

Betel chewing in Laos

The global betel chewing community stands at around 600 million. Nguyễn Xuân Hiên recently mapped this community, based on on-the-spot, up-to-date observations and surveys during the last decade, and on a review of literature from the last half century. His and Peter A. Reichart's research categorizes the global betel chewing community into two groups: autochthon and allochthon/migrant betel chewers. It also shows that Laos is an integral part of the global betel chewing area and in this article, Nguyễn and Reichart shed light on the little-known betel chewing customs of this landlocked nation.

Nguyễn Xuân Hiên and Peter A. Reichart

Laotian betel chewing as seen by outsiders

More than a century ago, the French explorer P. Néis observed (1885: 24) '...getting near a [Laotian] village, the first sight to see is the leaf-clusters of palm-trees, especially of coconuts and arecas.' In the first decade of the 21st century, the authors observed the same landscape on the outskirts of Vientiane and Luang Prabang: in the gardens of farmers and villagers, two or three areca palms can be seen with betel vines twining round their trunks. The products of these palms are mainly for domestic consumption. Further south, in Savannakhet and Sekong for example, the number of palms per household increases and sometimes betel vines are even planted separately on a bamboo frame.

Our observation is that Laotian areca palms (*Areca catechu* L., *māk* or *māk* or *mag* in the vernacular) are less luxuriant than Vietnamese ones. In addition, the betel vines or creepers (*Peper bitel*, *p'ou* or *plu* or *blū*) in Laos are thinner, with smaller and tougher leaves, as compared to those in the neighbouring country. The areca nuts are rather small, with a thick dark green covering, and are mostly oblong in shape. In mountainous areas of the Northern Highlands the authors have come across numerous specimens of semi-wild areca palms (*Areca laosensis*) with dark orange round nuts.

The Laotian betel quid (package) commonly consists of: 1) a whole or half leaf of betel, 2) a quarter of an unpeeled areca nut, 3) a small lump of slaked lime, 4) a piece of astringent bark and 5) a generous pinch of tobacco. It has been said that some poor Laotian women only chew dried areca core, lime and tobacco.

Most chewers prefer fresh nuts, but in the off-season they chew dried nuts. Areca nuts, in whole pieces or in fine slices, are hung above the fire-hole, usually located in the middle of houses on stilts. In the southern part of the country, the drying process has taken on a small business dimension. Areca slices are dried with charcoal, then bound with bamboo string into 20-slice-chains; these chains are then packed in quantities of 50 or 100 in woven bamboo boxes. Such businesses are dominated by the Chinese and sometimes the Vietnamese.

Most of the slaked lime (*poùn*) is from the limestone that is found almost everywhere in this mountainous country. Limestone pieces (of 20-30cm) are placed in a furnace (made of hard clay) then burnt for a day and a night. This artisanal burning gives an unevenly-burnt, rather dirty product; the slaked lime is not snowy white. In Luang Prabang, betel chewers from affluent families colour their lime with curcuma (*Curcuma longa*). The Thai ethnic group living along the Mekong river-side also burn mollusc shells in order to produce the raw lime, and in turn the slaked lime (*pun*), used in betel chewing.

In most cases, the astringent matter used in the betel quid is a slice of *sisiet* cut from the bark of the perennial, 25-30m-high Kunz tree (*Pentace burmanica*). The mature bark is removed in pieces of (roughly) 45-50cm, four to five centimetres wide and one to two centimetres thick. In some southern provinces, the bark is put into boiling water, then concentrated over a low fire for two to three hours until it has turned brown-black in colour and can be formed into balls of between five and eight centimeters in diameter; this produces a substance similar to *cachu*, the extract of *Acacia catechu* used as a stimulant by Indian chewers and some Southeast Asians. This concentrated ball is also called *sisiet*. Chewers fold a small lump of *sisiet* into a betel leaf together with the other components and the quid is ready to chew. In Xieng Khouang, another tree – the *Careva arborea* – is used to extract *cachu*. The ethnic communities in mountainous areas also use the bark of various trees such as *Artocarpus rigidus* and *Artocarpus asperulus*. What all these tree barks have in common is that they taste astringent. In fact, the more mature the bark, the more astringent the taste. Mountain people appreciate a quid with a bitter taste; they believe that it prevents malaria and other diseases.

Traditionally, the tobacco used in the Laotian quid has been homemade and very heavy. Recently it has been replaced by cigarettes. In mountainous regions, Lao Theung (midland people) and Lao Soung (highland people) chewers are generally also heavy smokers. Locals believe smoking and chewing will give them strength against the damp, misty weather.

In Laos, areca and betel planting is not undertaken for business. The interregional and international exchange of these products develops sporadically and on a small scale; mainly products are traded from the south to the north and from plains regions to the highlands. The Laotians do not participate in this business which flourishes in the dry season. Dried areca slices, raw lime and, when stocks are low, betel leaves are imported, sometimes from bordering provinces in Vietnam.

As is the case in most betel chewing countries, to date there are no reliable figures on the prevalence of this centuries-old custom in Laos. Most of the Laotian chewers the authors have met are mature women (over forty) with unblackened dentition. They sometimes display branches of areca or some betel leaves arranged on banana leaves at local markets or along roads to earn a few *kips* (Lao currency). Apparently this is more for pleasure than business because, if asked, they happily share their commodities with market-goers.

The betel quid still remains effective in ritual life. Part of a banana leaf is made into a conical container, into which is put a whole betel leaf, two or four areca quarters and, in most cases, a *sisiet* slice. This is then laid on the altar in order to eliminate summer ailments. It is believed that without the offering of a betel quid, the effectiveness of the prayers of *Mo* masters (a kind of medium) evaporates completely. A wedding go-between of the P'anoi people usually brings a jar of raw rice beer, betel leaves, whole areca nuts and *Artocarpus* (*puo* 'c *hât*) bark slices as presents for the bridal family.

Betel chewing practices among ethnic groups

Laos counts between 70 and 100 ethnic groups. On-the-spot observation by the authors revealed that in the Boloven Highlands, the Kha Alak practice the culture of betel; in the North, the Akha, the P'anoi, the Man and the Thai chew betel, too. However, it is worth noting that the Thai community in Bokeo, Luang Namtha and Hua Phan Provinces can be divided into a) (recent) Thai immigrants from Thailand, b) local Thais (who immigrated from South China in the 18th-19th century

or earlier), and c) Thai immigrants from Vietnam (from the 1950s on). All these Thais chew betel to varying degrees. However, their betel quid composition and especially their manner of betel rolling are quite diverse. The Thailand Thais, influenced by their compatriots, prefer the betel quid in a conical betel leaf; the Vietnamese Thais continue to roll betel into fine rolls; and the local Thais chew betel while they smoke. All of them hold the use of betel in ritual feasts and ceremonies in high esteem.

The Vietnamese ethnic community in Laos adopts a different pattern. They number between 20,000 and 50,000 (from a total of 7 million Laotians) and are highly mobile. They have settled mainly in Pakxe, Thakhek, Kaysone Phomvihane (Savannakhet) and Phongsali, Xam Nua, Ban Nape (along the Vietnamese border). It is possible to distinguish two sub-groups within this community: the Viet sub-group (mainly living in the south and originating from Quảng Bình, Hà Tĩnh and Nghệ An provinces, which are strongholds of Vietnamese traditional betel-chewing) and the Vietnamese Thai sub-group (mainly settled around the north eastern borders). The first sub-group still maintains their original customs. They prepare their betel rolls in the traditional Vietnamese way, by spreading a little snow white slaked lime on the betel leaf's dark surface, roughly rolling it up and then pressing a fine, peeled areca quarter against it. All of this is then placed in the mouth. A small pinch of cigarette tobacco is used later to brush the chewer's front teeth. The betel quid is chewed for over twenty minutes and the red betel saliva is spat out twice during the session. While some chewers still have betel paraphernalia from their native areas – the wooden betel box (*tráp trấu*) that, in the past, was considered to be the 'face of the family'; a bronze betel box (*ang trấu*), the symbol of betel chewing; a tiny silver lime tube (*ống vôi*); a bronze or ceramic spittoon (*ống phồng*) – many do not. Fortunately, the ceramic lime-pots are sometimes still conserved as heritage objects. It has been observed that local chewers usually use bronze stupa-shaped lime tubes. Similar tubes are found in Vietnamese border areas, such as Mường Lay District (Điện Biên Province) and Mai Châu District (Hòa Bình Province).

It should be noted that the authors did not observe or collect information about the chewing of industry-made, ready-to-chew *pan masala*. Likewise, no information was obtained relating to Laotian folktales over betel chewing and/or its components.

General speaking, the characteristics of Laotian betel chewing customs are:

- the quid is still close to its natural state; in particular, no stimulants are added
- betel is mainly grown for familial consumption and not for sale
- there is a close link with tobacco smoking
- betel chewing is not as prevalent or as impressive as in Vietnamese bordering provinces
- Laotian betel chewing is a peaceful practice, reflecting the life of local people
- the practices of autochthon betel chewers (native Laotians) from those of allochthon/migrant chewers (Vietnamese immigrants) are clearly distinguishable.

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- 2 Nguyễn Xuân Hiên (2009) *Betel-chewing Customs in Vietnam – from Practice to Ritual*. New York: Sun Publishers, Inc..
- 3 Nguyễn Xuân Hiên, Reichart, P.A., Vlaar, M.J. & J.D. Chang (2009). *La chique de bétel au Vietnam, les récentes mutations d'une tradition millénaire*. Péninsule, XLè année, Nouvelle série, No.58, pp.73-125.
- 4 Reichart, P.A. & H.P. Philipsen. 2005. *Betel and Miang – Vanishing Thai Habits*. 2nd Edition. Bangkok: White Lotus Press.

Images below from left to right:

1: Map of betel chewing areas (Nguyễn Xuân Hiên, 1998-2009). The solid dark zone shows the primary, autochthon betel chewing areas. The striped zone shows the secondary, allochthon betel chewing areas.

2: A semi-wild areca-nut from Luang Namtha Province.

3: The betel service of a Vietnamese immigrant in Savannakhet.

4: A casual betel quid on the Thailand-Laos border.

5: A Laotian lime tube in Xam Nua.

