

Rice Ball Rivalries: Japanese Convenience Stores and the Appetite of Late Capitalism

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SIMPLE IN INGREDIENTS and easy to make, the rice ball, or *onigiri*, is one of Japan's oldest "fast foods" and the nation's ultimate convenience meal. Japan's rice ball roots are traceable back to the Heian period. Ancient court poetry and military ballads celebrated the *onigiri's* portability and the fact that no plate was required for it to be served. While some of the *onigiri's* ingredients have changed with time, its basic form has not. Consisting of a heaping fistful of rice pressed into a round, cylindrical, or triangular shape, the *onigiri* is a fast food at its slowest—a convenient meal whose shape literally bears the mark of its maker. Its very name comes from the verb *nigiru*, meaning to press or pack together with one's hands. Today, *onigiri* remain a common food for those on the move. They are eaten for lunch by school children and harried workers, carried in hikers' backpacks, handed out at community events, and even dispensed as emergency rations in the wake of disasters.¹ Although still seen as an easy way to quickly feed a large number of people or to conveniently use up leftover rice from the previous night's meal, the *onigiri* image has evolved from that of a traditional family food to one that is purchased outside of the home, in stores and supermarkets.

Perhaps no retail industry relies on the *onigiri* more than Japan's convenience stores. For *konbini* (the Japanese contraction for "convenience store"), the rice ball plays an important role in redefining convenience and establishing chain distinction. Shortly after the American convenience store franchise model was introduced to Japan in the late 1960s, the *onigiri* became a key product in domesticating the foreign retail form for the Japanese palate. Corporations seeking to provide a familiar, convenient, and freshly packaged food that would still be considered a meal by the Japanese consumer embraced the *onigiri*. This attention to the rice ball led to innovations in its production and content. Today, the *onigiri* remains a focus of creativity, profit, and competition. *Onigiri* are available in various shapes and sizes. Their flavorful fillings range from pickled plum and tuna-and-mayo to *kimchi* and Hokkaido salmon. Priced between 85 and 260 yen apiece, the *onigiri* is a



multi-billion-yen business for Japan's convenience store franchises. 7-Eleven Japan alone sold 1.4 billion *onigiri* in 2003 (Yoshioka 2005:17), the statistical equivalent of eight rice balls for every Japanese man, woman, and child.²

In this chapter, I explore the *onigiri*'s commodification by Japan's convenience store industry. I argue that the *onigiri*'s "convenience" as a product is linked to the food's rich cultural resonance that companies hope to freely tap. However, the corporate embrace of the culturally value-added *onigiri* and the phenomenon of commodification that the food undergoes is not a simple process with predetermined outcomes. Drawing on particular case studies, my research points to tensions inherent in late "consumer" capitalism and its concomitant tendencies to commercialize private needs and increase industrial efficiency. Rather than eroding the rice ball's store of cultural meanings, the contradictions between the *onigiri*'s commodity nature and its emotional, cultural, and historical significance have contributed new meanings to the food itself.

The *Onigiri*: From the Heian Court to Heisei Households

People have made and consumed the rice ball in Japan for millennia. Heian Period (794 A.D.–1192 A.D.) court documents mention ceremonial exchanges of dense, egg-shaped bundles of glutinous rice between aristocratic households and loyal vassals. Ancient military ballads also contain references to the *onigiri*. Rice balls could be produced in bulk, rapidly distributed, carried into battle, and consumed when necessary. Fillers such as bean, millet, and wild vegetables weakened the rice ball's cohesiveness, making it necessary to wrap or bind (*musubu*) the rice ball together with large leaves or rice straw. The term *omusubi* is still used as an alternative word for *onigiri*, although seaweed and plastic wrap have replaced the leaves and straw of yore.

During the Meiji Restoration (1865–1912), agricultural reforms coupled with improvements in transportation and distribution helped make rice a more prominent part of the Japanese diet. The *onigiri* punctuated particular moments of the nation-state's expansion into everyday social life. One milestone was the opening of Japan's first rail line. In 1885, the national railway approved the sale of the first *ekiben* (train station lunchbox), which contained two rice balls lightly seasoned with sesame salt (*gomashio*) as a preservative. The Ministry of Education's first school lunch program, piloted at a rural northern elementary school in 1889, also featured the rice ball. The *onigiri* remains on school lunch menus to this day.

Although the appearance of *onigiri* in school lunches and in train station food stalls are important developments in the rice ball's modern historical trajectory, undoubtedly the *onigiri*'s strongest set of associations is with the home, family,



and motherhood. For many Japanese, the *onigiri* is seen as a “comfort food,” one that reflects the skill, nutritional acumen, and even flavor of the mother and wife. More akin to the matzo ball than the hamburger, the *onigiri* is a culinary composition whose external simplicity often belies its internal complexity. According to popular women’s magazines, the *onigiri*’s ingredients must be carefully chosen. Beginning with grades of rice and *nori* (seaweed) and proceeding through a myriad of fillings such as pickled plum, grilled salmon, and marinated sea kelp, every component of the rice ball is a decision unto itself. Attention paid to using a particularly famous regional product (*meibutsu*) or a seasonally appropriate ingredient bespeaks not only the housewife’s knowledge but also the degree to which she cares about what her family ingests.

The *onigiri* is as much about form as content. Its size and shape are literally determined by the hands of the creator. Some scientists have gone so far as to study how naturally occurring salts and oils from the woman’s palms subtly alter the taste of rice, thus giving the homemade *onigiri* a distinct flavor that is traceable to the mother who created it.³ The *onigiri*’s ability to connect the child to the home and caregiver has been reinforced, and some might argue exploited, by the state educational system. A majority of Japanese nursery schools and kindergartens do not offer lunch programs, thus making parents, usually mothers, responsible for creating a lunch box (*obentō*) filled with tasty, easy-to-consume foods like *onigiri*. Anthropologist Anne Allison argues that such a lunch box policy serves the dual purpose of reinforcing a gendered state ideology while opening the household to a subtle yet effective form of surveillance. Through the daily production and consumption of lunch boxes, both mother and the child are observed, judged, and disciplined by school officials and, by extension, the national education system (Allison 1996). Teachers and school officials critique the mothers’ *obentō*-making skills from nutritional and aesthetic standpoints. A half-eaten *onigiri* will accompany the child back to the home and kitchen along with a note from the teacher on how to improve tomorrow’s meal.

The critical role of homemade lunch box design in a child’s (and family’s) early educational evaluation has spawned a minor media industry focusing on *obentō* menu ideas. As a popular component of the *obentō* repertoire, the *onigiri* is reinvented monthly in magazines and TV cooking programs. The homey rice ball becomes a canvas on which a mother may exercise her expertise and creativity. The strategic placement of strips of seaweed and circles of processed cheese on a ball of rice by loving hands transform an *onigiri* into the face of a cat or a panda. In recent years, the attention given to *obentō* has generated problems of its own. Lunch box creativity wars among overly zealous mothers led some kindergartens to instruct parents to pack only *onigiri* in hopes of toning down the competitive drive toward more elaborate boxed meals (Iwamura 2004).



The *onigiri's* power as a cultural symbol continues to be reinforced in folktales and films where rice ball production and consumption embody care, loyalty, and magic. In popular children's stories, like *Sarukani Gassen* ("Showdown between the Monkey and the Crab") and *Omusubi Kororin* ("The Tumbling Rice Ball"), the gift of a rice ball, even when by accident, ultimately leads to reciprocity, prosperity, and deeper interpersonal ties. Even contemporary storytelling makes use of the *onigiri's* magical dimensions. A pivotal moment in the Academy Award-winning animated film *Sen to Chihiro no Kamikakushi* ("Spirited Away") occurs when the young heroine, Chihiro, accepts a rice ball from her dragon-prince friend, Taku. The strength Chihiro gains from her meal enables her to undo an evil spell that turned her parents into swine and Taku into a fantastical beast. When asked why so many Japanese viewers cry as Chihiro eats her *onigiri*, film director Miyazaki Hayao explains that the scene is a powerful reminder of commensality and human interdependence. "As a child or a parent, you understand that the *onigiri* is a food sculpted by the hands of someone you know and whose tireless efforts give you life" (Miyazaki 2002).⁴ For Miyazaki, the rice ball is infused with a kind of emotional magic powerful enough to humanize, or rehumanize, his story's animated characters.

Stories about the *onigiri's* power are not limited, however, to folktales and popular films. As a commercially mass-produced packaged food, the *onigiri* is one of the best-selling items in Japanese convenience stores. Beyond its material importance, the life of the *onigiri* as a processed industrial food is so closely tied to the growth of Japan's *konbini* industry that the development of some chains parallels advances in rice ball production and marketing. Japan's two largest convenience store chains, 7-Eleven Japan, the originator of the packaged *onigiri*, and its rival Lawson, are illustrative examples.

Onigiri, 7-Eleven Japan, and the Rise of the Konbini

Although not Japan's first convenience store, 7-Eleven Japan and its early success in localizing a new retail system through meeting consumer needs and satisfying franchisees made it a galvanizing force in the industry—the chain to watch and the chain to beat. A cornerstone of 7-Eleven's marketing strategy was to provide pre-prepared foods that appealed to the Japanese palate. The *onigiri* played a decisive part in this plan. 7-Eleven Japan introduced the *onigiri* to the marketplace of industrial cuisine in 1978 when it launched the industry's first line of packaged rice balls in a hundred of its fledgling franchises.

In 1978, the convenience store retail format was still a new phenomena in Japan. Only five years earlier, Tokyo-based retail corporation, Ito-Yokado, imported the American 7-Eleven name and store manual to Japan. Ito-Yokado used 7-Eleven's franchise system to "collaborate" with local merchants to modernize existing local,



privately owned and operated establishments. The convenience store's small-scale format also gave Ito-Yokado a means for sidestepping restrictive legislation prohibiting big corporations from building large-scale outlets in residential neighborhoods and shopping districts. 7-Eleven's expansion was slow, fraught with logistical problems, store management missteps, product line failures, and resistance from shop owner associations. The Japanese company, conscious of the need to build a customer base for its stores, readily broke from the American marketing script of hotdogs and flavored Slurpee offerings and explored "new" types of convenience foods that would appeal to a hungry Japanese consumer. The *onigiri* was an obvious choice. Its size, relative ease of preparation, and the possibilities for value-added innovation through fillings, shapes, and flavors contributed to its strong potential as a *kombini* food. More critical still was the rice ball's social and symbolic standing in the Japanese diet. As a rice-based food, the *onigiri* was more immediately seen as a "meal" than a "snack" in the eyes of Japanese consumers (see Watson 1997). Furthermore, the *onigiri*'s long history and associations with the home, portability, and quick sustenance helped differentiate it from other "foreign" fast foods that required intense marketing efforts to win over public recognition and acceptance. The *onigiri* could be used to draw upon cultural associations and assist the *kombini* to convey a sense of care and familiarity, qualities that served to tone down the shop's American origins and its impersonal chain store image.

7-Eleven Japan oversaw the creation of its convenience store *onigiri* from ingredients and packaging to distribution and display. The first hurdle the company had to overcome was with production. 7-Eleven combed a Tokyo phone directory cover to cover before it was able to find a food maker willing to commercially mass-produce the rice ball (Yoshioka 2005:16). Despite the *onigiri*'s compositional simplicity, production still literally required many hands to pack and wrap the cooked rice. Most food makers were unwilling to add an additional production line for what was at that time a commercially untested product. Eventually, however, a producer was secured and the *onigiri* began to appear on store shelves in Tokyo neighborhoods.

The company's next challenge was the customer. Stores initially sold an average of five or six *onigiri* per day. "Everyone thought that the *onigiri* wouldn't sell," admitted Sawada Kazuhiro, 7-Eleven Japan's food product senior merchandiser, "but we recognized the latent potential of this product and we refused to give up" (Yoshioka 2005:16). The company fielded complaints ranging from the *onigiri*'s taste and the hardness of the rice to problems with product irregularity. In short, the convenience store *onigiri* was not quite "like mom's." 7-Eleven officials realized that "to capture the latent demand for such products it would need to improve their quality" (Bernstein 1997:514).

Over the next several decades, 7-Eleven Japan introduced numerous innovations in the *onigiri*'s display, packaging, and production to help broaden the product's



appeal. The company placed open refrigerated cases in its stores so that *onigiri* could be stocked alongside *obentô* and other take-out foods. Initially, the triangular *onigiri* were covered in *nori* before being packaged, but between manufacture and sale the *nori* became soggy and sticky. In 1984, 7-Eleven developed a more advanced packaging system to deal with this problem. Referred to as the “parachute” wrap, an additional layer of plastic kept the seaweed crisp and separate from the rice until the *onigiri* was ready to be eaten. The purchaser removed the protective layer of plastic and manually enveloped the rice ball in seaweed, thus completing the final step in the process of making a homemade *onigiri*. In 1989, the “one hand” wrapping system replaced the parachute wrap. Pinching firmly on a colored plastic tab, the customer tears open the *onigiri* package with a single hand motion. The outer and inner layers of plastic are then removed by pulling on the corners of the package. 7-Eleven’s innovations in packaging were mimicked by other convenience store and supermarket chains.

As part of an overall effort to standardize and improve the freshness of its pre-made food products, 7-Eleven reorganized the manufacturing and distribution processes. It established a cooperative association to help small firms with food production and management. Initially it contracted with ten smaller-scale makers to produce its rice-based foods. In exchange for their compliance with company standards like ingredients, cooking temperatures, and packaging requirements, 7-Eleven agreed to be the primary buyer of the group’s output. By the 1990s the association had expanded to over one hundred firms with internal divisions overseeing such areas as bulk purchasing of raw materials as well as research and development of food products like *onigiri*. In 2003, this integrated association of food makers proved instrumental in launching 7-Eleven’s “Rice Ball Revolution” (*Onigiri Kakume*). Under increasing competitive pressure by other convenience store chains, including Lawson, 7-Eleven developed a new mechanized system for creating *onigiri*. The focus was on preserving the softness of the rice and producing an *onigiri* that “tasted as if it was made by mother’s own hands” (Yoshioka 2005:14). The “revolutionary” step is a specially designed heating unit that dispatches a quick blast of warm air into the hollowed out center of the *onigiri* before a filling, like pickled plum or cooked salmon, is added. The warm air separates the individual grains of cooked rice, preserves softness, and helps to capture the flavor of the filling.

From the beginning, producing a good-tasting product was not enough for 7-Eleven. Equally critical was improving ordering accuracy and speed through the development and implementation of an information technology system. The same year that 7-Eleven Japan launched its first *onigiri* line, it also initiated what would grow to become a powerful and comprehensive technological infrastructure linking the corporation with manufacturers, distributors, and corner stores. In its earliest stages, the system was simply handwritten order slips filled out by store owners



and sent to 7-Eleven headquarters. The head office put together the orders and relayed them to the food manufacturers. The turnaround time between store order and delivery took a week or more. Upgraded eighty times, today the system is a store-based computerized network of Point of Sales (POS) terminals capable of seamlessly relaying sales information in real time. Turnaround times for most products have been reduced to just over twenty-four hours.

The POS terminal fuses the cash register with 7-Eleven's in-store product ordering system and a mainframe computer at 7-Eleven's headquarters. The system keeps track of what is sold and allows the store to gather consumer data with each transaction. While stocking the shelves, store clerks scan items into the system using a wireless, hand-held bar code reader. During checkout, product bar codes are again scanned at the register. This information is automatically combined with data such as the time, date, and weather conditions. By pressing a single key on the computerized register at the end of the sale, the store employee inconspicuously inputs the customer's gender and age category.⁵ By the time the cash drawer springs open and the clerk begin to count change, the entire "transaction" has been electronically relayed as a complete data package to 7-Eleven headquarters where it is analyzed. An hour later the output is fed to manufacturers and back to store owners themselves, appearing as flow charts and graphs on the store computer located in the shop's back room. This system has proven invaluable in assisting manufacturers to create *onigiri* on demand. It has also enabled 7-Eleven Japan to generate customer profiles for its *onigiri* products. 7-Eleven Japan uses this data to advise store owners about how to adjust their offerings to suit the particular tastes of local consumers.

Today all of Japan's major *kombini* chains have followed 7-Eleven's lead by adopting and developing their own POS register systems. Consequently, a majority of the nation's forty-two thousand convenience stores are considerably more attuned to the purchasing habits of their customers. While the *kombini* is not a substitute for mother, the stores constantly strive to better predict what kinds of *onigiri* people will want and when they will want them. It is not uncommon to hear local residents living by themselves refer to *kombini* as "replacement refrigerators" (*reizōko no kawari*). Japan's convenience stores are oases of pre-prepared foods, like *onigiri*, for people without a mom around.

Onigiri continue to be one of the key products through which convenience store corporations seek to distinguish themselves and generate the kind of customer loyalty that will keep consumers flowing into their stores and not those of their rivals. Although 7-Eleven Japan played a considerable role in the initial mass production and marketing of the *onigiri*, Japan's second largest convenience store chain, Lawson, raised the bar of *onigiri* development a notch higher by using the *onigiri* as the flagship of its brand revitalization campaign.



Corporate Soul Food: “I Love Lawson *Onigiri* Project”

In 2001, the future of Lawson seemed uncertain. Its parent company, the large retail magnate Daiei, was on the verge of bankruptcy, individual franchisees profits were falling due to an increasingly competitive retail market, and the Lawson brand name image as a provider of safe food had been tarnished by a product scandal. The chain’s restructuring began with the hiring of a young new company president and, under his guidance, the development, marketing, and launch of a gourmet line of rice balls under the moniker *Onigiri-ya* (“Rice Ball Shop”). In less than a year, the *Onigiri-ya* campaign netted the company a healthy profit and reaffirmed Lawson’s image in the eyes of the consumer and its franchisees. The campaign defied the conventional wisdom at the time. Despite Japan’s lackluster economy and depressed consumer spending, Lawson priced its *Onigiri-ya* rice balls ¥100 to ¥130 (approximately \$1.00 to \$1.30) above the national convenience store average. What seemed like a risky move was, in fact, a shrewd strategy for invigorating sales.

The *Onigiri-ya* campaign was the brainchild of Niinami Takeshi, a forty-four-year old executive from Lawson’s new corporate retainer, trading company Mitsubishi Shoji. Wielding an MBA from Harvard, Niinami had proven his skill while serving as the marketing manager for Mitsubishi Shoji’s Kentucky Fried Chicken account. Immediately after assuming his position as Lawson company head, Niinami set to work on an *onigiri* campaign that he hoped would rekindle Lawson’s image as a name consumers could trust. On the eve of Niinami’s appointment, a slice of flesh from a fingertip had been discovered in an *onigiri* purchased at a Lawson store in the northern Japanese city of Sendai. The media attention concerning this incident was swift and the consumer-related fallout immediate. Lawson food sales dropped and stock prices dipped while those of its major competitors, 7-Eleven and FamilyMart, rose. The incident was a harsh reminder of how carefully food quality was monitored and of the overnight impact that a mishap could have in a cutthroat retail environment where the competition was literally on the next corner.

For Niinami the rice ball project was as much a new business model as a product confidence campaign. *Onigiri-ya* had two interrelated goals: to please customers with a quality product and to reaffirm confidence among the members of the “Lawson family”—from company employees through to franchisees and manufacturers. The new Lawson image was not being constructed for either the public *or* the company’s employees (Marchand 1998:44), but rather for both audiences simultaneously. In a TV-Tokyo interview, Niinami explained, “*Onigiri-ya* equals the ‘New Lawson’, that is the impression we are striving for. . . . If I can do all that then I will be happy with this as a business model” (TV-Tokyo 2003).

From its inception, the *onigiri* project was decidedly different from other product creation enterprises. The development portion of the *Onigiri-ya* campaign was titled “I Love Lawson *Onigiri* Project” and the development team consisted of



product development division representatives as well as a cross-section of company employees from various other divisions and departments. Secretaries, middle management, and executives were included in the initial decision-making stages. For several months, the teams met on a regular basis. Lunch breaks became gastrointestinal overtime as members sampled different types of rice balls, ranked what they ate, and gave opinions on what needed to change in order to create an *onigiri* “with impact” (TV-Tokyo 2003).

Outside of the office, Niinami sold the *Onigiri-ya* project to the company’s 7,600 franchisees as a way to reinvigorate profits. *Onigiri* are not only one of the best-selling items in convenience stores, but they also have one of the highest profit margins—on the order of 35 to 40 percent. In the case of Lawson, this profit is divided 40/60 between the company and franchisee respectively. A good tasting, more expensive *onigiri* that sold well meant more money for both the store owner and the corporation.

In November 2002, Lawson launched the new rice balls series under the nostalgic moniker *Onigiri-ya*. Like the *onigiri* varieties themselves, the project team also designed, voted on, and approved the campaign name and logo, a Japanese-style sliding door with a short blue curtain (*noren*) hanging just below the entrance’s frame. The *onigiri* wrapping, a specially engineered rice paper, added an additional layer of distinction to the product. The wrapping paper also ensured that the *Onigiri-ya* products stood out from other rice balls offerings on the store shelves. While the price per *onigiri* was close to double that of the regular varieties, the *Onigiri-ya* product was noticeably larger in size. In addition, all *onigiri* in the series were made with one or more “name brand” regional food products. The base ingredient for all the rice balls was Niigata *koshihikari*, a well-known variety of rice from a region in Japan renowned for its rice production. The *onigiri* fillings included braised eel from Kyushu, pickled plums from Wakayama, and fish roe from Hokkaido. The *Onigiri-ya* selection represented the ultimate commodity frontier. The ingredients easily called forth popular destinations of travel (see Caldwell’s chapter in this volume). For the salary men, office ladies, and retirees who bought the *onigiri*, their purchase became a means of traveling through taste without ever having to leave the confines of the office or park bench.

The *Onigiri-ya* products sold well. In the first several weeks of the product’s launch, Lawson released a TV commercial featuring Niinami himself, dressed in a dark suit and looking out over an expansive array of *Onigiri-ya* rice balls.⁶ The sentence *Onigiri wa nihonjin no sokojikara* (“Rice balls are the Japanese people’s source of stamina”) was spliced between the shots of Niinami pondering the selection and biting into rice balls he grasped in each hand. The decision to have Niinami appear on the commercial was doubly apt. The *Onigiri-ya* project represented Niinami’s official debut as the new leader of Japan’s second largest convenience store company,



and the main purchasers of the *Onigiri-ya* product (according to POS data) tended to be white-collar company employees like himself, with more discretionary income than their younger colleagues (Murata 2003).

The Limits and Liability of Rice-Ball-Led Restructuring

Despite the success of the *Onigiri-ya* project as a whole, there were setbacks. On May 21, 2002, news leaked out that Lawson's banner Niigata *koshihikari* rice had been blended with rice from another area. Some 218 Lawson convenience stores in Miyagi and Yamagata Prefectures received *onigiri* made with the blended rice. The reason for the blending was never exactly clear, but some analysts suggested that the just-in-time production system was to blame. When producing more "generic" *onigiri*, blending rice was not an issue and thus cheaper grades of rice were acquired and mixed as needed, allowing for warehouse and storage costs to be kept to a minimum. But in turning to "prestigious" ingredients, whether *koshihikari* rice or fish roe, the just-in-time system left food producers in a risky situation. Unexpected spikes in demand and dwindling supplies due to weather, pollution, spoilage, or poor planning meant that not enough resources would be on hand to fill orders. Substituting inferior ingredients or "blending" was one solution, but it carried with it the danger of being exposed by consumer watch groups and housewife organizations that constantly keep an eye out for dishonest and deceptive practices. Blame strikes not just at the factory level, but at the company whose image is intimately linked to the product.

Lawson's head office reacted quickly when the rice-blending story broke. Niinami made an immediate decision not to hide the truth about the rice-mixing incident from consumers. Reversing mistakes made during the fingertip incident, Niinami ordered immediate disclosure of what had occurred. Within twenty-four hours, Lawson published official apologies in major national newspapers and on its website. A day later, Niinami met in person with the head of the factory that had produced the *onigiri* and made it clear that Lawson would not tolerate future missteps. Lawson's damage control appeared to work. *Onigiri-ya* products remain strong sellers. However, not long after the incident, Lawson's *Onigiri-ya* television ad campaign changed. Niinami's executive visage was replaced with that of the gray-haired, kimono-clad actress Ichida Hiromi, famous for her Kyoto dialect and numerous roles as devout wife and mother in Japanese period dramas (*jidaigeki*). Ichida continues to be the face of the *Onigiri-ya* brand, inviting television viewers to enjoy the old-fashioned goodness of the latest rice ball flavor. While the *onigiri* contributed to a corporation's reinvention, its public spokesperson returned to a recognizable matronly trope.

The Lawson *Onigiri-ya* case suggests paths for the *onigiri* and the limits and liabilities that accompany these trajectories. In moving outside of the home into a



commercial sphere, the *onigiri* becomes more than a vehicle for cementing human-to-human relationships; it forges connections between individuals, stores, and corporations. But while the *onigiri* is offered as a kinder, gentler, more culturally recognizable fast food, it is not free from scrutiny. Problems with *onigiri*, whether the discovery of an unexpected gruesome ingredient or the blending of grades of rice, act as reminders to both the consumer and company of the limitations of corporate “maternalism” in mass food production. Products marketed as conveniences (*benrina mono*) in modern Japan have historically been accompanied by a social questioning of quality, health, safety, and even the possible deleterious impact that these technological and commercial advancements may have on people’s lives. A matrix of organizations in Japan including active local, regional, and national consumer rights and housewife organizations, government agencies, and the media have contributed to distinctive social sensitivity toward and awareness of products. As *konbini* ad campaigns and company slogans push the *onigiri* further onto center stage, the product becomes a greater focus of attention for consumer advocacy organizations and the media as well. Newsletters, online forums, and newspaper articles are one counterbalance to intense product campaigns. By publicly examining and discussing the unhealthy dimensions of the convenience store, these sources embed the *konbini onigiri* in issues like the use of food additives and preservatives and the amount of waste that stores generate.

On yet another level, the ubiquity of the convenience store and the proliferation of *onigiri* consumption have led to cautionary tales and critical forms of moral discourse. Housewife logs from recent dietary surveys show that some mothers are now buying *onigiri* in *konbini* and supermarkets and these purchases are made to supplement family meals (Iwamura 2004). It is not uncommon to hear stories from frustrated mothers and grandmothers about children who will no longer eat their *onigiri* because the rice balls looked strange and tasted different than the store-bought varieties. Rather than being read as merely symptoms of the “commercialization of intimate life” (Hochschild 2003), these examples are important contributions to a collective consciousness about life in a commercial society.

Conclusion: The Category of *Konbini Onigiri*

The *onigiri* has not disappeared from people’s diets; far from it. Its simplicity, nutritional value, and cultural cachet have allowed it to maintain its popularity as a food. While still produced by hand in homes and school cafeterias, the *onigiri* is also embraced by commercial enterprises and offered for sale to the Japanese consumer. Reinventing the convenience of convenience food in ways that benefit the bottom line and appeal to a consumer’s changing needs, the convenience store has found a way to insert itself between reproduction of the family and the production of



the market economy (White 2002). Corporate focus on the *onigiri* combined with public and consumer interest, both positive and negative, has led to the emergence of the *kombini onigiri* as a category of its own. In the course of my field research, informants and news sources increasingly use the term *kombini onigiri* to identify the commercially manufactured rice ball. The *kombini onigiri* is associated with certain shapes, flavors, and styles of packaging as well as a range of different practices introduced by the consumer rather than the producer. In Hokkaido and Okinawa, for example, customers prefer warmed *onigiri* and frequently ask clerks to microwave their purchases. Customers sometimes even instruct store employees on the exact number of seconds to warm the *onigiri*. *Kombini onigiri* are also integral ingredients in *yūshoku*, a new word used by young people to describe the practice of eating a quick meal with one's friends (*yūjin*) outside places like *kombini* rather than, or in addition to, consuming "dinner" at home with family. (The Japanese term for dinner is also *yūshoku*, however it uses a different Chinese character for the first syllable.) *Yūshoku* provides opportunities for young people to gossip about teachers, exchange information on part-time job opportunities, and even debate more efficient ways to open the *onigiri* wrappers (Utsunomia 2004:72).

Within the convenience store, the *kombini onigiri* blurs the distinction between gift and commodity. Despite company instructions to throw away all expired food items, convenience store owners frequently defy corporate orders by giving unsold *onigiri* and other expired food items to their part-time staff.⁷ Clerks frequently mention the practice of food handouts as a critical bonus to their low-paying jobs. Said one informant, "You don't need to eat before going to work, particularly if you are on the morning shift." Clerks will even go as far as to encourage friends to apply for a job at a particular *kombini* because of the store owner's largess with unsold food. Even the *kombini onigiri* that get thrown in the trash have the potential to enter other systems of value and circulation. Well-wrapped and easily gleaned from the dumpsters behind stores, the *kombini onigiri* are a source of nourishment for urban homeless populations. According to one Osaka-based homeless research task force, convenience stores are ranked relatively high on the list of places to scavenge meals.

The *onigiri* is emblematic of the changes of comfort in "comfort food." Blurring the distinction between commodity and comfort, the rice ball assists in transition of family from home to workplace, helps corporations to post profits, and provides a means for convenience stores to ease into local communities. The rice ball is not merely the flagship for *kombini* chains like 7-Eleven Japan and Lawson, it is a metonym of the convenience store more generally. The time, effort, and attention paid to the commercialization of *onigiri* have not, however, emptied the *onigiri* of its value or meaning. Rather, they have contributed new meanings and practices to this historically fast, slow food. The category of *kombini onigiri* reflects the power, even magic, that food in a consumer society continues to possess. Although still able to



resonate with notions of the home, motherhood, and comfort, the *kombini onigiri* is packed with a new set of associations and uses that extend beyond the label and logo that a corporation may try to give it.

Notes

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1. A housewife-initiated NGO, self-titled the “Japanese *Onigiri* Peace Corps” (*Nihon Onigiri-tai*), provides humanitarian aid in the form of rice balls. Each year they organize *onigiri* relief missions to disaster and famine-struck areas around the globe.

2. Ito-Yokado founded what became 7-Eleven Japan in 1973 through a licensing agreement with the convenience store chain's Texas-based American owner, Southland. The first 7-Eleven opened in 1974 in an industrial section of downtown Tokyo. By 1980, over one thousand 7-Eleven franchises were operating in Japan. 7-Eleven Japan purchased a controlling share of the U.S.-based 7-Eleven in 1991 when Southland filed for bankruptcy. In 2005, 7-Eleven Japan purchased the remaining shares of 7-Eleven from Southland, giving the Japanese firm complete control over 7-Eleven's global brand image.

3. The flavor of a woman's hands being transferred to the food she makes is a common theme in other cultural contexts as well. In reference to the magical associations that home-cooked food has, anthropologist Richard Wilk notes that in Belize people claim that each woman's handmade tortillas possess a distinct flavor.

4. The quote appeared on a packaged plastic model of Haku's *onigiri* that Hayao's Ghibli production company used to promote the video and DVD versions of the animated film. The life-size *onigiri* replica is hollow and can be opened by squeezing the toy's sides. The instructions explain that the toy rice ball is not for eating but for holding precious keepsakes. A color photograph of Hayao himself making *onigiri* appears on the toy's package. The plastic *onigiri*, however, is manufactured in China.

5. POS registers contain two vertical columns of color-coded keys. A light blue column is for male customers, and a light pink column for female customers. Each column is divided horizontally into four age brackets: adolescent (age fifteen and under), young adult (age sixteen to twenty-nine), middle-age adult (age thirty to forty-nine), and senior (age fifty and over). Some chains, including Lawson, separate the age categories into five groups: children (age twelve and under), teenager (age thirteen to nineteen), young adult (age twenty to twenty-nine), middle-age adult (age thirty to forty-nine), and senior (age fifty and over). For each sale, the machine will not calculate change and open the cash drawer until a customer data key is pushed.



6. In a later television interview, Niinami said he insisted upon being present at many of the rice ball taste testings and offered his own input. He admitted that the *Onigiri-ya* campaign added about eight pounds to his 6'2" frame.

7. A former Lawson employee explained that *konbini* corporations are as concerned about profit as health when insisting unsold food be thrown out and not given away. If employees are not provided with “free” meals, they are more likely to purchase store food and thus contribute to store sales. The corporations also warn store owners that giving away food may contribute to “bad employee habits” such as stealing.

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