



Betel-Chewing in Vietnam

Its Past and Current Importance

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Abstract. – Betel-chewing is an important age-old custom in Vietnam, which is in decline. The author argues that areca nuts and betel leaves play still a significant role in modern weddings and rituals and are also used in medicine and in diverse industries. The areca tree, the betel vine, and the lime pot are considered like family members and treated with deep respect. The betel service, especially the lime pot, is a specific identity marker of Vietnamese culture. Folktales reflect on the various aspects of the betel-chewing practice. The author presents an English translation of the oldest version of such tales. [*Vietnam, betel service, betel-chewing, rituals, cultural ceremonies, folktales*]

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1 Introduction

“Several hundred million people today practice the ancient custom of betel-chewing. In South Asia, where the habit is most prevalent, the signs are hard to miss,” D. Parsell (2005: 43) states thus the situation in the early 21st century. A decade ago, another author confirmed: “Few traditions in South-East Asia have the antiquity and universal acceptance of betel-chewing. The custom is over 2,000 years old and has survived from ancient times into the 20th century” (Rooney 1993: 1).

In Vietnam, betel-chewing is an age-old custom, too. This country is not situated in the domestication areas of the areca palm tree which are located somewhere in Malaysian archipelagoes.¹ The Vietnamese are not the people who were the first discoverers of the fascination of betel-chewing. Skeletons bearing evidence of betel-chewing date back to about 3,000 B.C. and were found in the Duyong Cave in the Philippines. The Vietnamese chewing addicts’ number does not rank among the first places in the list of high-percentage-chewers’ countries that are Pakistan, India, and Taiwan where people continue to chew betel to a great extent and “many new betel users are adolescents and children” (Parsell 2005: 43). Even though this custom is deeply rooted in Vietnamese society and culture, it is more than a tangible matter and always considered as an element of national identity and prestige. These marvelous particularities are, however, underrepresented in Vietnam and little known abroad due to the “monopoly” in international documentation of this custom by non-chewing outsiders.

In this article we try to present some peculiarities of the Vietnamese betel-chewing custom in its evolution and with regard to its multidisciplinary dimension from the point of view of an insider. Some 95% of the information was collected in Viet-

¹ Remains of what C. F. Gorman (1970: 98) suggested to be probably areca nuts, dating to 7,000–5,500 B.C., have been found at the Spirit Cave in northwestern Thailand, but the clue of their domesticity needs to be scientifically confirmed (C. F. Gorman, personal communication 1978).

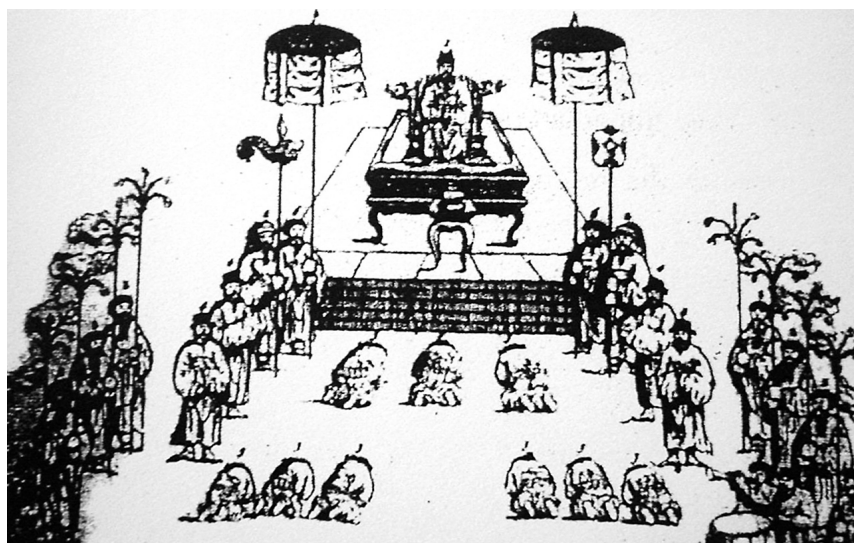


Fig. 1: Areca palm trees at the Lê Dynasty Court, about the 17th century (courtesy National Museum of Arts, Saigon, 1975).

nam itself and from Vietnamese sources. Our presentation is based on observation lasting for more than half of a century and on recent on-the-spot research, surveys, and interviews (2002–2004).

2 The Past and Present of an Age-Old Custom

2.1 A Millennium-Honored Custom

The Vietnamese were familiar with the areca palm tree (*Areca catechu* L.) and its alliance, the betel vine (*Piper betle* L.), from time immemorial. Archaeological evidence (skeletons with blackened teeth, areca nut remains) from the Phùng Nguyên, Đông Đậu, and Đông Sơn cultures (from the first half of the second millennium B.C. to the first millennium B.C.) suggests locals knew already from that time on the art of betel-chewing. In the late Đông Sơn period, a bronze spittoon was excavated in a brick tomb in the border region between Hải Dương and Quảng Yên Provinces (North Vietnam).

Ancient Vietnamese literature from the beginning of our era relates that the Vietnamese envoy has defended our betel-chewing custom before the Chinese emperor Zhou Zheng-wang (around 1,100 B.C.) as follows: “betel-chewing is for keeping good sanitary conditions in the mouth therefore teeth turned black.” It is also believed that before the Chinese domination (207 B.C.), the habits of betel-chewing and teeth blackening were widespread in the country. In A.D. 990, Song Kao, the envoy of the Song (Chinese) dynasty, was received by the Vietnamese King Lê Đại Hành (941–1005) and the envoy noted “... the King rides a horse with me, then he takes betel and areca to

invite his guests, even on horse. This is the tradition in the reception of honor guests.” Vũ Quỳnh (1453–?), in his Foreword to our first folktale anthology “*Lĩnh Nam chích quái liệt truyện*” (Collection of Extraordinary Tales from Lĩnh Nam),² has written in spring 1492: “in our country, no offerings are more precious than betel leaves and areca nuts that represent and promote the conjugal faithfulness and the fraternal affection” (1695, handwritten version).

Father Cristophoro Borri and Father Alexandre de Rhodes are the two first European eyewitnesses of the betel-chewing tradition in Vietnam. Borri wrote on the south (2000 [1631]: 18f.): “... people chew betel all day long, not only at home but also on streets and also while talking, i.e., everywhere and at all times. People smoke too, but tobacco is not comparable to betel as regards its popularity.” In 1651 de Rhodes remarked on the north (1999: 38): “According to a custom people always take at their belt a bag or a purse full of betel quids and open it when they get out. Once they meet their friends, they welcome each other and then they take a well-prepared quid from their friends’ bag. That is why in rich families, people order their servants to prepare these tiny presents and they offer them to their friends as a message of friendship. But for the others, who have no servants to prepare these presents in advance, there are up to fifty thousand [betel] sellers wide-spread all over the city [Kẻ Chợ, nowadays Hanoi], and the price is moderate. We can estimate from there how great the number of betel buyers is.”

² Lĩnh Nam is an ancient literal appellation for Vietnam.

In Huế royal city, you can still observe nine bronze eternal urns that were cast in the early 19th century. Bas-reliefs on these urns represent all typical landscapes and sights of Vietnam. One still discovers three areca palm trees on the upper part of the fourth eternal urn and some betel vines on the upper part, too, of the eighth eternal urn (Sogny 1914).

The betel-chewing custom always captured attention from European travelers; their opinions were divided to some extent. In 1861 a correspondent of *Le Tour du Monde* in Saigon noticed: “[The Vietnamese woman] would be beautiful in the Europeans’ eyes if she didn’t make her mouth as black as charcoal.” He predicted: “The betel-chewing custom continues to divide for a long time the Asians from the Europeans” (quoted by Meyer 1996: 264). Later Dr. A. Morice indicated: “It is difficult to find a Vietnamese who does not chew ...” (1997 [1872–1873]: 24f.). J. Silvestre (1889: 98) was among the few Europeans who appreciated the custom: “This chewing produces a fresh taste, bitter that is highly nice when you were a chewer. The saliva then becomes blood-like red; you feel your brain nerves stimulated and pleasantly warm in your breast that makes you comfortable and restful.”

2.2 The Once Flourished Practice

The Vietnamese betel quid mainly consists of three components: a quarter of a peeled areca nut, a betel leaf (sometimes only a half), and a smear of (white or colored) slaked lime. This composition dated from the second half of the legendary King Hùng period (some three thousand years ago) if we believe the folk story about the origin of this custom. Seemingly, a slice of *vỏ chay* (bark of *Artocarpus tonkinensis*) is recently added to enhance the bitterness. Adding tobacco to areca quid is not a very popular custom among Vietnamese chewers. It seems this manner of chewing increases in quantity when one moves from the north to the south. Stimulant additives like cardamom, clove, nutmeg, coriander, ambergis, etc. are never used by the Vietnamese who spit out the red saliva and even the chewed-out quid remains.

Areca palm trees and betel vines are wonderfully suitable for the tropical climate of Vietnam, from north to south, except some mountainous regions. Our surveys show that 24 ethnic groups out of the total of 54 ethnicities that make up the nation of 81,4 million inhabitants (UN 2003) practice this habit. But their population counts up to

over 95% of the total number of Vietnamese. Upon these data, we can qualify Vietnam as a country of betel-chewing, but there are no figures on the number of chewers available. Otherwise we can divide these betel-chewing ethnic groups into two categories; the first is the *traditional* betel-chewing category that embraces such ethnicities as the Việt, the Chăm, the Thái; the second is the *optional* betel-chewing category with, for instance, the Sedang, the Bru, or the Sán Chay. What makes the difference between these two categories is that people from the first group naturally chewed betel for centuries and their betel-chewing customs are fully developed, while people from the second group only chewed betel occasionally and their customs did not extend to a respectable population density. Possibly they just learned to chew by imitation or contagion from the major ethnicity and/or from neighboring ethnicities. Some ethnic groups like the Hmong are residing in an environment unsuitable (high elevation, cold weather, misty and frosty ambiance) for planting areca palm tree and betel vine; they are condemned to be no-chewers! We describe here two representatives of these categories.

2.2.1 Category 1

The Chăm (category 1) seemingly knew the art of betel-chewing before the Việt. Indian merchants and clergy transferred the custom to them. From the first century A.D. to the fall of the Chăm capital Vijaya (nowadays Đồ Bàn) in 1471, in Champa kingdom, there were two tribes with areca palms and coconut palms respectively as their totems. The Areca tribe resided in the southern area Pânduranga (nowadays Phan Rang) and they were more aristocratic, more respectful than the other. Areca nuts and betel leaves were representative of their country. Many times they offered these products as tributes to Vietnam and China. The Chinese author Lịch Đạo-nguyên wrote in his “Thủy kinh chú”: “Traveling to the south³ areca palm tree is the lonely plant to contemplate” (1944: 234). From the inscription on the Lai Trung stele (erected round A.D. 920), we know that in the Champa court there was a mandarin post called “officer for betel preparing.” In the court audience, maidens offered betel to the King and mandarins. In the King Procession, ten maids brought golden boxes full of dried areca nuts for the King’s use. Moreover, many architectural monuments and place-names continue to keep the vestiges of the betel-chewing custom from that

3 Insinuation for Champa.

glorious time. For example, the pagoda located in the Areca Cave on the Ré islet (in the seashore of Quảng Nam Province) is believed to be built up from Champa period. Some Chăm towers were decorated with betel-leaf motifs in their bas-relief. On a Spirit statue the shield was symbolized by an enlarged base of the areca-leaf petiole and the sword was symbolized by a petiole of the coconut leaf.

Therefore, until recently this area remains one of the most concentrated areca-growing regions in Vietnam. Lê Quý Đôn noted in 1776: “At the foot of the Hải Vân pass [between Huế and Đà Nẵng] as well as in Quảng Nam Province, areca palms are planted too dense and too numerous up to the point that looked like a forest; nuts are too old, nut cover is too dark, locals take only the nuts, put them together as high as a hill. Ships are loaded with these nuts and sail back to Kwangtung [South China] where people use [drink] them as thee” (1977 [1776]: 323).

At the beginning of the 20th century, the French priest E. M. Durand (1903: 56) observed the use of baskets woven with roots from wild areca palms by the Chăm Bani in Thuận Hải Province. That means, at that time, wild or more precisely bewildered areca palm trees existed probably in the region.

Tam Lang, a renowned journalist prior to World War II, noted in his reportage: “The Chăm don’t smoke opium but they chew betel with tobacco. Men and women chew quid after quid all day round. Some people chew up to several tens of quid a day” (1941: 24). “[Nowadays] betel-chewing is very important to [Chăm] people’s daily life” (*Đại gia đình* 2002: 16).

The ritual role of betel and areca is fully seen at wedding ceremonies, which are condensed manifestations of ethnic, spiritual, cultural, traditional, religious, and musical customs and meanings that symbolize the people’s identity. The Chăm from Ninh Thuận Province still observe numerous rituals related to betel and areca. According to their belief, betel vine and leaf belong to *yin*, while areca and lime belong to *yang*. Betel rolls for a religious celebration must be round-rolled, and those for a wedding must be flat-rolled. In their wedding ceremony, the bronze betel box and the wooden tobacco box are the two most important elements. When the shaman makes his oration, the bride and the groom put their hands open between these two boxes. Once the groom enters his sweetie’s reception hall, the bride chooses a perfect betel-leaf, cuts it into two equal parts, smears pink slaked lime on them, and hands one part to her sweetie. After that, the groom chooses a round areca nut, splits it into two equal parts, then hands one part to his sweetie.

The two youngsters begin to chew these dual quids. If they get much saliva and their saliva turns bright red, that is the wonderful omen for their future. All village dignitaries as well as the shamans and their attendants each receive a tray full of food. There is also a dish of areca and betel. This subgroup of the Chăm ethnicity is the direct descendant of the 15th-century Areca tribe. They are Brahmins. The Chăm from An Giang Province are Muslims. According to their Islamic teachings, betel is a bad odor generator, even though they remain honoring betel and areca at holy places such as at the foot of the main column in their house.

2.2.2 Category 2

The elderly from the Sán Chay ethnicity (category 2) residing in Thái Nguyên Province continue to chew betel and their denture remains as black as just blackened. Areca palm trees are growing in the midst of fan palms that are the typical trees in this area.

Although their immigration from China to North Vietnam dates back to no more than four centuries, the betel and areca play a crucial role in their wedding ceremonies. They are the two main presents in all five steps of the wedding ceremony that are: 1) “Proposal Feast,” 2) “Definitive Conclusion Feast,” 3) “Fees Paying Feast,” 4) “Feast for the Bride Entering Her Husband’s Family,” and 5) “Presents Returning [to the Husband’s Family] Feast.” The number of leaves and nuts, i.e., from two up to some tens, depends on the wealth of the groom’s family. Betel leaves and areca nuts are carefully wrapped up in fresh banana leaves and bound with glutinous rice straw. Along the road to the bride’s family the “eldest official,” the “bride-introducing girl,” and the “youngest official” must offer betel quid to all villagers whom they meet on the road; this quid transmits the message announcing the wedding, wishing happiness for the couple and gladness for both families. At the porch of the bride’s family children stop the procession in order to get some presents. These three representatives must, once again, distribute areca nuts. Each child receives a nut, regardless of his or her age; then the children clear the obstacle that normally is a bamboo stock or a banana sting. At the step toward the reception chamber of the bride’s house, a couple of girls or women from the bride’s family stop the procession by singing:

A bamboo branch with curve top,
A sharp knife for easily cutting.



Fig. 2: The skill of preparing betel is transferred from generation to generation. The Mường (courtesy of Dr. Trần Tiến, Hòa Bình, 1999).

If you who are a *quan lang* bring in betel leaves, then, please, come in.

If you don't have betel leaves with you, please, come back tomorrow ...

Returning to the groom's family the procession (this time with the bride and some of her family members) must stop at the porch of the groom's house. The groom's relatives (mostly the groom's aunts and/or the groom's sisters) take in a hurry many betel boxes with plentiful well-prepared quids, rush to the guests, and offer them betel quids. Everyone is chewing betel and enters the reception chamber. The person who does not chew betel is not permitted to enter.

The groom's mother prepares the nuptial bed with a brand-new, attractive reed mat; she puts a pair of areca nuts at each corner of the mat and another pair of nuts at the mat's middle point. The newly married couple gather all these areca nuts, put them on a dish, and then put the dish on the ancestors' altar; they must chew all these nuts during their first night living together.

Three days after the wedding feast, the groom's family organizes a great feast aiming at recognizing the bride as a family member. After this feast, betel, areca, and other presents are distributed once again to acquaintances and family members; that is the last step of the wedding ceremony.

Nowadays the wedding ceremony is simplified, but the role of areca and betel remains the same as in the past.

The "Betel Roll Preparation" is a real art, with all respectful meanings of this word. A. Landes (1885b: 363) has already recognized that "It is a great art and it is not everyone who can prepare a betel roll that meets all the requirements [of a roll]. In Annam [then North and Central Vietnam] the roll is in regular form and smaller than that in our provinces [South Vietnam]. There people do not offer a whole plate full of betel leaves and areca but some rolls. Through the elegance [of these rolls] the skillfulness of great family ladies is discovered." In fact, ladies from high-ranking families could not cook rice and prepare dishes, but they should master the art of betel preparing. This skill is more important to ladies living in the Royal Palace. Before World War II and in cities like Hanoi, Nam Định, Huế the first thing a lady did in the early morning was shopping for completing the betel box (personal observation).

Some people can prepare the betel roll in varied forms, for example, *trầu cánh phượng* (in phoenix wing form), "in flying dragon form," "in sword form," etc. Every locality has its own style in *trầu cánh phượng* preparation. It is not a roll but a quid; the areca quarter forms the phoenix body, the betel leaf is cut to the bird's wings and the *vỏ* bark – the head. But their marvelous skill will be fully demonstrated when they prepare ordinary rolls: in regular cylinder form, with nice-to-see size, not too tight, not too loose, the roll is firm but not hard, attractive but not gaudy, and, more important, hundred rolls resemble one another. Otherwise, all other forms'

preparation, if any, is reserved for festivities, rituals that do not occur on a daily basis. The secret point of preparation resides in the following issue: lime must be enough, neither too much nor too little; in the first case, the chewer's mouth should be burnt; in the last case, the saliva does not turn red and the chewer does not enjoy the full taste. The Vietnamese do not like to incise the husk of the areca quarter as a lot of people on Indonesian islands usually do.

The way you prepare the betel quid, especially the way you roll the betel roll and the way you husk and split the areca nut, shows your social class, education level, personal experience, temperament, and aesthetic sense. In the recent past, the most important topic of the girl's education, which was at family level and transferred from mother to daughter by experience, was the know-how of betel preparation and betel service care. How to keep the betel box always full of fresh components, the betel knife sharp and clean, the spittoon clean, all these tiny actions demand attention and care, force and skill, and material and spiritual resources. In festive events such as the Tết festival, "kind girls from the streets" were secretly contesting in betel preparation skill.

The chewers are all day round busy. G. M. Vassal noticed many times that "one of the main duties [of Vietnamese women] is to fill up the betel box" (1912: 95, 165, 167). At weddings, funerals, ceremonies, feasts, etc. there is a large contingent of betel quid makers (sometimes up to ten light-fingered women) working at full capacity.

In the remote past, betel-chewing and teeth blackening with lacquer were twins. The first engendered the second. Betel-chewing turned teeth rose then brown to black, but unevenly. If the chewers wanted to have a black denture as praised in folksongs and highly appreciated by people, they had to actively and voluntarily blacken their teeth by dyeing them. The commoners shared this desire with the aristocrats. "The teeth [of women from Hanoi] were dyed up to a shiny black as the cockroach wings." (Trương Vĩnh Ký 1982 [1876]: 15). At the time, "teeth as black as real black beads of a necklace" or "teeth as black as custard-apple⁴ seeds" were the most desirable traits of a beautiful girl. "In the 1920s, most of Hanoi girls had blackened teeth" (Vũ Ngọc Phan 1993: 137). Recently, H. Rydstrom still observed in Thịnh Trĩ Commune, Hà Tây Province: "Black teeth were traditionally considered more beautiful than white ones as some of the black-toothed grandmothers in Thịnh Trĩ



Fig. 3: A Mường elderly lady (Nguyễn Xuân Hiền, Hòa Bình, 2003).



Fig. 4: A Chăm elderly lady (Nguyễn Xuân Hiền, Ninh Thuận, 2004).

told me [Rydstrom]. Moreover, it was previously a common belief that only evil spirits had long white teeth, and no one wanted to look like an evil spirit. Also, blackening is assumed to protect one's teeth ... Tooth blackening was a kind of female ritual that a girl went through when she was in her teens ... I did not observe the practice of tooth blackening in contemporary Thịnh Trĩ" (2003: 153,

4 *Annona squamosa* L.

189). But some ethnicities such as the Lự, the Dao Tiên continue to blacken their teeth; blackened denture remains an attractive favorite of female beauty.

2.3 More than a Tangible Custom

Nobody knows how many generations of Vietnamese have chewed betel, but everyone can see the sociocultural aspects of the custom. “The betel quid establishes communication,” as the saying went not long ago. All social strata, the poor and the rich, the commoner and the aristocrat, the alphabet and the intellectual accepted the betel quid in their environment. The betel quid is regarded as one of the four cardinal pleasures of life. You meet someone on the road or in a pub, you invite him/her to take a quid; that is the best way to show your hospitality. You offer a betel quid to a superior or a friend whom you meet suddenly on your way; nothing is more respectable. Accepting a betel quid offered by someone means obviously an overall positive reaction to him/her. If you wish to send a negative message to someone, you simply refuse his/her betel quid. Accepting a betel quid is the beginning of a long-lasting relationship. A betel quid also implies some sense of obligation. The Quan Họ singer warns herself: “Accepting your quid, it’s OK. But how can I keep my word?”

If a commoner entered any office for business, he had to have in his hands at least a betel tray or some areca nuts and betel leaves for the officials, from the security personnel at the gate to the office head in his bureau. The introduction by way of rolls of betel and areca engendered the expression “money for betel leaves and areca nuts.” Initially, it refers to real betel and areca, then it is symbolized in a little sum expressing your gratitude to someone who assisted you in a tiny business; later, it is some fine words for the bribe.

On the other hand, betel leaves and areca nuts were also used to entertain guests during social gatherings and family reunions: birth and death anniversaries, New Year holidays, funerals, weddings, etc. No activity can occur without the presence and the introduction of the betel quid. This is true, too, throughout one’s individual life, for example, at a birth, wedding, or death, and at all daily occasions of happiness or sadness.

Ancestors, genii, etc. also accepted the betel quid as introducing a matter. In all religious and ritual ceremonies, in public or in private, the betel leaves and the areca nuts were a must. For a dead, an ancestor, or a deity, betel and areca – with a cup of fresh water (preferably rainwater collected



Fig. 5: The *Lễ Đi Ăn Trầu* (rite of visiting and betel-chewing); early 20th century; traditional woodcutting (courtesy National Museum of Arts, Saigon, 1975).

at the base of an areca palm tree) – formed the most pure offerings. Areca nuts and betel leaves continue to be the first offerings on the family’s and communal house’s altar. In their heart of hearts, the Vietnamese believe that when they put a bunch of areca along with some bottles of rice alcohol and/or a bunch of bananas on the altar, then their genii and their ancestors would assist them in their business, whatsoever.

But the communicative meaning of betel and areca is best shown in the relationship between women and men, from their first hesitant moment to their wedding ceremony and beyond: “Accepting a betel quid, [the girl] becomes daughter-in-law in her [i.e., the coming husband’s] family.” The message of this proverb is “No betel quid, no marriage! No courtship!” In fact, this is true as well in the past as nowadays. To introduce the matter of marriage, people usually say: “I’ll get a tray full of betel and take it [to your parents] to ask for your hand.”

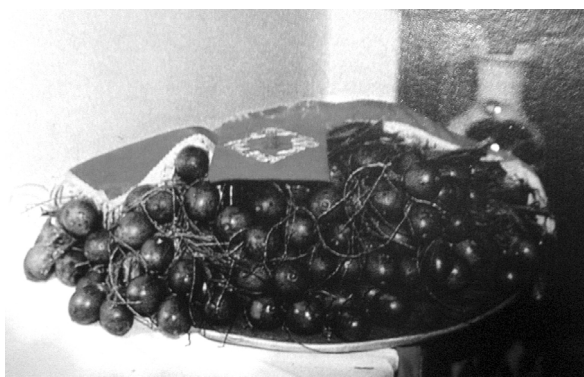


Fig. 6: The Lễ Đì Ăn Trầu in Hanoi (courtesy of Dr. Trần Tiến, 1998).

Otherwise the areca palm trees with their thin, elegant stature and a tall, straight trunk, losing leaves, are like a shy girl, and they remain as a symbol of the Vietnamese landscape, especially in religious institutions. The areca orchard, the red-tiled roof, and the deep pond are representative of the maternal house from time immemorial. When you think about a Vietnamese house, the first things to appear in your mind are areca palm trees. The areca palm tree continues to play a double role for Vietnamese people as *identifying tree* and *traveler's tree*. Areca palms are always the first “relatives” who welcome you when you return to your native home after a long trip. Kilometers away, you recognize already the areca palm trees of your home. Moreover, in the past, the Vietnamese considered their areca palms as brothers or sisters. When a family member passed away, all areca palms in this family ought to be in mourning, i.e., giving each tree a white band (paper or cloth) or simply making a circle of white lime on their trunk. If people forgot to do so, most (if not all) areca palm trees would die, one after the other. They followed their dead sibling!

Generally, the areca palms are typical, symbolic plants in the north and northern part of Central Vietnam. Coconut palms play this role from Bình Định southwards, meanwhile areca trees are also planted widely in the south. If the bamboo hedge is representative for Vietnamese villages, the areca palms play the same role for Vietnamese dwellings, monuments, pagodas, temples, palaces, tourist spots, etc.

We can see the popularity of areca trees in the toponyms with *cau* or *tân lang* (areca) and *trầu* (betel) terms. The oldest one is seemingly the *làng Cau* (Areca village), Bắc Ninh Province. Archaeological artifacts from this area prove that the locality was inhabited by the Việt from the begin-



Fig. 7: Plucking areca nuts; Saigon suburbs; early 20th century; traditional woodcutting (courtesy National Museum of Arts, Saigon, 1975).

ning of our era, and written documents confirm the long existence of this locality's name. About sixty locality-names in eleven provinces are related to the areca and to betel appellations.

In the 14th century Tuệ Tĩnh Nguyễn Bá Tĩnh, who was the founder of Vietnamese traditional medicine, emphasized: “[Chewing] betel quid discards phlegm and warms up the body” (1998: 397). He further indicated that the areca peel has effects on asthma and on flatulence, and it acts as an expectorant. Wild areca core is known as a vermifuge and an antiseptic. A concoction of areca core is used in the disinfection of open wounds. In the 1950s, Hanoi's Medicine and Pharmacology University confirms the high antibiotic effect of betel leaves on *Streptococcus*, *Bacillus coli*, *Bacil-*

lus subtilis. Recent investigations lengthen the list of bacteria negatively affected by betel extract in methanol. Some hospitals successfully use areca core and betel in external medicine (Nguyễn Văn Đàn 1993: 96). In traditional veterinary medicine, the dried areca core is used in the purge of intestinal flatworms of dogs and cattle. Betel-chewing is thus a manifest of the Vietnamese nutriotherapy.

At last, in the time when there were no cosmetics, Vietnamese women found in betel-chewing the natural way to make-up: they chewed betel, and their cheeks, their lips turned attractively rose (as they use nowadays make-up chemicals), their eyes became sparkling, and they fell into psychoexciting amiability (as they drink nowadays some glasses of aperitif). The ingenious discovery of this cosmetic effect of betel-chewing by Vietnamese women encouraged girls to chew betel *en route* to trysting-places, to festivities, ceremonies, etc. They chewed it, gained self-confidence, looked more attractive, and their voice became more melodious and glossy.

Previous to the use of toothbrushes and tooth-paste, betel-chewing was the only way to clean the teeth effectively, to prevent caries, and to freshen the breath. On the other hand, the halitosis is a big and real problem all the time and for all people, in particular for persons of advanced age. How to manage this “plague” is a permanent concern of several generations. In betel-chewing one finds a wonderful way of dealing with this wide-spread plague.

From the historical standpoint, the Vietnamese betel quid is a substitute both for a beauty-case and a tooth-care set!

To sum up, betel-chewing is not merely a matter of chewing. The betel quid carries multiple socio-cultural messages by itself. The Vietnamese always think about these messages when they practice this custom or they talk about it. The betel-chewing custom is considered as an element of national identity and prestige. It is deeply rooted in society and culture.

2.4 The Vietnamese Betel Service

In ancient Vietnam, the betel-chewing custom did cost the chewers a lot. A popular saying summarized the issue in these words: “Abstaining from smoking, you have enough for buying water buffalo; abstaining from chewing, you have enough for buying fields.” Along with betel quid, the betel-chewing custom needs, indeed, a couple of implements that make up the *bộ trầu vó* (betel service):

- a) an *ang trầu* (bronze betel box) for conserving fresh betel leaves, whole areca nuts, and a piece of bark;
- b) a *lime pot* for containing slaked lime and a *spatula* for taking lime from the pot and smearing it on betel leaves;
- c) a *tráp trầu* (wooden betel box) for storing relevant things. This box has a shallow tray called *cơi trầu* (betel tray), on which the well-prepared betel quid’s components are displayed;
- d) an *areca knife* for cutting areca nuts and preparing betel rolls;
- e) a *spittoon* for collecting betel spittle and betel quid remains;
- f) a *betel bag* for keeping some ready-to-chew betel quids when on travel;
- g) a *lime recipient* for containing a little slaked lime which is used to adjust lime to one’s taste;
- h) finally, and if necessary, a *betel mortar* for pounding betel quid, used by toothless elderly.

The last three instruments are optional.

No outsider, scientist or connoisseur, or collector of antiques can, alas, completely describe all elements of the Vietnamese betel service. The most missing one is the *ang trầu*, but for the Vietnamese this box is the unique representative symbol for the betel-chewing; there is nothing that says more than this box about the traditional custom. Meanwhile, at family level, the *tráp trầu* in the past and the shallow tray *cơi trầu* nowadays are considered the face of the family; it represents the host’s mentality, hospitality, and generosity; it shows the welcome level offered by the host to the guests. In general, the Vietnamese betel service does resemble those of the neighboring countries as regards the service components, but the style and the material are not the same. Naturally, the handicraft skill, the shape pattern, and the decoration motifs depend on the local history and the traditional culture. Nowadays, all these instruments become rare antiques that are eagerly searched for and illegally exported by foreign collectors.

A lime pot was very cheap: in 1882, it cost only 1 *tiền*; no pottery was cheaper (Derbès 1882: 606). But it takes a special place in Vietnamese reality. Many rituals and taboos are related to this tiny ceramic. First, how are these pots produced? Only potters that mastered the glaze technique could produce lime pots. There were almost no pots without glaze. But there is one exception: in Phước Tích and some other villages in Hương Trà District (Huế City) local potters, who adapted to limited welfare conditions and the severity of the local environment, had to produce earthenware pots.

The production itself should strictly observe some traditional regulations. They were produced after the lunar calendar and only in the intercalary month of a leap year. The pottery owner and the head craftsman could knead and glaze “Mr. Lime Pot” when they were “clean,” i.e., not in mourning, but in good health and in materially prosperous conditions. On most of the lime pots there are no decorations but only stylistic leaves, flowers, clouds, etc. The manual production of lime-pot showed that every lime pot is unique, not even one resembles the other. Lime pots were and are considered to be the most utilitarian of all small wares that are produced by local potters. Every family possessed one. Therefore, almost all lime pots bear no inscription denoting their date and origin. Only lime pots from ancient royal family members in Huế are China-ordered from Song kilns in Kenkte District, Zangshi Province (China).

Old ceramic lime pots were among the most original creations of Vietnamese potters; they condensed the mind and talent of local artisans. We examined over hundred specimens from various periods and with different shapes, decorations, and colors. From the initial elliptic bulbous forms (probably from the 11th century), these pots developed to more spherical and then lightly ovoid forms in present days. The handle became more and more prominent and the decor more and more whimsical, especially in the 17th and 18th centuries. But the general shape remains the same throughout the centuries.

The Vietnamese consider lime pots as a representative of God. New lime pots were only sold in big markets. Village markets, even in villages where lime pots were produced, were unsuitable to display and sell these items. People did not say, “I go to *buy*” but to “*invite* a Mister Lime Pot.” The vulgar term *mua* (to buy) was replaced by the respectful term *thỉnh* (to invite). People, who wanted to invite a lime pot, had to prepare in advance a square of new, red cloth. On an auspicious day, they put this cloth in a clean basket and brought it on their head to the market. They did not try to bargain over the price. They paid what the seller wanted. The latter could not get a big profit. That was contrary to the Vietnamese business practice! Mister Lime Pot supervised their transaction! Then the owners covered the “Invited Pot” with the cloth and brought it back on their head. It was forbidden to carry a lime pot by its handle. If they took a bus or a boat, they had to put their basket with the pot on the place higher than their head.

The house owner carefully searched an honorable elderly to slake lime, for the first time, in this

new pot. That is an old man or woman who had a happy conjugal life, a respectful social life, and a successful business life. The elderly poured rain-water (collected under an areca tree) in the pot and then put in some small, carefully selected pieces of limechalk. The lime must be burnt evenly, not unburnt. If slaked lime was evenly well, i.e., no lack of water that made lime too dry or unevenly slaked nor water in abundance that made lime too watery. That was a happy omen for the whole family and for a long time. Endless prosperity, longevity, wealth, security, and happiness would be guaranteed. Naturally, the bright pink was the preferable color for slaked lime on this occasion. Lime powder – as described by many outsiders – is never used in betel-chewing; the Vietnamese believe, it could burn the chewer’s mouth!

Chewers take much care when they take lime from the lime pot. They could not stir the spatula inside the pot. Stirring makes lime lose its smoothness. That is the reason why the pot’s “belly” gets narrower with the time, and the pot becomes quickly useless. The pot’s owner is proud of it, too. It is forbidden to scrape round inside the pot, as this practice makes the pot quickly obstructed. But people believed if the lime pot became obstructed in a short time, the family would be prospering for a long time!

During the Tết festival, the lime pot is decorated with a red, square paper on which the character “Happiness” is written with black Chinese ink. This “Happiness” is usually on the opposite side to the spatula hole. The pot handle is also decorated with a silk band in statine red.

The right place for the lime pot is behind the ancestors’ altar. This quiet and secure place is also inaccessible to thieves, who usually obstructed firmly the spatula hole of the victim’s lime pot before they searched valuable things. They believed, that, having done so, the victim’s family members would not break their sleep, would not speak in their sleep, and, more importantly, if they woke up they would not be able to speak a word and give alarm. People in Thanh Hóa Province believed in another way used by thieves who got the same effectiveness if they turned the spatula hole close to the wall.

Countryside fellows believed that the House Genie should incarnate in the lime pot and this genie decided the prosperity and future of the whole family. Therefore, in the inauguration rite of a newly built house, the house owner had to invite a brand-new lime pot. Every participant in the inauguration feast had to take a little lime from this new pot. This lime smearing incarnated the luck and prosperity to visitors and to the new house’s family, too.

After some time, the spatula hole of the lime pot was garnished with a white or rose aureole. The thicker this aureole was, the richer was the house owner. The quick increase in the thickness of this layer demonstrated the great hospitality of the owner and the warm friendship between him and his neighbors and visitors.

It was forbidden to break the dried lime layer on and around the spatula hole. The owner invited usually an old man to carefully saw off the layer. As numerous and as big these pieces were, as proud was the house owner. Or they waited until the lime aureole would fall down. The dried lime pieces from this layer were hung up in the house's back entrance or by-entrance that was used by women, especially by menstruating women. These persons were often haunted by devils; the dried lime layers turned the devils inoffensive when women entered the home.



Fig. 8: Lime pot in ceramic; 17th century (courtesy National Museum of Arts, Saigon, 1975).

More generally, after a long service dried slaked lime would obstruct the spatula hole of the lime pot; it turns useless. People never break it out or destroy it. It must be placed with high veneration at the foot of secular banyan trees, in front of temples or shrines. About half a century ago, one could still see such banyan trees near shrines and temples in Hanoi with numerous old and useless



Fig. 9: Lime pot in ceramic; late 1950s, Hanoi (Nguyễn Xuân Hiến).

lime pots oscillating at the ends of or between their long aerial roots. The gloomy atmosphere under the thick canopies of banyan trees turns these lime pots more mystic and horrific. When people walked by these banyan trees with old lime pots, they had to clasp their hands, bow their heads, and pray for protection by the temple genies and these pots.

Another place suitable for conserving these useless pots was the graveyard. People put their old pots nearby their relatives' graves in the hope that these pots would protect their relatives' souls against all kinds of devils. The village pagoda is sometimes believed to be a suitable place preserving these sacred things.

Rainwater, accumulated in these abandoned lime pots, was rich in calcium and used by shamans in the treatment of children's diseases. In treatment of rickets, they applied many times this water on children's feet and arms, sometimes also on the body. Tây people in Lạng Sơn treated flatulence syndromes by oral administration of clear water which was collected from old lime pots.

In ceramic studies, lime pots still remain underresearched. Thus, it is really difficult to identify the date and the origin of a pot. However, it seems to be sure that lime pots as well as spittoons were not lucrative commodities in interregional and international commerce. In all wrecks along the Vietnamese coastlines, no signs of lime pots were found among numerous (up to several millions) pottery remains which were excavated during the last decades. These popular pottery items were not involved in the transoceanic silk and pottery route connecting North Vietnam to other countries in Southeastern and Southern Asia, the Middle East and Europe from the 15th century on.

In North Vietnam, ancient lime pots were discovered in two famous ceramic centers: Bát Tràng



Fig. 10: A betel basket in Bạc Liêu; about 1940 (courtesy National Museum of Arts, Saigon, 1975).



Fig. 12: A betel service in District 8, Saigon (Nguyễn Xuân Hiền, 2004).



Fig. 11: A betel dish in North Vietnamese countryside (Nguyễn Xuân Hiền, Bắc Ninh, 2003).

village (nowadays Gia Lâm District, Hanoi) and Chu Đậu village (Nam Sách District, Hải Dương Province). Vương Hồng Sển has collected nine representative lime pots of Vietnam (1950: 11).

The lime pots are always a curiosity for outsiders. From 1889 on, the French voluntary soldier Louis Bonnafont (1924: 10) has painted all that he was attracted by, e.g., the lime pot, the tortoise, etc. on the wall of a Buddhist pagoda on the seaside at Nam Ổ area, near the Hải Vân pass. Vietnamese ceramic lime pots, most of them are brand-new ones and without any vestiges of usage, are conserved in various museums abroad such as Musée de l'Homme (Paris), Musée National des Arts Asiatiques – Guimet (Paris), Musée des Arts Africains et Océaniens (Paris), Musée National du Guinée (Paris), Musées Royaux d'Art et d'Histoire (Brussels), etc. Many valuable lime pots are firsthand

items in private collections all over the world. Lime pots are normally also displayed as decoration objects in dining rooms or they are simply used as flower vases. One possesses the pots, but ignores the cultural art around these precious pots. They display the “corpse,” but they do not get the mind, the soul, and the spirit of it.

Nowadays foreign collectors who consider these lime pots as relics of ancient golden times are eagerly hunting them at any price. Many Vietnamese scientists are warning of the danger of a “lime pot drain”; at the same time a lot of sophisticated, colorful, large lime pots are probably products created by fakers.

2.5 The Betel-Chewing Custom in Folktales

The betel-chewing custom is also captured in the Vietnamese folk literature, but it is poorly documented in French, German, and English sources, which are exclusively written by outsiders. They always cite, with little variation, the Vietnamese “Story of the Betel and Areca.” This tale is also told in anthologies of Vietnamese folktales such as, to cite a few, “Contes et légendes du pays d’Annam” by F. Cesbron (1938), “Vietnamese Legends” by G.F. Schults (1965), “Als die Fische die Sterne schluckten – Märchen und Legenden aus Vietnam, Laos und Kambodscha” by E. Claudius (1976), etc. All these versions belong to Type I of the tales of the origin of betel-chewing (see Table 1). Moreover, there are also folktales about specific implements (such as “The Monk Turned into a Lime Pot” and “The Novice Turned into a Spittoon”) and the specific manner the Vietnamese prepare their betel

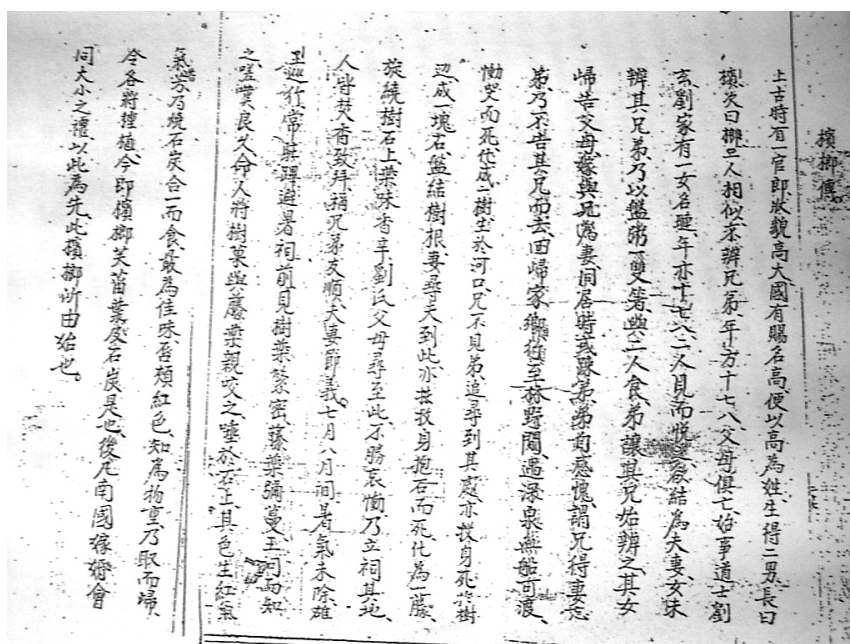


Fig. 13: Facsimile of the entire “Story of the Areca Palm Tree” in *Linh Nam chíc quái liệt truyện* (handwritten version, 1695, photo by Nguyễn Xuân Hiến, 2004).

roll (such as “Why Do We Use a Tip-Cut-Off Betel Leaf?”). Nine other tale variants have details and/or episodes concerning the areca tree, betel vine, betel quid, and betel quid remains. With regard to languages, four tales, among them the oldest one, are directly translated from *chữ Nho*,⁵ others from French (10), and Vietnamese (16). Only three versions are originally quoted in English.

With regard to time, these tales cover a period of more than eleven centuries (from about the 11th century to the early 21st century), but mostly from the late 19th century onwards.

With regard to ethnicity, eight ethnic groups (the Việt, the Dao, the Tày and the Thái in the north, the Co, the Katu, the Sedang in Central Vietnam, and the Khmer in the south) contribute their folktales about the betel-chewing custom.

We translated the integral and oldest version, entitled “Tân lang truyện” (The Story of the Areca Palm Tree),⁶ for the first time from the handwritten book *Linh Nam chíc quái liệt truyện* (1695) into English:

A long, long time ago, a *quan lang*⁷ of very high stature received from the king himself the name Cao [high],

5 Chữ Nho is a Vietnamese old script that looks like Chinese characters but with different pronunciation, grammar, and syntax.

6 This title can be understood in two different ways: “The Story of Tân [and] Lang” (two persons) or “The Story of the Areca Palm Tree” (or of the Areca Nut).

7 *Quan lang* was an appellation for a prince under the legendary Kings Hùng.

which therefore became his family name. Cao had two sons, the elder named Tân, the younger Lang. The two children resembled each other like two drops of water; it was impossible to tell them apart based on their appearance.

When they reached the age of 17 and 18, their parents passed away. The two brothers came to a Taoist hermit named Lưu [Đạo] Huyền for instruction. The Lưu family had a daughter named Liên, also 17 or 18 [years old], and, at first sight, [she] fell in love and wished to marry one of the two. But she was unable to distinguish the elder from the younger. She offered them a bowl of rice gruel with only a single pair of chopsticks. The younger invited the elder to partake of this specialty first, and she asked her parents for permission to marry the elder boy.

Once established with his wife, the elder showed a less warm sentiment towards his younger brother, who felt humiliated and reflected: “My brother concentrates on his married life and is really forgetting me.” Saying nothing, the younger brother returned to his natal village. Reaching the heart of the forest, he came upon a deep spring; he found no boat to ford the water. He wept with deep grief and died, then changing into a tree standing at the mouth of the river. The elder brother on discovering his sibling’s absence left his beloved home in search of his brother. He reached the same place, fell by the tree, and was then turned into a stone embracing the tree. The wife went out in search of her husband and upon reaching this place, embraced the stone and died, and was then changed into a vine creeping round the tree and the stone. The leaves of this vine are very aromatic and slightly bitter.

Miss Lưu’s parents set out to fetch the children and reached this place; they felt great anguish and decided to build a temple dedicated to them. People in the sur-

Table 1: Tales of Origin of Betel-Chewing from Various Periods

Type	Charac- ters	Who turned into <i>Areca Tree</i>	Who turned into <i>Betel Vine</i>	Who turned into <i>Limestone</i>	Representative Sources
I	3	Younger brother	Elder brother's wife	Elder brother	<i>Lĩnh Nam chíich quái liệt truyện</i> (1695), Nordemann (1914), Phan Kế Bính (1989) [1915], Crawford (1966), Nguyễn Khắc Viện and Hữu Ngọc (1972), Bùi Bảo Vân (1989), Lý Khắc Cung (2002)
II	3	Elder brother	Elder brother's wife	Younger brother	Lê Văn Phát (1913), Cesbron (1938), Phạm Duy Khiêm (1951), Dương Đình Khuê (1967), Vũ Ngọc Phan (1975), Tạ Đức (1989), Nguyễn Đồng Chi (2000), Nguyễn Công Hoan and Hoài Nam (2003), <i>Nghệ Tĩnh Province</i> (n. d.)
III	3	Younger brother	Elder brother	Elder brother's wife	Langlet (1928)
IV	3	Younger and el- der brothers	Elder brother's wife		Chivas-Baron (1917), Vũ Ngọc Liên (1942)
V ^a	2	Wife	Husband		Trần Thuyết Phương (1960)

^aThe plot is very simple and underlines especially the perfect conjugal affection and happiness.

rounding areas offered flowers and incense at this temple. They praised them as “the united brothers and faithful spouse.”

In the seventh and eighth lunar months, when it is still warm, King Hùng went on a tour of inspection, stopping for a while before the temple. He contemplated the luxuriant tree with the vine creeping round it. He plucked a nut and a leaf, chewed them together, and then spat out his saliva on the rock; suddenly his saliva turned red and took on a delicious aroma. The king ordered the rock to be baked to obtain lime and chewed it with the tree's fruit and the vine's leaves. This quid, once chewed, gave off fragrant and delicious flavors and made the cheeks rosy. The king realized the high value of these things and ordered them to be brought to his house.

Nowadays these plants are planted everywhere: they are the areca palm and the betel vine. From then on, the Vietnamese have offered first the areca nut and then the betel leaves at wedding ceremonies or in rituals and festivities at various levels. Thus are the origins of the areca palm related.

Based on over hundred collected versions, we can identify five types of folktales about the origin of the betel-chewing custom (see Table 1). The above-mentioned oldest version belongs to Type I.

Among these five types of tale, the first two are popular, but the others are less known by the public.

2.6 In Present Day

The custom seemingly reached its peak around the time of the colonization of Vietnam in the second half of the 19th century by the French. At the beginning of the 20th century and especially in Bà Điểm area (the stronghold of betel-chewing tradition in the outskirts of Saigon), close to 80% of adults, young and old, chewed betel daily (Balaize 1995: 165). It is impossible to get a reliable, quantitative and nationwide feature of the custom that is in decline, but every year some new members join the chewer's contingent, especially when they are at the age of 50 or 60 and incorporate into a Buddhist lady group, particularly in the countryside. They replace partially the chewers who passed away. Generally speaking, alone elderly women, most over sixty years and living mainly in the countryside, continue to be really passionate about chewing. The prevalence in the north is more impressive than in the south. Indeed, their percentage among the el-



Fig. 14: Street vendor of betel in North Vietnam; in the 1930s (courtesy National Museum of Arts, Saigon, 1975).

derly female population is rather low, too (personal observation, 2002–2004).

The decline of the betel-chewing custom can be seen through the change of the old conception “I’m willing to pay ten *quan* for a girl with blackened teeth” into the new one “I’m willing to pay ten *quan* for a girl with [a] charming [smile].”

The business of areca and betel, flourishing once all over the country, is being in deep decline, especially in large agglomerations. For the time being and in some places in North Vietnam, this business is in fusion with the business of incense and joss-paper things, both items are mainly used in rituals. In August 2004 at Tân Định market in Saigon center, we found only two small stalls, which were owned by two ladies in their seventies from Bà Điểm region. They managed the business in the manner “of sleeping and selling [areca] intermittently.” The business, up to two stall rows with some thirty vendors of areca and betel, flourished at this market some forty years ago. They sold betel “without a rest.” Elderly women who are naturally addicts take the monopoly in this commerce that usually does not reach a level higher than any local one (personal observation, 2004).

In recent years, especially to attract foreign tourists, the modern trend develops a habit of offering a phoenix-wing-formed betel roll to the audience before every traditional cultural performance in the city as well as in the countryside, in lowlands as well as in mountainous regions. The betel quid turns into a symbolic welcome gift crystallizing the hospitality and friendship. The ancient message “the betel quid establishes the communication” keeps all of its meaning in our new millennium society. This trend is less developed in the south.

The betel quid enters more frequently into rituals in the countryside as well as in the city. Numerous city-dwellers still believe: “[At a wedding] the presence of betel and areca shows luxuriousness and satisfaction.” A groom’s mother living in Hanoi suburb made a confession: “On the occasion of my son’s wedding, my utmost concern is to get enough areca and betel for the rite of demanding the hand of the future bride. The reason: No betel, no areca means no marriage. I have known anything about areca and betel since my childhood. Now I realize, how sacred the betel rolls and the areca nuts are; that came from our forefathers. I see in these round



Fig. 15: Street vendor of betel in North Vietnam; in 2000 (courtesy of Dr. Trần Tiến, Hanoi, 2003).

nuts and green leaves the human sense, the living feeling, and folk identity ... I enter the bride's home along with four maidens who bring the tray with over hundred areca nuts and I am vibrating with deep, sweet love, and affection. I really reach up the sublime happiness of a Vietnamese mother" (Mai Thục 1998: 24). It seems necessary to note that most of these offered quids finally will wither; nobody wants to chew them.

Many Vietnamese keep immemorial souvenirs from this custom. Among Vietnamese elderly, the reminiscence from the past, especially from their childhood, is always mixed with areca palm trees and their suave fragrance.

After the end of the war (April 30th, 1975), over three million Vietnamese left their country and



Fig. 17: Betel leaves in Paris 13^e, France (Nguyễn Xuân Hiền, 2005).



Fig. 16: Areca nuts (Nguyễn Xuân Hiền, 2005).

were spread over a hundred countries all over the world. A couple of Vietnamese elderly people from the first generation living abroad have always kept the custom of chewing-betel. They brought with them a rather complete betel service, especially the areca knife. But the Vietnamese diaspora is not numerous; moreover, they are recent residents. In the USA, the Vietnamese American community is the most populous in Vietnamese diaspora and concentrates in some localities such as Santa Clara (California), Houston (Texas), etc. The environmental conditions facilitate the practice of betel-chewing custom among some last chewers. In France, where they have settled for a long period and keep a rather constant relationship with their motherland, one



Fig. 18: A Mường lady (courtesy of Dr. Trần Tiến, Hòa Bình, 1999).



Fig. 19: Bamboo-inlays with areca palms at One-Pillar Pagoda (Nguyễn Xuân Hiến, Saigon, 2004).

can meet on the streets some old ladies who still chew betel. In a couple of Paris-based shops with “produits exotiques,” one can sometimes get fresh areca nuts and betel leaves (but never *chay* bark) from Vietnam. In the UK, the Vietnamese reside side by side with heavy betel addicts from India, Pakistan, or Bangladesh. They can easily get *paan masala*, but they complain “betel is not the betel we used to chew, the taste is really unacceptable.” The sensitive difference in taste discourages local

Vietnamese to continue practicing this custom. The hard availability of betel quid components, even in other European big cities, makes it difficult to practice this custom. If someone returns from Vietnam and brings with him some betel leaves and areca nuts, it is a real feast for “ancient addicts” who call one another and gather in the owner’s home to celebrate the event. Their radiant faces, their smiling eyes with a temporal flash of tiring age, their joyful conversation denote how deep the betel-chewing custom is rooted among these elderly people. Almost nobody of the Vietnamese diaspora chews betel as a daily routine. But when the moment comes, people do their best to get some fresh areca bunches, some fresh and attractive betel-leave sets at any cost as is the custom at wedding ceremonies between Vietnamese brides and grooms. The two families, especially the bride’s side, try to strictly observe this symbol of conjugal faithfulness. They still believe, if the boy’s family cannot offer at least two large trays full of fresh areca nuts and betel leaves, the young couple would meet numerous troubles in their upcoming common life and, naturally, their happiness would be challenged all the time. Mrs. Đỗ Kim Ngọc (67 years old in 2003), a mother-in-law from a groom’s side in Sacramento, USA, confesses, “I’m not afraid of anything [with regard to my son’s wedding] but only of the betel and areca issue. It costs much time and energy. Finally, we get a thousand and fifteen areca nuts and four bags of betel leaves, as fresh as directly from Bà Điểm orchards. It’s not only the demand from the bride’s family, but it’s the sacred duty of a Vietnamese mother.”

This happened with the Việt and with other ethnic groups, too. A Tháy bride’s family in Minnesota decidedly urged that there should be two areca bunches for the wedding ceremony of their elder daughter; the American groom did not know how to satisfy this demand and had to ask for assistance from the local Vietnamese community. But in most of the cases, the bride and her sweetheart do not share the concern about areca and betel of their parents (personal observation, 2003).

In short, when a Vietnamese thinks about his home village or his native dwelling, the first thing that appears in his mind is his areca palm tree(s) or something related to this romantic plant. The young generation of the Vietnamese, living at home or abroad, sees the betel-chewing custom with less sympathy. They ask their relatives: “Why do our grandmoms chew it with a blood-like mouth and from time to time they spit out a stinky thing?” Many chewers do not feel comfortable when they take a quid in a public place.

3 Conclusion

Areca nuts and betels leaves have a long history of use and are deeply ingrained in many sociocultural and religious activities. Their usage is culturally bound and is an integral aspect of several Asian customs and thus part of their identity.

Since 1912, French colonists have tried, with great curiosity, to answer the question: Why are these people so enthusiastic about this “dirty” behavior that is viewed [by Europeans] as representative of backwardness in hygiene, aesthetics, culture, etc.? Step by step, they uncovered with stupefaction numerous positive aspects of this custom. Many researchers consider betel-chewing as a main feature of Vietnamese culture. However, we can see some additional aspects from the standpoint of cultural anthropology: 1. This custom took a *reasonable dimension*. There were betel chewers, but no betel slaves. 2. The betel and areca production kept always its *familial* features even in its high development. Even in some commodity-oriented areas, the areca trees’ number per household cannot exceed 40–50 trees or so. 3. It seems that for centuries, the Vietnamese quid was not an object of change. The betel-chewing custom was wonderfully green, natural. 4. The rich and the aristocratic people have supposedly ordered special betel services made of gold or silver. But after too many “revolutionary” upheavals, it is hard to find out some tangible relics of this custom. 5. Anyway, betel-chewing remains, we hope, for a long time, if not for ever and at modest extent in Vietnamese *practice* and in the *minds* of the Vietnamese, at home and abroad.

With regard to a cultural dimension, the areca palm trees are always present, for instance, in the daily performance of many water puppet groups, in *chèo* (traditional operetta) acts, in *cải lương* (reformed opera) performance, in feature films, etc. With regard to a literal dimension, a variety of poets, writers, and composers continue to insert the areca simile in their creations. For example, in the 2004 contest “Writing about the Motherhood” organized in Saigon, the two highest awards were given for two articles about the relationship between the areca palm tree and the authors’ mother. No plant can replace the areca palm tree in the Vietnamese landscape and life, neither in the mind nor in the soul of the Vietnamese.

In the meantime, recent research reveals numerous high risks and side-effects of betel-chewing. The International Agency for Research on Cancer (IARC 2004) states in its monograph “Betel-Quid and Areca-Nut Chewing” clearly: 1) there is sufficient evidence in humans for the carcinogenicity

of betel quid with tobacco that causes oral cancer and cancer of the pharynx and oesophagus, 2) there is sufficient evidence in humans for the carcinogenicity of betel quid without tobacco that causes oral cancer. The areca nut itself is carcinogenic to humans.

It is the first time that IARC issues a clear-cut affirmation about this complicated problem that is in decade-long dispute. Nobody can challenge this conclusion. But it is merely from a medical standpoint. On the other hand, “human beings are irrational thinking animals.” As far as we are concerned here, it is clear that human mouths are always itching to snack, to drink, and to smoke. Millions of people in several continents know already the direct cancer risk of smoking, but they continue to accept a death sentence because of cigarette smoking.

Everywhere and all the time, human beings are really obsessed with a certain chewing mania. The ancient Greeks chewed *mastiche*, a chewing gum made from the resin of the mastic tree. The ancient Mayas chewed *chicle*, which is the sap from the sapodilla tree. North American Indians chewed the sap from spruce trees and passed the habit on to the settlers. Early American settlers made a chewing gum from spruce sap and beeswax. Gum-chewing is being the most popular chewing habit at international level, but the gum is a man-made product and can cause diarrhea. In Africa, people continue to chew *khat*, also known as *miraa*, a stimulant leaf from a shrub-like tree (*Catha edulis*) of the same name. People chew *khat* simply for becoming fashionable or for seeking a way to cope with social breakdown. The Chinese used to crunch popped melon seeds, and other peoples have got their own favorites: pistachio, sunflower seeds, pumpkin seeds, etc., and the young people taste potato chips or nuts worldwide. It is reasonable to see the Vietnamese betel-chewing habit in the context of the global chewing mania.

The betel addiction is always dangerous, but the need of an in-depth research on anthropological aspects of betel-chewing on a multi- and interdisciplinary basis and with an impartial vision is obvious, and the intercultural analysis can introduce one to a well-balanced, more humane handling of this age-honored custom, even at the national level. An integral treatment sought after is more effective. The ancient practice of betel-chewing may be seen under a new, comprehensive vision and in its global dimension.

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