

# An Introduction to the Use of Sirih in Malay Culture

By Khir Johari

While living in the port city of Melaka between 1512 and 1515, the Portuguese apothecary Tome Pires wrote his *Suma Oriental*, the first systematic geographical account of Asia to be produced. One of the exotic practices he observed was the chewing of *sirih* (betel) and *pinang*, known in the Portuguese language respectively as *betele* (from Malayalam *vetilla*) and *areca* (from *adekka*), which indicates that it was along the Malabar coast that the Portuguese first became acquainted with these products. He further wrote that betel chewing “helps digestion, comforts the brain, strengthens the teeth and sweetens the breath.”

Based on linguistic and archaeological evidence, it appears that both *sirih* (the fresh leaf from the betel vine, *Piper betele*) and *pinang* (the seed of the areca palm, *Areca catechu*) are indigenous to the Malay Archipelago. Chinese sources from the early Tang period described Nanyang (the southern sea), now Southeast Asia, as a region of betel chewers. Indeed the Chinese name for areca, *pin-lang*, is derived from the Malay *pinang*. Together with two other essential ingredients, slaked lime (made from shells) and gambier (the dried resin of the leaves of *Uncaria gambier*), it makes a quid with the *sirih* forming the wrapper.

What does a quid of *sirih* mean in the Malay world? The answer lies in the characteristics of its ingredients. The *sirih* represents humility and respectfulness, for the betel vine climbs up anything it can cling to and does so without disturbing its host. Since the areca palm is a tall, elegant tree with a straight trunk and promises a profusion of fruits, *pinang* epitomises honesty, high moral values and the determination to excel when given a task. Pure white slaked lime from shells easily available to coastal folk, denotes pure-heartedness and sincerity, but when provoked it can be aggressive for such is the nature of calcium hydroxide – useful in small quantities, but too much is



The pinang (*Areca Catechu*) tree



From an old Javanese manuscript. It depicts a guest being offered sirih as a gesture of hospitality

caustic! To obtain the gambier lozenges, the leaves of the gambier tree are first boiled to extract the resin. After an arduous process of reduction, the paste is made into small medallions that require days of drying. The gambier thus represents perseverance, patience and hard work. Hence, to the Malay forefathers, every quid of *sirih* was a reminder of what it takes to be a person, to be human.

This belief system goes back millennia and is related to propitiating the ancestors. Indeed, the use of *sirih* began as a sacred act, a sort of communion with the progenitors. According to historian Anthony Reid, in the old Malay world, “the ancestral spirit had to be given *sirih* on every significant occasion,” which explains its importance in marriage rites. Marriage resulted in progeny and the survival of the clan or tribe – hence the invocation for the ancestors’ attendance necessitated the use of *sirih*. Moreover, the union of the two major elements, *sirih* and *pinang*, symbolised the union of the male and female – the *sirih* is seen as cool and perfumes the breath through the phenol it contains, while the *pinang* is associated with heat and the male desire for sexual union.

Chemical reactions resulting from the mastication of the main ingredients produce a distinctive red saliva. It was believed that this concoction had magical and supernatural powers, in addition to its medicinal properties. In most households the *sirih* set, a receptacle for containing the various ingredients and associated paraphernalia, acted also as the First Aid box. The antiseptic and antibacterial properties of *sirih* help to prevent infection from wounds. Its juice reduces swelling, fever and prevents diarrhoea. Chewing *sirih* after



A Riau, Sumatra sirih set with silver ingredient receptacles. Mid 1800s



Coco de mer and brass sirih set from Solo, Java. Late 19th century

meals aids digestion and prevents belching. *Pinang* contains an astringent for intestinal troubles and is effective for headache relief. As late as 1930, *pinang* powder was sold in pharmacies across Europe as a vermifuge against parasites – a treatment noted by Avicenna in the 11<sup>th</sup> century. Bee or hornet stings can be contained and relieved with the application of slaked lime. The alkaline characteristic also has antacid properties. A gargle of gambier infusion relieves sore throats and gambier as a lotion soothes burns. A quid of *sirih* also brings calmness to the mind.

Apart from its medicinal potency, stylised and ritualised *sirih* chewing carried a wealth of symbolism for Malays. Before a child's arrival, *sirih* appeared at the *lenggang perut* ceremony, a baby shower of sorts, when *sirih* leaves were tossed to predict the baby's gender. As soon as a toddler attempted his or her first words, parents swiped a little *sirih* juice across the lips in the hope of smooth speech development and love of the mother tongue. A constantly crying child could be reflective of the lack or loss of *semangat*, the inner life force. So *sirih* chewing together with the right incantation, could help *jemput semangat*, the recalling of the child's inner spirit.

It is no wonder that in the Malay world of old, betel-chewing played a central role. It was not just a habit or pastime, but rather a quintessential part of the Malay cultural identity and its presence was everywhere in countless aspects of life from birth till death. The beauty of such a custom was that it bridged social divides, transcended class, religious beliefs, race, age and gender. It also featured prominently in courtship, marriage, hospitality and relationship management.

The ultimate symbol of hospitality among Southeast Asians was *sirih* chewing.



A climbing sirih vine

It preceded the offering of drinks or food. The Dutch in the East Indies were quick to notice this and adopted the custom to lubricate commercial or diplomatic transactions. *Sirih* chewing among friends and associates symbolised a pledge of trust reminiscent of the Native American *calumet* (peace pipe). It was in marriage, however, that *sirih* chewing and *sirih*

presentation took a central role. It sealed the covenant between families and was witnessed by the ancestors. Indeed, the Malay word for a marriage proposal is *pinang* and to ask for someone's hand in marriage is *meminang*, both from the root word *pinang*, the areca nut. The potential bridegroom's representatives would carry a *sirih* set to offer to the parents of the prospective bride. If this was returned unused, it was understood that the *pinang* had been refused, thus saving everyone any embarrassment. On the other hand, if the *sirih* set was returned consumed, it was a message of acceptance.

While unspoken, it carried the same force as a written contract. Invitation to the wedding was only done through a representative carrying a *sirih* set to various invitees' homes. On the wedding day, *sirih* leaves neatly arranged in tiers with flowers called the *sirih junjung*, decorated the wedding dais. Guests would be given the Malay potpourri, the *bunga rampai* wrapped in *sirih* leaves. And if the bride was a virgin, a special *sirih* arrangement known as the *sirih dara* would be presented to her family in her honour.



Brass inlaid with silver Maranao sirih box from Mindanao. Wheels made of old Spanish coins

The *sirih* chewing tradition was also the determinant of what was polite, acceptable and to a certain extent, what was beautiful. Although *sirih* still plays a symbolic role in Malay weddings, much of the knowledge of its traditional uses has been forgotten. Today, *sirih* consumption is associated with bad habits and backwardness. Much of its cultural heritage has been lost, save for the *sirih* sets and their paraphernalia, now testimonials to a bygone era.

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