of an elderly and female work force. A recent study of Japanese rural households by Bernard Bernier shows that these households are now significantly better off than their urban counterparts — precisely because of the combined involvement in industrial and agricultural activities by the household's members. It is the very density of Japanese industrialization that has made this possible by making industrial and service work available nearby and by providing small scale production equipment. The relevant economic comparison now is between the alternative forms of employment and income available to Japanese rural housewives and the elderly, the ones actually involved in agricultural production. Quality of life considerations in types of work also play an important role here. Consequently, my prognosis would be much less pessimistic than Gourou's.

In conclusion, then, *Riz et civilisation* is a beautifully written, richly detailed book which avoids facile generalization, but which at times is somewhat shallow in its analysis and in terms of critical theory.

Joachim VOSS  
Butare, Rwanda