



The ceremony was apparently started by yamabushi (mountain hermits) who brought offerings from the mountains that were distributed to the people.

# 強くて可笑い日光責め (4月2日) 輪王寺の強飯式

The rice-forcing ritual, also known as "Nikko-seme", is the highlight.  
式のハイライトは「日光責め」とも呼ばれる強飯頂戴の儀

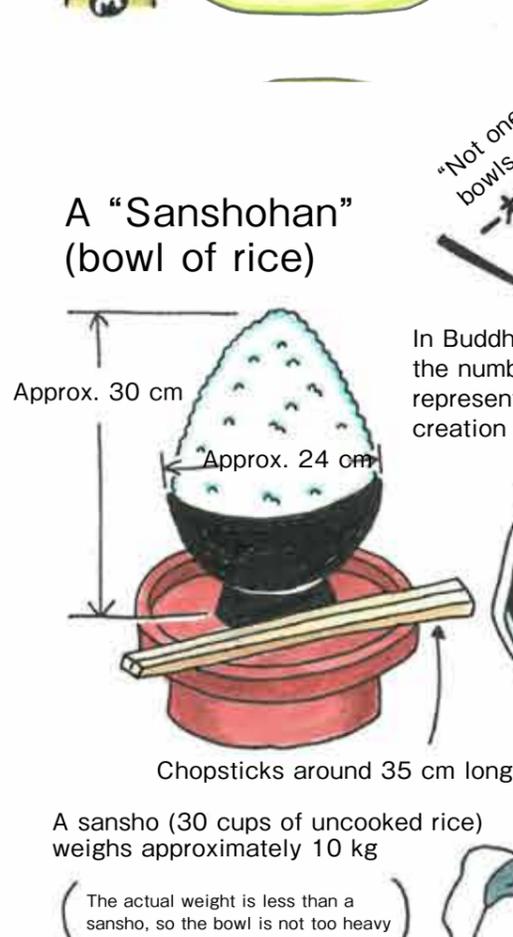
In this quirky ceremony held at a Nikko World Heritage site, participants are forced to eat huge bowls of rice, which are said to bring them great fortune.

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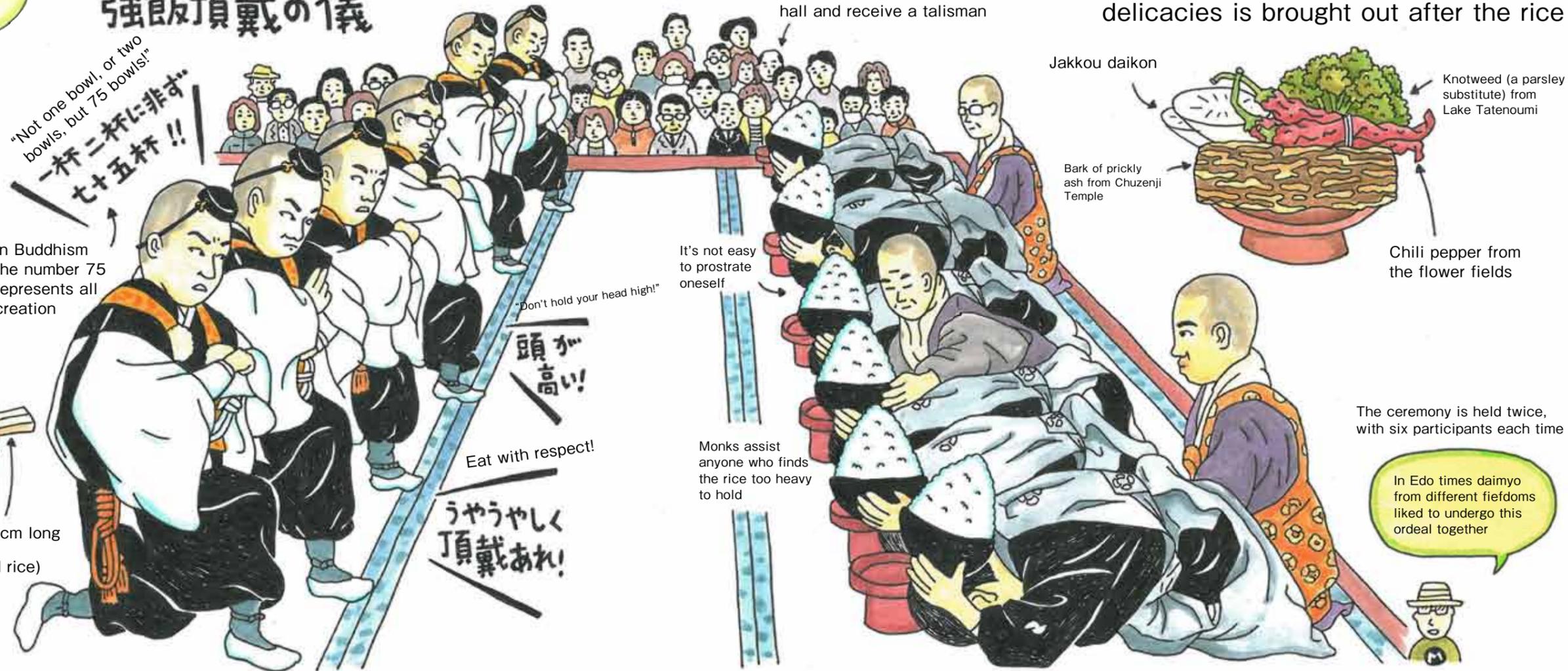
Illustrations and Text/  
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A tray of famous Nikko local plant delicacies is brought out after the rice



"Not one bowl, or two bowls, but 75 bowls!"  
一杯二杯に非ず 七十五杯!!

In Buddhism the number 75 represents all creation



Jakkou daikon

Bark of prickly ash from Chuzenji Temple

Knotweed (a parsley substitute) from Lake Tatenoumi

Chili pepper from the flower fields

The ceremony is held twice, with six participants each time

In Edo times daimyo from different fiefdoms liked to undergo this ordeal together

## A Dramatic Ceremony Draws Laughter and Gasps

Every year on April 2, a very peculiar ceremony is held at Rinnoji Temple in Nikko. "Clean it all up, every last grain!" is the order given to participants as they eat their way through a large bowl heaped with rice. This is the Gohan-shiki, or rice eating ceremony. A name like that suggests that this is a fun, quirky festival perfect for a big eater such as myself, but in fact this ritual originated from Shugendō (mountain asceticism) practices that have been observed in the Nikko mountains since ancient times. The ceremony is conducted twice, at eleven in the morning and two in the afternoon, in the main hall at Rinnoji, the Sanbutsu-do. A

procession of monks led by a yamabushi (mountain priest) blowing a trumpet shell enter the hall, followed by the monks who dispense the rice. A heavy wooden door closes behind them with a noisy creak, and the ceremony begins. Although it is April, the interior is chilly and only faintly lit by candles. The atmosphere is solemn, with ceremonial chanting of sutras and ritual burning of holy cedar-sticks. Flames from the fire flicker and throw light on the Amida Nyorai image enshrined in the hall. It is a truly mysterious spectacle. The initial rituals end and the lights come on, instantly transforming

the scene. Ceremony participants dressed as samurai enter, and at last it is time for the main event, the "rice-forcing ritual". First come the monks who force the rice on the participants, dressed as yamabushi and bearing large cups of sacred sake which they aggressively press on the participants, telling them to "make sure you drink this dry". As if that weren't enough, their exaggerated motions when they pour the sake draws laughter from the spectators. Next, large black bowls heaped with rice are brought out, and again there is laughter. The bowls are known as "sanshomeshi" sansho being a measurement equal to 30 cups of uncooked rice. The rice is thrust in front of the participants' faces, who are threatened with the words: "This is an offering from the Kumano Sansha Gongen

[avatars of the Kumano shrines]. Show some respect and eat it!" Upon being further threatened with shouts of "Don't hold your head high!", the participants instinctively prostrate themselves, foreheads scraping the floor, and then—oh, no!—the bowls of rice are placed on the backs of their heads! There are even more laughs from those watching—it is an amusing festival after all. As if to deliver the final blow to the participants, who are now incapable of moving, a cry goes up "We'll have you eat one bowl, then two, then 75! You see if we don't. No mercy!" 75 bowls? Unbelievable! Next to appear is a tray heaped with the famed vegetable delicacies of the Nikko mountains. Prickly ash pepper, chili peppers, daikons ... Is this some kind of torture by hot food? This stuff is fine as an