

THE TRADITION OF BETEL AND ARECA IN BHUTAN

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Doma zhes is one of the most heard and widespread phrases in Bhutan: " Please have betel leaf and areca nut" becomes a leitmotif each time two individuals meet, at the end of a meal, and in all the occasions of everyday life. It is impossible not to notice the importance that the betel leaf and nut holds in Bhutan. One can multiply the scenes and the examples: Customers buy the betel leaf at the weekly Sunday market, their dress's pocket bulging with silver boxes, or just simply with plastic bags filled with betel leaves; petty sellers at bus terminals selling ready made quid, called *kamto*, in cone-shaped papers; monks returning to the monastery with their bags filled with quantity enough to last for a week's consumption; betel leaf with a small piece of areca nut that the host offers with his two hands to the guests at the time of a ceremony; betel leaves and nuts put in a plate along with those filled with chocolates during archery games or official ceremonies ; betel leaves and nuts passed round after dinner ; red stains in the street; men and women with red stained teeth sweating profusely.

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This is a slightly-modified version.

These descriptions invite questions and amongst them, what is the true significance of the "betel" in the Bhutanese context? Can the date of the betel leaf and nut consumption habit be traced back?

The importance of these plants is well known in the Indian sub-continent as well Southeast Asian countries. On the contrary, we know that the Tibetans did not consume areca nut and leaf. Could Bhutan, the country lying on the crossroad of these two worlds, have been influenced by the habits of their southern neighbours? Besides its addictive properties, what role does betel have in the Bhutanese society? Why is the consumption of betel accepted where as tobacco is strongly condemned?

Areca Nut, Leaf and Lime

The majority of the westerners are under the impression that betel is the nut. We talk even of betel nut and the mistake was made even as early as 1673. The betel (*Piper betel*) is, in fact, the leaf that envelops the nut and the later is areca nut (*Areca catechu*). In Bhutan a quid comprises a piece of areca nut, *doma*,¹ betel leaf, *pani*, (from *pan* of Hindi, which is derived from Sanskrit *parna* meaning "leaf " ²), on which lime, *tsuni* is applied. The areca nut is rolled in the leaf and the quid obtained is called *doma*, the abbreviated form of *doma pani*.

The areca nut was not indigenous to Bhutan but imported from Assam and Bengal. The cultivation of areca nut commenced in the 1960s in the southern foothills as it became really populated after the control of malaria and the development of communications with the interior parts of Bhutan. Today it forms one of the important sources of income. However, a part of it is still imported from India.

¹ Spelled in Dzongkha as *dog ma* (or *rdo ma*), this word is also applied to the fruit of any type of tree.

² Hobson-Jobson, 1989: 689.

The areca nut is consumed in two ways: The fresh nut, called *kanza* is harvested in summer; the old nut is known as *muza*.³ The later, consumed in winter and spring is stored in big holes dug in the earth. With a size of a table tennis ball and slightly oblong, the fresh areca nut has a dark orange greenish bark and produces a juice with the reputation of possessing strong intoxicating properties; the old nut with a dark brown bark and covered with fibres is preferred to the fresh ones as it is less strong.

The betel, *pani*, is a creeper, which grows wild in the sub-tropical regions of Bhutan, normally below 1300 m. It is found in the regions of Punakha, Kheng, in the southern parts of oriental Bhutan and along the Indian border. Two types of betel leaves are consumed. *Rata* is the one that grows wild whereas *trodom*⁴, which belongs to the same species of betel leaf of India, is basically cultivated in the village of Tabadramtsi in Samtse district of Southern Bhutan. The *rata* is smaller and is bought along with the stalk whereas the *trodom* is sold in the form of packet of leaves. The former is cheaper and in effect less strong than the later. It is difficult for an individual accustomed to chewing *trodom* to shift to *rata* and vice-versa.

Imported only in small quantities from India, lime, *tsuni*, is largely produced artisanally in the villages. The best limestone is found in Chendebji in central Bhutan but all the villages make use of what is available in their region. They produce lime, which is boiled till a white creamy paste is obtained. The product is consumed in the village or put in small empty condensed milk cans and sold in the market. The lime produced in Bhutan is considered weaker and less corrosive than the ones imported from India. It is said that the paste of lime prepared for important officials and royalties is mixed with white cow butter to weaken the astringency. It

³ There is no standard Dzongkha spelling for these terms.

⁴ Idem.

is also possible to add a plant - the species of which is unknown to me- that turns the paste into orange.⁵

The different ingredients can be bought at the weekly markets even in the small urban centres. The areca nuts are kept in big jute bags and the merchants normally present a nut cut into halves so that the clients can judge the quality of what they are buying. The fibre of the nut that covers the bark is also peeled off with a knife. The most current unit of sale is the *pon*, a word of Indian origin, and equivalent to 80 nuts.

The stalk bearing the *rata* leaves are tied together in tens and stacked in crudely woven bamboo baskets whereas *trodom* leafs are folded and packed in boxes. As for lime, it is sold in the empty condensed milk cans, which forms a kind of unit of measurement.

Each person then makes their own preparation at home, cleaning the leaves and applying lime to the personal taste, placing half or a quarter of a nut before folding the leaves and putting all of it in the mouth. The ingredients are generally kept in a plate or a *bangchung*, a container of woven bamboo. The addicted and chain consumers carry the required quantity for the day in a small plastic or a cloth bag tucked in their *hemchu* (a pocket formed by the folds of the upper part of the Bhutanese dress). A small metal container is used for carrying the lime.

The grand style of carrying betel ingredients consists of a rectangular silver box, *chaka*⁶ which contains the betel leafs and nuts, and a round box with conical lid, also in silver, *thimi*,⁷ for lime. In the past, Bhutanese carried these two containers in their *hemchu* but today they seems to prefer plastic or cloth bags which are lighter and not as bulky.

⁵ Information provided by Dasho Shingkarlam during an interview in Thimphu on January 4, 1996.

⁶ In Dzongkha, *lcags dkar* means, " white iron ", because the first of this type was made of this metal and not in silver like today.

⁷ In Dzongkha, *kri mi*.

In most of the shops along the road, at the bus terminals, or in villages, one can buy the ready-made quid wrapped in a conical paper containing four pieces. The quid therefore look like a bouquet where the betel nuts would be the flowers. Called *kamto*, a quid costs Nu. 5 in 2001. Bhutanese would eat it straight away if they are in need. However usually, before chewing it, many people unfold the betel leaves to check that the required dose of lime is correctly applied. In the eastern part of the country, lime, betel leafs and nuts are simply rolled in a paper and it is left to the consumer to prepare the quid according to personal taste.

Addiction and Properties

Doma pani provokes a phenomenon of addiction and is therefore, according to the medical criteria, a drug. Certain people wake up late in the night and cannot go back to sleep without chewing a quid. Even the old people who have weak teeth make use of a special instrument known as *drecha*⁸ to grind the nut into small pieces so as to reduce the difficulty of chewing. And, a chain consumer can chew up to fifty quids a day. On the other part, the dropping of the habit of chewing the betel can provoke in certain persons withdrawal symptoms: headaches, giddiness and irritation.

The noxious effects of *doma* are well known: lesion of mouth and gums, abrasion of teeth, and mouth and throat cancer. More still, most of the Bhutanese do not spit the juice but swallow it, which also seems to cause lesions of the intestine walls. *Doma pani* consumed first in the morning without eating can also lead to suffering from diarrhea. But, the Bhutanese see *doma pani* as increasing their resistance to fight against cold; it also creates a sensation of warmth, and keeps oneself awake and concentrated. It is also plausible

⁸ It is a tube of a wood or metal in which is put the nut, which is chopped and ground to small pieces by a sharp tool.

that *doma pani* kills some of the taste buds. This could be an explanation for the impressive quantity of chili consumed especially in Western Bhutan where it is a vegetable and not a seasoning.

In parts of western Bhutan, it is believed that *doma pani* and hot water should be given to women who have delivered so as to avoid the possibility of the newborn suffering from diarrhea.

Origin and Substitutes

The betel leaf and nut chewing culture is believed to be an age-old practice as it plays a very important social role; in the same way as the archery, it appears that this custom cannot be disassociated from Bhutanese culture. However, the exploration of historical sources and the fieldwork lead us to doubt its ancient nature, at least in most parts of the country.

The Bhutanese Code of Laws (*bKa' khrims*) was composed in 1729 by Tenzin Choegyel, the future 10th Je Khenpo, under the command of the 10th temporal ruler Mipham Wangpo (1729-1736). This text gives very detailed prescriptions on different aspect of life and especially a strong condemnation of tobacco (ff.107 a-b) but betel is not mentioned.

The 1775 report of George Bogle, the first British emissary to Bhutan who visited the country in 1774, does mention the large consumption of alcohol as a kind of Bhutanese habit but is silent on the issue of betel. In the like manner, Bogle enumerates the dishes displayed on his table but does not mention *doma*. However, it seems that betel nut was already imported from India at that time since Bogle writes: "The consumption of Bengal goods except tobacco, betel nut, and other bulky articles is very small in the Deb Raja's country".

In 1783, Samuel Turner, another British emissary visited Bhutan. He describes in great details all the presents offered

to him and also the Bhutanese customs but does not remark at all on betel. In 1815 the British sent an Indian called Kisan Kant Bose on another mission to Bhutan. In his mission report he writes: "From the low-lands under the Hills and on the borders of Runpore and Cooch Behar, they import swine, cattle, pan and betel, tobacco, dried fish, and coarse cotton cloth".

With the Pemberton mission in 1838 began the derogatory reports on the 19th century Bhutan, reports that explained the bad relations, which existed between Bhutan and the British. Pemberton mentioned the export of tobacco to Bhutan but not that of betel, and neither does he describe the betel chewing habit, which he could not have missed if it was as wide spread as today. Doctor W. Griffith who participated in the same mission also does not describe this betel chewing custom but remarks that "the Booteahs depend on the plains for supplies of betel nuts, otherwise they might advantageously cultivate the tree on many of the lower ranges."

J.C. White who was the *Political Officer* to Sikkim and Bhutan relates that at the time of the enthronement of the king in 1907 "three kinds of tea, rice and pan were offered in turn." As per Mrs. Williamson's diary who in 1933 had accompanied her husband, the Political Officer of that time, there is not even the slightest mention of the betel chewing habit in Bhutan.

These witnesses pose a problem. Most provide very detailed information on the export of areca nuts from India to Bhutan but none projects even a glimpse of its consumption. One can propose two hypothesis for the lack of this information: either, coming from India where betel was consumed in large quantities, the British must have judged unnecessary to describe a well know custom, or this habit was not as widespread as today and probably restricted only to a small section of the population. It is difficult to be definite on the basis of theses sources. The book of K.Nishioka, a Japanese

who had lived in Bhutan for 20 years, provides a contemporary parallel; he is silent on the betel leaf and areca nut but attaches a lot of importance, among others, to the description of the production of alcohol.

There is no place for doubt that the custom of making betel quid came from India, and that the ecological condition of Bhutan favoured the expansion of the areca nut plants, whereas it remained unknown in Tibet. The very term *pani* for betel, as we have seen, comes from the Hindi *pan* which means betel leaf. The combined form of all the ingredients that one eats is interestingly mentioned as early as 1298 in the accounts of Marco Polo.⁹ *Pan* would be the abbreviated form of *pan supari* as *supari* in Sanskrit signifies "pleasant" and applied to designate the areca nut in Hindi.¹⁰

The term *supari* was not introduced in Bhutan, and in India it is referred only to the dried areca nuts chopped into small pieces and flavoured with all kinds of ingredients; this is the Indian "dry type" that the Bhutanese refers to, in opposition to the "humid type" that they chew with betel leaf and lime, and it is also the most appreciated in Assam and Bengale. In effect, it certainly is from these border areas with which Bhutan shared commercial relations that the consumption of the combined ingredients was adopted. Chakravarti, an Indian writer asserts "the Bhutanese seemed to have picked up this habit from the people of the plains in Assam in course of their trades and raids through centuries. Bhutan draw its requirement of betel leafs and areca nuts from Assam. Betel leafs, however grow in some quantity in the jungles of lower Bhutan also."

It is not a surprise that the Bhutanese sources remain silent on *doma*, if we know that the texts essentially had a religious tonality and the lay customs as well as the personal habits were usually not documented. However, a text titled

⁹ Hobson-Jobson, 1989: 89.

¹⁰ Hobson-jobson, 1989: 689.

Significance of chibdrel, Serdreng and Zhugdrel Ceremonies, enumerates *doma pani* among the offerings made during the *Zhugdrel* ceremony: ¹¹ "This is followed by oblations of wine (*marchang*), flag, *changyep* (ceremonial money) and *doma pani* (areca nut and leaf)." Similar references are found in the two protocol manuals (*Driglam Namzha*) published in 1999.

If we now turn towards folk literature, just recently and partly documented, mention of *doma* is made in at least two popular stories, *Gasa Lamey Senge* and *Namtala* which dates back to the second half of the 19th century. Similarly, *doma* appears in the colourful history of Ap Wang Drugay, a highly amusing personality and the Bhutanese equivalent of Akhu Tompa of Tibet, who is supposed to have lived in the 19th century.¹² However, to my knowledge, in the hundreds of stories documented, there is not even a single in which betel and areca play a central role.

The field work that I had conducted in December, 1995 first confirmed that *doma pani* was consumed at a much lesser degree in eastern and central Bhutan; on the other hand, it showed that the generalized and frequent habit of chewing *doma* was probably due to the development of communications and trade with India in the 1960s as well as the monetary increase among the population and therefore quite recent.

The biography of Dasho Shingkar Lam,¹³ high official who served the second, third and the fourth kings throws light on this point. When he arrived to western Bhutan from Bumthang, (central Bhutan) in 1947, he remarks: "People in Paro seemed to be richer and were accustomed to the consumption of betel nuts as a daily necessity, whereas it was still an occasional indulgence in central Bhutan." He

¹¹ In dzongkha: *gshugs grel*.

¹² " (He) chewed ruminatively upon the makings of a doma," in "Opening Spell," Chiramal, J.M., *Ap Wang Drugay*, Thimphu, Yangchenma publications, 1995, n.p.

¹³ *Drag shos Shing khar bla ma*.

confirmed this to me later in a personal interview.¹⁴ The western Bhutanese and, in particular, those of Paro and Ha had the habit of chewing betel and areca nuts since an unspecified date but for a very long time, according to him. They bought them from the borders areas during trading trips, and during the transhumance when they migrated south with their cattle in winter. Both activities were tied together. It is interesting to note that the region of Tabadramtse where areca nut is cultivated is one of the areas of winter transhumance.

It therefore seems that *doma pani* was restricted for a long time to the upper layer of the society, and to the western Bhutanese who had the occasion of migrating to the plains. On the other hand, the villages in the interior pockets of Bhutan had plants of several types that substituted betel and areca. These plants are still used today in areas cut away from the roads.

The most currently used plants are *rushing* and *gonra*.¹⁵ *Rushing* which means "creeper tree" is identified as *Poikilospermum*. Found in abundance mainly in the subtropical regions of Khyeng and Lhuntse, it is essentially consumed in these areas as well as in Bumthang. Today, at times a small amount of it is added to the combination of betel, areca and lime. The bark of the creeper was peeled off, then chopped into small pieces and dried to be eaten. It produces a red juice. The western Bhutanese also consumes the bark of the wild peachtree whereas those of the east and particularly the residents of Lhuntse chew the bark of the chir pine (*Pinus Roxburghii*). *Gonra* (Tshangla; Dzongkha: *Bjukosisi*; Bumthangkha: *yukuling*; *potentilla pendoncularis* fam. *Rosaceae*) is found in almost all parts of Bhutan but is mainly consumed by eastern Bhutanese. The root is dug out,

¹⁴ Interview with Dasho Shingkarlam in Thimphu on January 4, 1996.

¹⁵ Ugyen Thinley of the Department of Forest helped me by identifying the botanical names of these two plants and I thank him sincerely.

boiled and then chopped into small pieces. When chewed it produces a red juice and has a bitter taste. All the substitutes of areca nut are also prepared with betel leaf and lime when available.

The field work and the sources allows us therefore to present an image of *doma pani* consumption which is less uniform but a habit more ancient than the impression created by the sources referred to at an earlier stage. If it appears that Bhutan imported areca nut from India at least from the mid-18th century as per the British sources, the consumption itself was not that wide spread like today and probably confined itself to the category of luxury items for many while the inhabitants of the interior pockets satisfied themselves with other substitutes available in their area.

Don et Partage: Le Role Sociale du Betel

These conclusions are partially confirmed if we examine the role that the betel plays in the Bhutanese society. Today, a lot of Bhutanese chew *doma pani* but the consumption is much higher in western Bhutan where areca nuts have been imported since two centuries ago if we trust the British sources. In the weekly market of Thimphu, the capital, a section of the place is fully reserved for the sellers of *doma pani*. However, the younger generation seem to be eating much less *doma* than their parents, often because they find the smell offensive or for esthetic reasons.

All the informants above 50 years agreed to say that, in their youth, *doma pani* was a luxury and that areca nuts was ten times more expensive than today and not available everywhere. All of them are of the opinion that the development of roads in the 60s allowed the habit of chewing *doma* to reach all the layers of the society and to become generalized beyond western Bhutan.

According to the same people, in their youth, important people presented *doma pani* to the villagers as a valuable gift,

*soetra*¹⁶, or even as a payment. The villagers would be so thrilled when they received a whole areca nut along with two or three betel leaves. Likewise, Dasho Shingkarlam¹⁷ relates that at the time of the Second King (1926-1952), the later had the habit of giving a quid already prepared by a servant as *soetra*: the areca nut was enveloped in a leaf on which was also put some lime.

The sources say the same thing although they must be deciphered further. We have seen that J.C.White explains that three types of tea, rice, and *pan* were offered to the guests of the coronation ceremony of the First King. At that time the Bhutanese did not drink much tea (*Camilla sinensis*) but leaves of different kinds of tree in the guise of tea. If there was tea, then they prepared salted butter tea. To serve three varieties of tea, therefore, was demonstrating great lavishness, and all the more to offer three kinds of rice as the majority of the Bhutanese did not eat rice and consumed maize, barley and buckwheat according to the region.

We can then imagine that to serve three kinds of *pan* was a sign of wealth. The King, moreover, had a courtier whose duty was to carry the container of betel and areca, "a senior *changgap* carrying *doma bata* (betel nut container)".¹⁸ *Bata*¹⁹ is a round metal container, the lid of which is often decorated with lotus motifs and its use reserved to the King, the Chief Abbot and the ministers.

In the mid -19th century, making presents of betel or *doma pani* was an acceptable gift as related in the history of Namtala, a courtier of the lord of Dramitse in eastern Bhutan. Namtala returned from a mission conducted for his lord but "on the way he realised that he had not taken any gift for his lord, so he took some betel leaves from the forest and put

¹⁶ Spelled as *gsol ras*, it is a gift from a superior to an inferior.

¹⁷ Interview with Dasho Shingkarlam, Thimphu, January 4, 1996.

¹⁸ Karma Ura, 1995 : 179.

¹⁹ In dzongkha, *sba khra*.

them in his *gho*.²⁰ The lord of Dramitse was very surprised to see Namtala back the next day. He accepted his gift of betel leaves."

Similarly, in the history of Sengye, the servant of the Lama of Gasa,²¹ the chamberlain of the *Desi*, the temporal head of Bhutan, used to visit the house of the well-off villagers in Punakha who "tried to serve him as well as possible. They were not poor but they were not rich either and it was an honour for them to receive the *Desi's* chamberlain in their houses. They offered him *Doma* and drinks." When Dasho Shingkarlam was serving at the court of the Second King, sometime in 1948, he encountered a young village girl and flirted with her by offering several areca nuts: "In the course of our frivolous talk, I took out my pan holder and scooped a dash of *tsuna* (lime paste) with two ruffled leaves of pan. I recall I did not put a quarter of a betel nut on the pan as commonly done, but three pieces of betel nut, which I am sure she understood as romantic (and perhaps narcotic) lavishness."²² The areca nut was rare enough if offering three nuts was considered as a great generosity, accessible only to important people. We remember Dasho Shingkarlam's surprise when he noticed that the people of western Bhutan consumed a lot of areca nut.

In this context, it is very possible that the offering of *doma pani* during the ceremony of *zhugdrel* represented a precious gift to the monks who had the authorisation to chew betel and areca but could neither smoke nor drink alcohol.

In India the custom of offering *pan* to the guests whom we want to honour is very old as attested by *Hobson-Jobson* dictionary:²³ in 1616 "the king giving me many good words, and two pieces of his Pawnee out of his dish, to eat of the

²⁰ The *Gho* (*gos*) is the men's dress.

²¹ *Ga sa bla ma'i Seng ge*, a very popular story from the mid-19th century.

²² Karma Ura, 1995 :101.

²³ Hobson-Jobson, 1989: 689.

same he was eating;" and, in 1800, "On our departure pawn and roses were presented (...)". It is therefore probable that Bhutan had borrowed, along with the areca nuts, this gesture of friendship and honour from India, and it was all the more appreciated that the ingredients were relatively rare.

Because of its diffusion and availability, *doma pani* is no more considered an important gift or a mark of honour, but as a symbol of conviviality and friendship. To offer *doma pani* when meeting someone at the bus stops or at the time of a fortuitous encounter implies the desire to chat, and therefore if two persons already know one another, it means that they wish to maintain and strengthen their friendship.

At the time of marriage or promotion ceremony, a servant or any relative gives with two hands, an elementary courtesy, a demi-nut and betel leaf to the guests who have come to congratulate and offer good wishes and presents. During official ceremonies or archery tournaments, plates containing half areca nuts, betel leaves and lime are kept on low tables in front of the guests. However, an individual from the inferior social ladder would usually respect the etiquette and would not chew *doma pani* in the presence of someone superior, unless the latter tells him or her to do so. On the contrary, among equals, when the ambience becomes relaxed with lively conversations, the plate of *doma pani* passes round from one hand to another and each one chooses with care his or her leaf, nut as well as the necessary amount of lime. Similarly, at the end of a meal the guests sigh with contentment when the container of *doma pani* circulates. A real meal never does close without a quid and the host should not forget it. This sharing is done in a relaxed manner only between the people coming from the same social level; in this case there is no protocol and to share *doma pani* is a symbol signifying free and open conversation.

It is also a mark of friendship, and even of intimacy if someone asks somebody else to prepare a quid. This implies that they know each other well.

Consumed by men as well as women, by laymen as well as monks at all the hours of the day, *doma pani* is perceived today by the Bhutanese as signifying a moment of relaxation and conviviality. Despite the knowledge of its negative effects on the health, *doma pani* had never been an object of opprobrium while tobacco is strongly condemned.

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