

# Betel Chewing in the Philippines

by Cynthia Ongpin Valdes



Components of the chew: betel leaves, areca nut, lime, chewing tobacco, also called *mascada*

CHAPTER ONE of the *Noli Ale Tangere*, magnum opus of the Philippines' national hero Dr. Jose Rizal, also a commentary on the state of affairs in the country during the Spanish colonial period, opens with a gathering in the Binondo house of the town mayor, "Kapitan Tiago". At the door, the host's cousin, with a proffered tray of cigarettes, cigars and *buyo* (betel) welcome the Kapitan's guests composed of town officials, religious curates, military men as well as civilians and other busybodies.

Elderly people in the Philippines invariably remember a time in their youth when offering a tray of *buyo* or *hitso* (native terms for the betel chew) was the essence of urbanity, an act of courtesy and politeness in every house especially in the homes of the wealthy. A homeowner would never fail to offer betel to anyone who entered his house for to do so would be a serious breach of hospitality. On formal occasions, the ingredients of the quid would be served in precious metal trays (*bandejados* or *buyeras*) or boxes offered by servants, daughters of the household or even the lady of the house herself.

For travellers, a bag of betel may be more essential than food. Chewing betel helps withstand hunger and exhaustion. Warriors too may need it to revive strength and for that added boost of courage. The offering of betel was an essential component of every rite of passage such as birth, courtship, betrothal and marriage, healing and finally death.

## The Betel Chew

The nut is the fruit of the areca palm (*areca catechu*). It is chewed together with a leaf of the betel piper vine (*Piper betel*) from which the name comes. The nut is cut into segments dabbed with lime (which is ground and burnt sea-shell), mixed with some water or oil and wrapped in a leaf to form a quid, the chewing of which produces blood-red spittle.

The practice of betel chewing used to be prevalent throughout the Philippines from the mountains in the north to the Muslim communities in the south. The tribal people of the Cordillera, commonly called Igorots, carry their containers around their waists or in little specially made baskets. Most of the men, especially the older ones, chew betel constantly. The Igorots believe that the chewing of betel staves off hunger and tiredness as they work long hours in their rice fields.

My sister-in-law, a Catholic missionary nun working with the Ifugao and Bontoc thought that tuberculosis must be rampant among the natives because they spat "blood" everywhere. Indeed early European travellers who encountered chewers in the islands thought the same thing. But rather than blood, the red spittle was due to the betel they constantly chewed.

In northern Philippines, lime containers are usually made from wood and bamboo. Many of these are made from sections of bamboo, incised with delicate geometric patterns and further decorated with beads. In the case of small containers, cotton or cloth may be used as stoppers. There are wood containers made in the form of Chinese jars with carved human or animal figures as stoppers.

## Betel Chewing in Southern Philippines

In the Visayas, the nut was called *bonga* and the betel leaf *buyo* along with the prepared quid. Sometimes the quid was called *mamon* or *maman*: to chew it was to *mama*. The terms used sometimes varied from region to region.

According to the Philippine historian, William Henry Scott, "the preparation, exchange and serving of betel nut was the most important social act among the Visayans". Men carried the necessary ingredients with them in little special baskets or pouches ready to share these with friends and associates. On special occasions a touch of musk or a slice of cinnamon bark or some other aromatic flavouring may be added. The chewing of betel also figured in courtship and romance. To offer a partially chewed betel to the beloved was an act of flirtation; to send one in response was an acceptance of his advances.

To the rural folk, the chewing of betel consists of plucking a betel leaf off the vine growing in the backyard, picking a nut off the areca palm, dabbing it with a lime paste and popping it into one's mouth. In some places, the custom may be a purely social undertaking, offering betel to an acquaintance or to a stranger as a gesture of friendship.

In central and southern Mindanao, betel chewing may be a simple pleasure and at the same time hold ritualistic associations. This custom is especially noted among the Maranao, Maguindanao, Bagobo and Tausug groups.

## The Betel in Early Philippine Literature

Epics in Philippine literature are narratives based on oral tradition that revolve around heroic deeds or supernatural events. Usually in verse, they are chanted or sung. The advent of Western ways have obliterated much of old customs and traditions in the Philippine countryside.

Ullalim verses tell of the importance of betel in the life of the Kalinga, a pagan tribe in northern Luzon. Palms of areca are planted on the slopes of their village hills and the borders of their fields and houses. These trees perpetuate themselves by dropping their ripened fruits on the earth where the "Kalinga live and die". "Behold here, a nice red ripe betel nut," the *ullalim* opens a *Message of the Betel Nut* with. The stereotyped phrase "a nice red ripe betel nut" is repeated several times elsewhere in the verse. Betel nuts are endowed with such "great magic powers. . . that they are almost characters in the play". They are said "to bleed, speak. . .invite courtship, cause pregnancy, bring bad omens", functioning as actual participants in the events narrated by the bard.

Scott notes the role of betel in Visayan epics, "The Panay epic of *Humadapnon* climaxes with a sixty-two line description of betel nut being prepared and served by *binokot* (ugly and stunted) maidens". In a Subanon epic, writes Scott quoting from a source, "when the hero Sandayo appears before Datu *Daugbulawan*", he was so young that "the sword at his waist scraped the floor". He was told, "*Bata, ka'na ginapog: po dapa no p'nlebon* (Child, no lime for you: you know not woman)".

## Archaeological Evidence

Duyong Cave, located along an isolated stretch of beach in Lipuon Point, Palawan, yielded artefacts associated to a Neolithic burial dated to 2680 BC. Among these were Arca shells with traces of lime that archaeologists believe must have been used with betel chewing. Similar shells with lime have also been found at the Rato Puti Cave, also in Lipuon Point, not far from the Tabon Cave complex.

## The Betel in Ethnographic Records

The betel or its components such as the areca nuts are mentioned in ethnographic records about the Philippines, usually as items of trade or when describing habits of the native peoples encountered.

Trade with the Chinese and other Arab nations had been going on for several centuries before the Philippines was discovered by Spanish conquistadors. *Ma-l*, a name by which some islands of the Philippines was known, was listed in the *Zhufanshi* (Description of Barbarian Peoples) as trading its products consisting of yellow wax, cotton, pearls, tortoiseshell, medicinal betel nuts and *yuta* cloth for which the Chinese bartered porcelain, trade gold, iron censers, lead, coloured glass beads and iron needles. Zhou Rugua wrote the account while he was Superintendent of Maritime Trade at Quanzhou, in Fujian province. This was the most important port of the 12th and 13th centuries in China.

In the 16th century, Magellan's chronicler Pigafetta, in an account of their first voyage around the world, de-scribes the people they encountered in Samar as "heathens" constantly chewing a fruit that they call "areca. . . which resembles a pear.. They cut this fruit into four parts and wrap it in the leaves of a vine that they call *betre* (betel) which resembles the leaves of the mulberry. . . They mix it with some lime and when they have chewed it thoroughly, they spit it out. It makes the mouth exceedingly red. . . All the people in those parts of the world use it, for it is very cooling to the heart, and if they ceased to use it, they would die."

## Reports of the Religious Orders

Throughout the Spanish colonial period, local officials as well as various religious orders regularly sent reports to the king or their superiors in Spain. Meanwhile, European travellers wrote their impressions of the country and its peoples.

The Jesuit Fr. Pedro Chirino in 1600 AD wrote about the affairs of the country he had been sent to evangelise. "The *buyo*", according to Fr. Chirino, "provides great sustenance to the living...It strengthens the teeth, tightens the gums and sweetens the breath...And so the Indians (the natives were referred to as "Indio") and even the Spaniards make much use of it." Among other customs he described was the manner in which the Filipinos shrouded and buried their dead. The body was anointed with aromatic ointments to preserve it, "especially with the sap of a plant similar to the ivy. . . It is called *buyo* and very pungent in taste."

Another religious, Fray Juan de Plasencia wrote about the customs of the Tagalogs people of Central Luzon. "Their usual objects of sacrifice were goats, fowls and swine which were flayed, decapitated and laid before the idol". Sometimes rice is also set before the idol while all about it are placed *buyo*, "a small fruit wrapped in a leaf with some lime". The *buyo*, together with other sacrificial objects were employed by the Tagalogs in all manner of rituals that are offered for a variety of personal reasons. These may be for the recovery of a sick person, good weather for those embarking on a sea voyage, a bountiful harvest for sowed fields, a propitious result in war, a successful delivery in childbirth and a happy married life, etc.

The Jesuit Francisco Ignacio Alcina spent thirty-six years of his life among the Bisayans. He jotted down voluminous notes of his observations and interaction with the natives while travelling around Samar, Leyte, Cebu, Panay, Bohol and Negros. He died before his monumental work, *Historia de Las Islas e indios de Bisayas-1668*, was published. There are several references to the chewing of the *buyo* by the natives, a habit that he personally found repugnant. Among other observations, he noted that the *principalias* and other people of higher status who use it, have little vessels of silver, or even of gold, or porcelain from China for spittoons. <sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup>The "little vessels of silver, or even at times, of gold" referred to by Alcina are usually lime containers.

## Other Travellers and Ethnographers

Le Gentil de la Galaisiere was a French traveller who visited the islands in the 18th century. Talking about agricultural products of the natives, he wrote, "betel is very common. . . It is believed to be good for the stomach and to aid digestion". The custom, he continues, was already established in the Philippines when the Spaniards arrived who had since adopted it for themselves. The use of betel was so common that men and women carry it with them already prepared in a box of silver or gold. Unfortunately, he says, deadly poisons had often been dispensed in the guise of this act of courtesy.

Jean Mallat, a French physician who resided in Manila in the early 19th century, mentions *bancas* and native paddlers who never complain of fatigue and can row the whole day even if they do not have rice; "a little tobacco and some *buyo* are enough for them".

Of the many foreigners who wrote about the Philippines in the 19th century, Fedor Jagor's account is probably the most scientific and discerning. In his travels throughout the islands stopping in different places, he de-scribes the topography, livelihood, social life, as well as the habits and customs of the natives. He mentions as a favourite pastime of the natives, the chewing of the *buyo* and the smoking of cigars. Sometimes tobacco then was not smoked

but cut up into pieces to be chewed with the *buyo*. The addition of tobacco to the traditional chew composed of the betel leaf, areca nut and lime is still popular today. Chewers say it greatly increases the "taste" of the chew. It could have been a later development, perhaps towards the 19th century when Jagor wrote his account.

Fr. Blanco, in his *Flora de Filipina*, writes the following account, "This species of palm ... which like its fruit is called *bonga* by the Indians, grows to about the average height of the cocoa-nut tree. Its trunk is smaller at the base than the top, very straight with many circular rings formed by the junction of the leaves before they fall, which they do on growing to a certain size." Fr. Blanco observes that when "the *bonga* is mixed with lime and the pepper leaf, it makes the saliva very red... The Indian apply this saliva to the navel of their children as a cure for colic and ... (uses it for) protection from the effects of cold air". Both natives and Spaniards use the term " *buyo*". Fr. Blanco says of the piper betel (*Pimenta betel*) whose leaves are employed as "envelopes" to the areca nut and lime: "this plant is universally known".

Writing around 1600 AD, Antonio de Morga, published a classic in Philippine historiography. He describes chewing of the *buyo*, "This rolled tidbit is placed in the mouth and chewed... strong and stimulating... it induces sleep and intoxication". *Buyo* chewing was indulged in by well-to-do natives and Spaniards, both laymen and priests. The *buyo* was always served in special plates or service sets. In the same way that sipping chocolate was served in New Spain (Mexico). *Buyo* sets, according to Morga, were made of brass and other materials and included separate containers for the different ingredients, the scissors or cutters (called *kalukate* in Tagalog) and other utensils for handling this delicacy. The *buyo*, as well as the articles that go to making a *buyo* or the service set, were sold in the *Parian* (a place where the Chinese inhabitants of Manila were confined to live and work).



Lithograph by C.W. Andrews of a native woman selling buyo (betel).  
*Ilustracion Filipina*, June 15th, 1859

In the mid-19th century, Sir John Bowring, an English-man, who was for some time British Consul to Canton and afterwards Governor of Hong Kong, undertook a mission to Manila with a view to developing British trade with the Philippines. He devoted several pages to a description of the products produced by the different regions in the country. The great consumption of betel made a distinct impression on Bowring. He writes, "there are in the city of Manila, in the courts and ground floors of the houses, altogether 898 warehouses and shops, of which ... nearly half ... are devoted to the sale of the prepared betel or to the materials of which it is composed".

### The Betel Monopoly

The Spanish colonial enterprise in the Philippines was always short of men and money. There were no easily obtainable sources of wealth and therefore few Spaniards ventured to settle in a country made doubly inhospitable by the hot tropical climate. Had it not been for the development of the galleon trade, the Spaniards might have given up on the Philippines. The galleon trade not only provided the Spaniards with a way of making a living, the sale of cargo space in the ships helped defray the cost of maintaining the colony.



Lithograph by C.W. Andrews of an old man with a *caticut* preparing his betel chew. *Ilustracion Filipina*, June 1 st 1959

Other ways of generating revenue were monopolies instituted by the government on the growing and marketing of certain products indispensable to the lifestyle of the Indio. Among these monopolies were the growing of palm wine, betel and tobacco.

There is a town in Bustos, Bulacan which is still called Bonga Mayor. There are interestingly carved stone houses some of them exhibiting stylised renditions of the areca palm, the growing of which had occupied people of the town for hundreds of years. The areca palm was planted at the foot of the nearby Sierra Madre mountains. When ready for use, they were gathered and stored in ware-houses that in many cases were the downstairs area of large stone houses, and readied for market, a revenue-generating activity controlled by the colonial government.

### Sold in Wet Markets

In most wet markets outside of Manila, one can still buy the areca nut (*bunga*), the betel leaf (*ikmo*) and the prepared lime (*apog*). These days a piece of chewing tobacco (*mascada*) is always part of the quid (*nganga*). At a special section of the Quiapo market at the heart of the city of Manila, these components of the betel chew are still readily available. Vendors say that the leaves have come all the way from Penaranda in Nueva Ecija and the areca nut from Bulacan and sometimes from Laguna. The lime, which is ground burnt seashell sometimes mixed with water or coconut oil to form a paste, can be from anywhere.



Betel leaves, *ikmo*, and areca nut *bunga*, together with lime, *apog*, are sold at Quiapo market in Manila

Since there are many vendors, there must still be quite a number of chewers around. In Quiapo, vendors say most of their customers are "*Bombay*" (the local term used to denote Indians from India).

## Betel Chewing in the Countryside

Just outside of Manila, going north to Bulacan is a town called Pullilan where I encountered some diehard adherents to the chew. One of them, my host, was the eighty-eight year old lady of the house who was celebrating her birthday. She attributed her longevity and good health to betel chewing. She never failed to chew betel after meals and before bedtime in order to get a good night's sleep. After lunch, she brought out a tin can containing her leaves, split nuts and lime paste. Placing the nuts with a dab of lime and wrapping this with a leaf, she pounded the concoction in her *almirez* (a kitchen-sized mortar and pestle), added a slice of fragrant chewing tobacco and popped the tidbit into her mouth.

These ladies attribute their good health to the Philippines custom of betel chewing



Betel is chewed after lunch and just before bedtime for a good night's sleep



This eighty-eight year old Pullilan lady grows the betel vine in her own backyard



Her chewing tobacco was an "imported" variety that came like a small wad. It was regularly supplied to her by a son who lived in the United States. A few of her friends performed the same ritual. After the first few chews, they spat into the ground to get rid of the initial pungency. Curiously, the trio of them had only few teeth left, still they remained diehard adherents to the "chew". They claimed that the chew was good for the teeth, or at least the gums!

## Betel Chewing in China and Southeast Asia

The tradition of chewing betel is ancient in China. It is mentioned in Tang dynasty (7th to 9th centuries) sources as being part of marriage ceremonies. Ma Huan, writing in the 15th century, observed that the Chinese when they receive guests, entertain them not with tea but with areca nut. Although the custom is prevalent in the coastal areas where the climate and the soil are suitable for the cultivation of the nut and the leaf and where there are adequate sources of lime, it is less common inland unless the ingredients can be obtained through trade.

Betel has been called "the daily social lubricant of Southeast Asia". Anthony Reid, Professor of Southeast Asian history at the Australian National University, writes, "although betel chewing was also widespread in South India and South China by the 15th century, it appears to have originated in Southeast Asia". The areca nut and the piper betel leaf grow naturally in Southeast Asia and this fact, according to Reid, is borne out by the "extraordinary diversity of indigenous words for them".

In Jakarta I encountered streets and districts named after the components of betel chewing such as: *Pondok Pinang* (areca nut hut), *Kehon Sireh* (betel garden). Elsewhere in Southeast Asia, "The genus *Areca* gives its Malay name to the island of Penang", according to the *Palms of Malaysia*.

Isabella Bird in her 19th century travels throughout the Malay Archipelago, visited the states of Sungei Ujong, Selangor and Perak. She noted the "abominable habit of betel nut chewing which is universal among the inhabitants of the Malay Peninsula. . . It is a revolting habit, and if a person speaks to you while he is chewing his 'quid' of betel, his mouth looks as if it were full of blood".

In a Malay household, a *sirih* (betel) set was usually placed before visitors who would be joined by the host in the informal ritual of preparing the chew. *Sirih* sets were part of household paraphernalia that were used in ceremonies performed during betrothals, weddings and funerals. It was uncommon to find a household without these brass sets.

Helen Ibbitson Jessup, in *Court Arts of Indonesia*, names the *sirih* as one of the "most pervasive social customs in the Indonesian archipelago". She believes that the practice, which is known throughout Southeast Asia, may have originated there. *Pinang* (the areca nut) is wrapped in the leaf of the betel vine and along with crushed lime (from seashells), tobacco and some spices added, is chewed for a prolonged period of time, and as a result a mildly narcotic effect is induced.

A container or implement has evolved for every ingredient and process connected with the preparation of betel in Indonesia. There are boxes with or without lids, individual containers (sometimes in the shape of the fruit *mangosteen*) for the nuts, the lime and spices, elongated holders for the leaves, tweezers for picking up and mixing, cutters for the areca nut, a small flat spoon for the lime as well as spittoons.

The most common materials are brass but other sets are made out of wood, palm fibre, split rattan and even tortoiseshell. In Lampung there are exquisitely beaded *sirih* boxes. In Palembang there are red lacquer sets and silver boxes come with chains to facilitate carrying. In the Javanese *kraton* (sultan's court), the *sirih* set was usually made of gold, sometimes studded with gems or decorated with exquisite repousse or stained gold work. Sometimes it is made of other metals inlaid with gold. So central is the custom that the *sirih* set forms part of the essential court regalia. The king's retinue always included a slave or a servant who carried the master's betel box.

Zhou Daguan, member of a Chinese mission, who rendered a faithful account of life in Angkor (Cambodia) at the end of the 13th century, thought the Khmers chewed betel after meals to help their digestion and thereby pre-vent belching. The ceramic lime pots, that come in a variety of forms (usually shaped like an owl but also other birds, elephant, rabbit, frog and other animal shapes) are ubiquitous in the repertoire of the Khmer potter. In temple and other excavation sites they are found with a pinkish residue (due to the addition of tannin or turmeric to the lime, a popular local variation).<sup>2</sup>

According to Dawn Rooney, a Southeast Asian scholar who has written extensively on betel chewing in Southeast Asia, the use of betel is "geographically widespread... encompassing the eastern coastline of Africa to Madagascar in the West, Melanesia. . . in the East, southern China in the North and Papua New Guinea in the South", an area which includes the "Indian subcontinent, Sri Lanka, and all of Southeast Asia". She notes that the practice is particularly concentrated in areas where the areca palm and the leaf grow, such as in lush tropical climates and coastal areas where there are adequate sources of lime.

<sup>2</sup> On a visit to the storage area of the Field Museum of Natural History in Chicago, the author found a Thai jarlet still with traces of lime in-side.

## Betel Chewing in India

Betel chewing must be an old tradition in India where it is called *tambula* (" *tambool*" is a Sanskrit word) in ethnographic accounts but popularly referred to as "*paan*". While enjoyment of the *paan* is very much a simple plea-sure among Indians, at the same time, its cultural significance is both mysterious and magical. Paean to the *paan* are recorded in India's classical literature such as Kalidasa's (4th to 5th centuries) narrative plays.

There are early medical words like "*caraka sambita*" which refer to betel. The Ayurveda (the science of natural medicine) has recorded many uses of the piper betel leaf (*Piperaceae* family). When combined with *paan* spices and condiments, it is said to assume "carminative, stimulant, astringent, aphrodisiac, digestive and cosmetic" at-tributes.

P.K. Gode lists numerous inscriptions mentioning *tambula* from AD 1028 to 1800. Marco Polo is among early travellers who noted the use of betel among the people of India. According to Gode, it was in the 17th century that tobacco came to coexist with *tambula*. The difference is that tobacco has gained no religious significance unlike the *tambula*.

Sumati Morarjee in her article "*Tambula* (Tradition and Art)" writes, "Betel stimulates passion, brings out the physical charm, conduces to good-luck, lends aroma to the mouth, strengthen the body and dispels diseases arising from the phlegm." It bestows other benefits, "Bitterness, pungency, heat, sweetness, saltiness, astringency... power to remove gas, kill worms, remove phlegm, destroy foul odours from the mouth. . .to beautify it, bring about purification and to kindle passion... The 13 qualities of *tambula* are unobtainable even in heaven".

The "eating of a *paan*" in India, "folding it up with spices and condiments and sharing it with another person is a gesture of hospitality" in much the same way an American or European would share a cup of tea or coffee by way of initiating social communication. The author, who writes for *Taj Magazine*, of the Taj Group of Hotels in India, avers "the art of making and serving a *paan* is as sophisticated. . .as that of serving after-dinner liqueur" and every wealthy Benaresi home will own an "antique *paandaan* (*paan* container) of beaten and carved silver, usually several generations old".

In an article on areca production and marketing in India written by S. Giriappa in 1994, the author claims, "areca nut is one of the few alien crops to be domesticated and exploited fully in India". It used to import this ingredient from Malaysia, Singapore and Sri Lanka but in the 1960s, India itself became the largest producer of areca, ahead of other countries like Bangladesh, Sri Lanka and Malaysia. To this day, the *paan* is part of the meal in any Indian household or restaurant. In the capitals of India, it is common to see a *paan* tray at the entrance of restaurants as a sign of welcome. Like coffee or tea or even a cigarette, the ingredients of the chew are offered at the end of the meal, to aid digestion of the usually spicy food no doubt but also that the host and his guests may linger in sociability and conversation after the meal.

## Origins

In a publication called *Palms of Malaya*, it is claimed that no one has ever come across a wild betel palm; the species being found mostly in villages and other house sites. Its "nearest wild relatives grow in northern Borneo, the Philippines and Celebes. . .In the Philippines, where there are several (species), betel tends to escape and produce many varieties", a fact which led the author T.C. Whitmore to conclude that the "the origin may be there (in the Philippines)".



*Buyera* (tray) made of mother-of-pearl with silver inset at the centre



A blue glass spittoon



A lime container



*Buyo* server made by Chinese or Filipino artisans. Used in the Manila area



Betel box in silver with gold inlays. From Tausug



*Buyera* for serving the prepared quid ready to be enjoyed by guests. Fine silver handcrafted trays were made by Filipinos



*Buyera* silver tray for serving prepared quids. Handcrafted in Manila with the initials of the original owner engraved at the centre



Brass betel holder in the shape of a boat. From Maranao

#### TRAYS AND PARAPHERNALIA OF BETEL CHEWING FROM THE RICHARD LOPEZ COLLECTION

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### Betel Paraphernalia

During the height of the galleon trade, *reales de ocho* (pieces of eight), Mexican currency minted from the mines of Peru and Mexico were exchanged for the goods brought by the trading ships that crossed the Pacific. These silver coins, besides being popular currency, were a store of value because they could be melted down and transformed into various luxury articles that were desired by the Spaniards and Indio made wealthy by the trade.

The first craftsmen were probably Chinese who taught the craft to young mestizos<sup>3</sup> and Indios who apprenticed under them. There are beautiful silver trays (*buyeras*) in Philippine collections, distinct because they bear no European hallmark, that are believed to have been made by local silversmiths.<sup>4</sup>

During a short-lived coffee boom in Batangas province in the late 19th century, the jewellers of Lipa (a town in the province) made elaborate table services, including *buyeras* and *paliteras* (toothpick holders) out of solid gold and silver.

<sup>3</sup> During the Spanish colonial period, the term "mestizo" referred to Chinese- Filipinos according to Wickberg.

<sup>4</sup> Information from Richard Lopez, a local collector.

### Brass and Bronze

Brass and bronze represents a second set of trade metals whose import into the Philippines has been going on for a long time. They are treasured as heirlooms and form part of the transactions and rituals engaged in from tribe to tribe such as engagements, weddings, peace pacts and the payment of blood money.

Brass is a copper-zinc alloy while bronze is made from a tin-copper mixture. Brass is cheaper and softer than bronze. Some evidences of brass working have been found among the Bontoc and other peoples of the Cordillera. Brass and bronze however, are chiefly worked among the Muslims communities in Mindanao in the same way they are prevalent in Indonesia and Malaysia.

The process of casting brass seems to be essentially the same everywhere: a model of the desired object is made in beeswax that is then surrounded by a clay mould. When heated, the wax melts and runs off as it is replaced by molten brass or copper while the clay mould is broken away. This process is technically known as the "lost wax" or *cire perdue* process. Muslims make betel boxes this way.

### Betel Paraphernalia in Mindanao

There are nine groups of Islamic peoples in the Philippines. The most prominent among them are the Maguindanao, the Maranao, the Tausug and the Yakan. Only the Maranao and the Maguindanao are known metal smiths but there must be artisans from other tribes as well. From time to time, there are betel boxes coming to the antique shops in Manila that are said to have come from the Bagobo and the Yakan.

Tugaya, a lakeshore town east of Marawi City in Lanao del Sur is famous for its brass industry. Dr Abdulah Madale who wrote about his people, the Maranaw, has researched this subject. The industry at Tugaya may have been established only during the American occupation of Manila in World War Two when empty brass shells became abundant.

It is believed that the brass industry in Tugaya had its beginnings when artisans from Tugaya might have joined traders in an expedition to Samar (a place known for its excellent metal working) and other centres and were taught by metal workers in those areas who may have learned it from the Chinese or the Arabs. Another theory is that a Maranaw living among tribes in Samar or in Mindoro for a long time could have learned the trade and brought it back to his people upon his return.

### Foreign Influences

The more obvious thing is the manner in which the art of the Maranaw has been influenced by the Chinese, Arab, Indian and Javanese. The predominating design in Muslim brasswork which looks like a fern (*pako*) is a modification of the Arabic floral design called *kufic*. The design consists of half palmettes and two or three lobed leaves with floral motifs, tendrils and scrolls growing from a central form. The flower-like design on the cover of a Maranaw *loto-an* (betel container) consists of a modified *pako* within a rectangle. The *Pako* design is closely related to the arabesque in Islamic art the roots of which probably go back into antiquity. Maranaw designs and motifs are essentially geometric because the Islamic religion prohibits the representation of living objects. Even the *pako* design is an abstraction of nature.

The Maranaw *loto-an* usually comes with silver inlay and is decorated with all manner of vegetal designs. They are rectangular boxes of different sizes. Frequently attached to them are beaded belts and handles. The smaller ones are carried by datus around their waist everywhere they go. The medium sized ones are used in the home to welcome guests and visitors. The large and elaborate boxes may be either kept for display or used only during grand ceremonial occasions.

Some special boxes come with superimposed gold or silver medallions and can be quite opulent. A person's rank or social standing may be gleaned from the appearance of his betel set.

Reid in quoting an ethnographic source describes a ruler or aristocrat's retinue of betel carriers who were usually favoured young women. In some cases they were female dwarfs (deliberately crippled in youth) who added to the mystic and charisma of the ritual. This practice is reminiscent of the offerings by *binokot* maidens mentioned by Scott.

Rectangular boxes have a removable section inside composed of four compartments for the different components of the betel chew. Even when boxes are cleaned prior to a sale, the whitish residue of lime remains.

Maranaw brass articles are slowly disappearing. Brass is becoming more difficult to obtain. More recently cast items made from inferior materials do not have the fine look of older pieces. Also, Tugaya has sunk and Tugayans have moved to other places like Marawi City where they take up livelihoods more lucrative than metal crafting.

Some betel boxes, neither rectangular and inlaid but in different shapes and sizes, are made by the Bagobo, T'boli, Maguindanao and Sulu areas. Of these, some are shaped like crescents while a few are shaped like butter-flies and frogs. Rather than a box with lid, some open boxes serve as holders of smaller containers for the different ingredients. While, among the poor, the most common container for the lime is a node of bamboo. With an elongated metal tool called *caticut*, other ingredients of the chew such as slices of the nut, may be mixed in the bamboo tube.

### **Brass Working in the Region**

Mohd Kassim Haji Ali believes that the art of casting brass was introduced into Malaya from Thailand some three hundred years ago. The craft thrived around a village called Terengganu that produced objects made of brass, other than *sirih* sets, like kettles, serving trays, cooking pots and buckets for raising well water.

In Indonesian communities influenced by Indian and Islamic culture, brasswork is quite common. Metals are usually cast but can also be beaten into shape and worked with tools to create intricate ornamentation. Musical instruments of the Minangkabau of Central Sumatra are cast in brass. Vases, lamps, platters and other household objects are made at Yogyakarta, Tegal and Gresik in Java.

For thousands of years, there has been much interaction between the peoples of mainland and island South-east Asia. Other than trade, there have been migrations and other means of cultural interchanges between the different regions. Some metal artefacts found in Mindanao may have even been acquired through trade rather than made there. There are small boats called *kumpits* that cross the ocean back and forth in an inter-island barter trade that has been going on for centuries between the Mindanaoans and the people of Borneo.

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An areca nut cutter, called *kalukate*



Betel containers with scrolls design in relief. From Bagobo



A *caticut* for mixing the lime with tobacco or spices



Crescent shape betel box with chain. This type is usually attached to the waist for easy carrying. From Maranao



Silver betel box with stylised floral design in relief. From Tausug



Silver betel box with stylised vegetal design in relief. From Tausug

FROM THE RAMON VILLEGAS COLLECTION



Finely made betel box with star-like design enhanced with a rust-red tint. From Bilaan



A sultan's betel box with diamond shape silver appliques From Maranao

FROM THE BOBBY QUISUMBING COLLECTION

FROM THE AUTHOR'S COLLECTION



Smaller size betel boxes, usually attached to the waist. From Maranao



Betel sets of two compartments. From Bagobo



Betel box with scroll design within squares in relief and matching *caticut*. From Bilaan



Components of the quid in separate containers on top of betel box with cut-outs. From Maguindanao



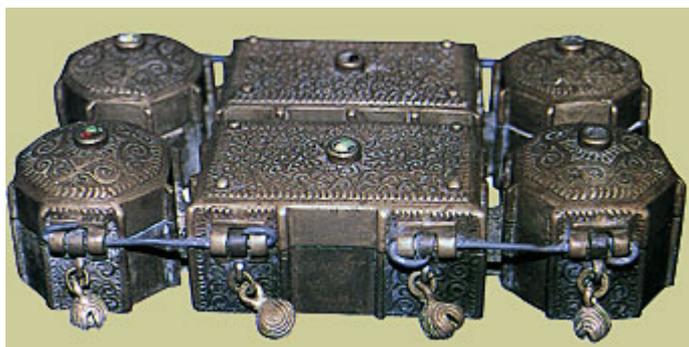
Betel box with silver inlay and beaded strap handles. From Maranao



Large betel box with stylised *sari-manok* (legendary bird) appendages. From Maranao



Betel box in yellow brass with design of two stars enhanced by a reddish tint. From Bilaan



Betel sets. From Bagobo

FROM THE AUTHOR'S COLLECTION-CYNTHIA ONGPIN VALDES

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## Betel Chewing Terms

Dawn Rooney, in her publication on *Betel Chewing Traditions in Southeast Asia* for Oxford University Press, lists regional terms for the betel leaf, areca nut and lime from Burma, Cambodia, China, India, Indonesia, Laos, Malaysia, Thailand and Vietnam, but offers none for the Philippines.

Other than the aforementioned terms for the betel chew and its components, a look through some Filipino-English dictionaries revealed the words: *ikmo* (piper betel; betel leaf pepper); *dahon ng ikmo* (betel leaf); *ikmong may apog* (betel leaf with limc); *ikmuhan* (land planted to ikmo); *ikmuhan* (to supply with ikmo); *mangikmo* (planter or dealer in ikmo). These are just the Tagalog (which is the national language) terms. Besides those already mentioned, there are various regional terms in use or formerly used throughout Luzon, the Visayas and Mindanao.

Western influence and modern-day hygiene have more or less obliterated the chewing of betel in urbanised areas of the Philippines. There are doctors who believe the practice may contribute to mouth and throat cancer, cause plaque if not discolour and rot the teeth. It no longer takes a chew of the *buyo* to redden the lips of a maiden. Tea or coffee is the favourite drink of the day to aid digestion after dinner. Alcohol and its derivatives is what loosens up the tongue and helps shed inhibitions at intimate social gatherings. To the sophisticated man or woman, lighting up a cigarette (notwithstanding the surgeon general's warnings) is the customary way to relax. The nervous individual may pop a tranquiliser to de-stress or to induce sleep.

The waning of old practices as well as economically difficult times have forced tribal peoples to exchange their cherished heirlooms and handcrafted treasures for ready cash. Betel boxes and other paraphernalia are particularly desired by anthropological museums as well as private collectors for their diversity of shapes, specific functions and precious materials. They are relics of an enduring and pervasive custom that for many generations held most of Southeast Asia under its spell.

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Intricately carved betel box in yellow brass with *sarimanok* perched on its corners.  
From Maguindanao



Betel box with intricate design applied in relief.  
From Bilaan



Betel box with containers for the lime, areca nut and tobacco in separate compartments. The leaves are usually placed inside the box. From Maguindanao



Circular tray with individual containers. Cut-outs on the lip of the tray. From Maguindanao



Betel box of yellow brass in the shape of a frog. From Maguindanao



Betel box with silver inlay and intricately beaded strap handle. From Maranao

TRAY AND BETEL BOXES FROM THE AYALA MUSEUM COLLECTION