

# Behind the Scenes

## BETEL CHEWING PARAPHERNALIA FROM ASIA AND THE PACIFIC



**BETEL CARRIER AND SERVER.** A betel chewer carries a basket, box, or bag containing a ready supply of betel chewing ingredients. On social or ceremonial occasions, ingredients may be presented in special servers. Carriers and servers often have multiple compartments to segregate the different ingredients.

(L) Betel server. Wood, iron nails, pigment. Northeast Thailand, late 19th–mid 20th century. H. 19 cm. UPM 89-13-294. (R) Betel carrier. Brass, brass inlay; suspension chain missing. Southern Philippines, early 20th century. H. 7.3 cm. UPM L-192-133

▲ **MARKET IN PHIMAI, NORTHEAST THAILAND.** The three essential ingredients of the betel quid are presented for sale. Bags of red lime paste sit on the ground, while sprays of green areca nuts spill over the table above. A tray of betel pepper leaves is displayed directly in front of the vendor, and open bags of sliced dried areca nuts are arrayed on the table at left rear.

Photo by Jennifer White, 1996

**F**rom the east coast of Africa through South and Southeast Asia to the islands of Melanesia, wherever the areca palm (*Areca catechu*) and the betel pepper vine (*Piper betle*) grow, the fruit of the palm and the leaf of the vine are combined with slaked lime to form an astringent, mildly stimulating quid. According to local custom, other ingredients—tobacco, catachu, and a variety of spices such as cloves, cardamom, and ginger—may be added to enhance the effects of the chew and improve the flavor. A quid is formed by placing sliced areca nut, betel leaf, and some lime in the side of the mouth to be sucked and chewed. A quid usually lasts 15 to 30 minutes, after which it is spit out. The name of the betel leaf has come to be applied to the areca palm fruit, which is called betel nut, to the quid as a whole, and to the practice itself, which is called betel chewing.

Betel chewing induces a sense of well-being, freshens the breath and, to a certain extent, inhibits tooth decay. The most startling side effect, often noted



**ARECA NUT CUTTER.** Before being added to the quid, the areca nut is husked and the inner seed is sliced into small pieces. In India, Sri Lanka, and Southeast Asia, special hinged, single-bladed cutters are used for this purpose.

Areca nut cutter. Iron. West Kalimantan (Borneo), collected 1897. L. 18.2 cm. UPM P974



**LIME CONTAINERS.** Powdered lime for betel chewing is produced by calcining (burning) shells, coral, or limestone. It can be used in powdered form or mixed with water to make a paste. In either case it is usually carried in a container with a closely fitting lid, from which it is either shaken or dipped out with a spatula or stick.

(L) Lime container. Silver. Chiangmai, Thailand, 18th–early 20th century. H. 10.6 cm. UPM 95-21-1A. B. (R) Lime container. Bamboo, palm leaf midrib. Solomon Islands, early 20th century. H. 17.2 cm. UPM P3413



◀ **MORTAR AND PESTLE.** Wherever betel is chewed, the associated complex of objects always includes mortars and pestles. They are used by toothless people and people with poor teeth, who can no longer chew the betel quid, to mash the ingredients into a manageable paste.

Betel mortar. Wood. H. 9.5 cm. UPM P1683A. Betel pestle. Shell. L. 19.75 cm. UPM P1684B. Both from Yap, Caroline Islands, collected 1903



▶ **LIME SPATULAS.** In the Massim culture district of east Papua New Guinea, powdered lime is conveyed directly from the lime container to the mouth of the betel chewer. The Museum has over 100 lime spatulas from this area, which is known for the extraordinary decorative quality and variety of its carvings.

(L) Lime spatula. Wood, pigment. Trobriand Islands, early 20th century. L. 27.2 cm. UPM P3046. (R) Lime spatula. Wood, pigment. Woodlark Island, early 20th century. L. 28 cm. UPM P3055

with disgust by European observers, is the copious production and constant spitting of blood-red saliva. Betel chewing combined with poor oral hygiene leads to gum disease and the loosening and loss of teeth. A heightened incidence of cancer of the mouth has been observed in some betel chewing areas.

People have been chewing betel for over 2000 years. Where practiced, betel chewing has been an essential element in virtually all social interaction, from casual daily encounters to important ceremonial and ritual occasions. Now, the habit is gradually dying out, especially in cities. However, the practice still continues in many traditional betel areas and even in some overseas Asian communities. Preserved and frozen areca nuts, freeze-dried betel leaves, and lime are available in Thai grocery stores in Philadelphia today.

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The practice of betel chewing generates a complex of objects for preparing, carrying, and serving the various ingredients. A selection of such objects from the collections of the University of Pennsylvania Museum will be on view in the front lobby from April 5, 1997, to January 1998 in a small exhibit entitled "Creating the Quid: Betel Chewing Paraphernalia from Asia and the Pacific."