

In: Constantine Nowinoski WARDLIS (2014) Voices of Early Modern Japan pp. 44-8

“The Produce of the Land of Japan”:

Excerpts from Joao Rodrigues’

History of the Church in Japan (1620–1621)

The land yields much good rice, and this is the principal food and crop of the whole kingdom. It is sown during the May rains in fields where there is plenty of water and irrigation, and as a result they harvest it in September. There are various kinds and different types of rice. The chief sort is white rice, and here again there are various types and prices; another type is red or reddish in color, and no matter how much they pound it the rice never becomes white but remains grey in color. They

also grow an abundance of wheat for various purposes, but they do not use it to make bread after our fashion, and in recent years merchants have shipped flour to Manila. They also grow barley, and this serves as food for the peasants and poor folk in some barren regions; they cook it like rice and mix a little with it. This happens principally in barren and mountainous places in the Kantô regions and the island of Kyushu, where there is not enough rice. At certain times of the year the peasants and poor folk eat barley, fern roots, and wild acorns in, for example, **Bungo, Satsuma, and Gotô**.

Some of our first **Fathers**, noting this and unaware of what happened in other regions, wrote that Japan was very poor and lacking in provisions, and that the people ate only the leaves of radishes and plants, etc. But this is not so in **Gokinai** and other fertile regions, where there is an abundance of food and provisions. . . .

They also produce an abundance of every type of vegetable, such as beans, diverse kinds of millet, many various green stuffs, turnips, and large quantities of **radishes**, which in some regions are so big that four of them make up a reasonable burden for one man, as we ourselves saw.

Much of the fruit is the same as in Europe, for example, different kinds of pears, small apples in the Kami regions, peaches, apricots, and plums. . . .

The country also produces much good sesame oil and this is the type most in use. But oil is also produced from **mustard and poppy seeds**, as well as a certain kind of oil obtained from the seed or fruit of a tree. The women use this last oil to dye their hair black, in contrast to Europeans who try to make their hair **fair**, something that they dislike intensely. There is also oil obtained from whales and other fish. There is a great deal of wax for candles, and this is made from the fruit of the **tree from which varnish is obtained**. . . .

The land produces a kind of tree from which they obtain excellent varnish, probably the best in the discovered world and better than that of China.

**Bungo, Satsuma, and Gotô:** Bungo is a province in eastern Kyushu; Satsuma is a province in southern Kyushu; Gotô refers to the Gotô Islands, off the west coast of Kyushu.

**fair:** Light in color.

**Fathers:** Jesuit priests, members of the Society of Jesus.

**Gokinai:** Refers to the Kinai region, meaning the Kyoto-Osaka area.

**mustard and poppy seeds:** May refer to rapeseed, which was used for lighting.

**radishes:** Refers to Japanese radishes, or *daikon*, which are long and white.

**tree from which varnish is obtained:** The lacquer tree, the berries from which can be used to produce wax for candles; the sap was used a lacquer.