

BETEL CHEWING IN SOUTH-EAST ASIA

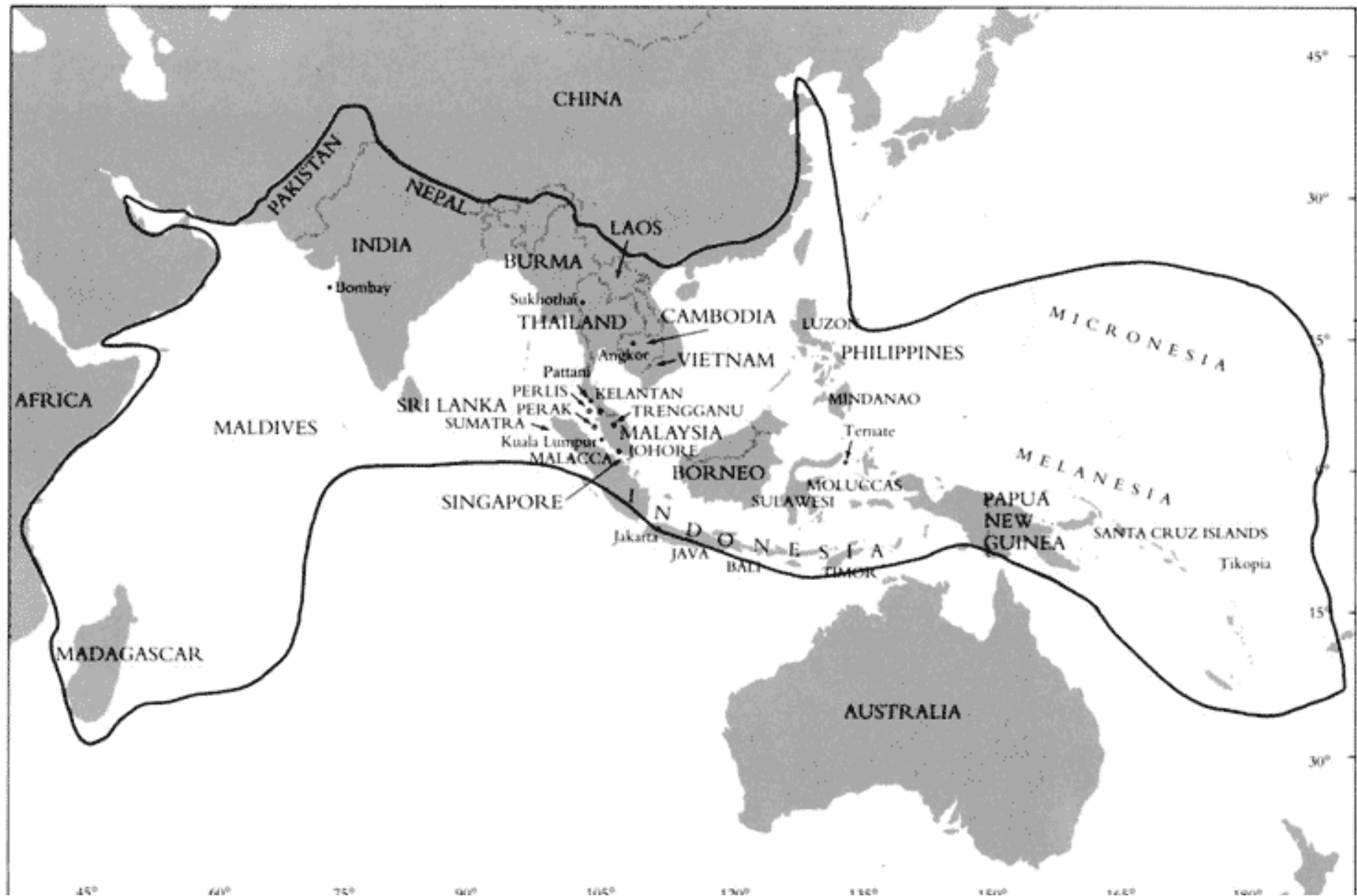
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INTRODUCTION

The ubiquitous red-stained lips and blackened teeth associated with betel chewing are sported by one-tenth of the human race and one-fifth of the global population. The custom pervades Asia, yet it is hardly known outside of the continent. It has no sex barriers and embraces all ages and classes. Even though it has long-established roots in Asian culture, history of the custom relies mainly on oral tradition, probably because it is most prevalent amongst the agrarian population. Since the eleventh century, however, the royal use of betel in South-East Asia is described in written records which provide a rich source of details about the protocol of sharing a quid with a king and the use of betel in royal ceremonies. From the sixteenth century onwards, when Europeans reached the East, accounts include descriptions of the royal use of betel but the custom has consistently been misrepresented by early western travellers who wrote about it, either from their own observations or those of others. The custom, so alien to foreigners, was viewed from a western perspective. Nearly all of them were repelled by it and called betel chewing an ‘...*unhygienic, ugly, vile, and disgusting*...’ habit. Even the name given to the custom by Europeans, ‘betel-nut chewing’ is a misnomer. The term is incorrect because an areca-nut, not a betel-nut, is chewed. Numerous English language dictionaries continued to retain ‘betel-nut’ as an entry until recently, but today most references to the custom are defined correctly under ‘betel’. The geographical parameters of betel chewing encompass an area of 11,000

kilometres east-west and 6,000 kilometres north-south and include the Indian subcontinent, Sri Lanka, and all of South-East Asia. The boundaries extend to the eastern coastline of Africa to Madagascar in the West; Melanesia to Tikopia (in the Santa Cruz Islands) in the East; southern China in the North, and Papua New Guinea in the South [see map in book, *Betel Chewing Traditions in South-East Asia*, p. 11].

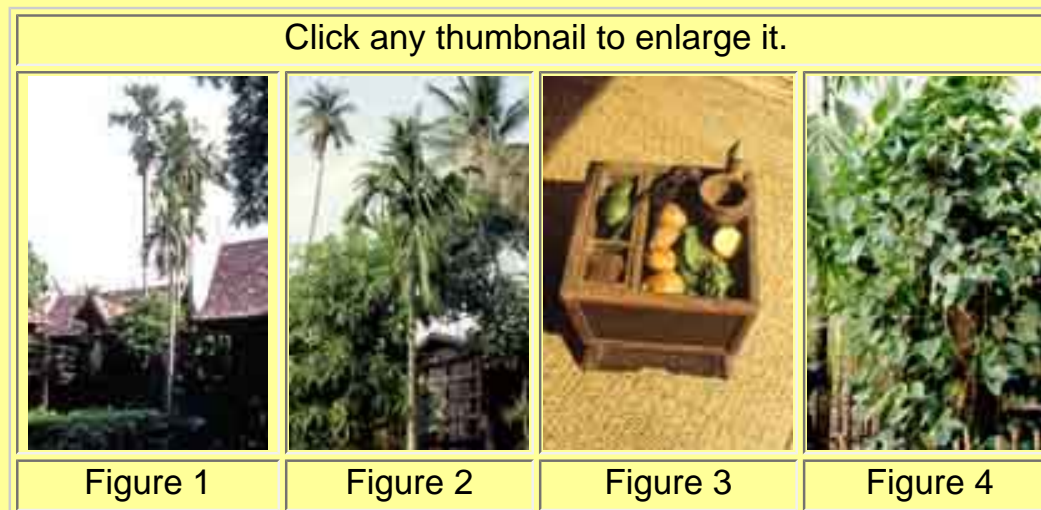


Geographical Distribution of Betel Chewing

Betel chewing is firmly embedded in the traditions of South-East Asia and enjoyed, even revered, on several levels. The most obvious reason as to why people chew betel is for social affability, in a way similar to westerners drinking coffee together. A key to its widespread patronage, though, lies in its use for other purposes besides chewing. The betel quid is also used as a medicine to cure a variety of illnesses ranging from headaches to skin infections. Betel is also believed to be a powerful link in contacting supernatural forces and as such is intricately entwined with the rites of animistic worship which give it magical qualities. And both the nut and the leaf are used symbolically in all ceremonies related to the rites of passage. It is particularly potent in fostering social and sexual relationships between a male and a female.

THE BETEL QUID

A betel quid has three essential ingredients and others may be added depending on availability and preference.



The so-called 'nut' is actually a seed of the *Areca catechu*, a member of the palm family. The slender

trunk is one of the tallest of the palms and is distinguished by a cluster of leaves at the top sheltering stalks of the nuts [See figure 1 and figure 2 above]. The nut itself is round or oval and about five centimetres long at maturity. At the earliest stage it is green and soft with a smooth exterior, but it gradually turns yellowish to brownish with a tough, fibrous husk when it hardens [See figure 3 above]. The young nut is succulent and sweet-tasting whereas the mature one is bitter and savoury. The leaf is from the vine of the Piper *betle* pepper plant. The vine is cultivated from cuttings. It likes shade and is usually trained to grow up another tree or pole for support and protection from the sun. The leaf itself is broad with defined points and a prominent central vein [See figure 4 above]. Lime, the third ingredient, is obtained from various available sources. The lime is ground to a powder (calcium oxide) and mixed with water to a paste-like consistency (calcium hydroxide) to make it suitable for chewing. Limestone chalk (calcium carbonate), obtained from mountain lime, is used in Thailand, Laos, and Vietnam. Sea shells and molluscs, such as snails, and coral provide sources of lime in the island areas. They are pulverized by burning and then crushing with a hammer or even the hands. Mussels and other freshwater shellfish from rivers and streams are used in the Philippines. In some places cumin or turmeric are added to the lime, which gives a pink or reddish cast to the paste. Additional ingredients are a status symbol and the greater the number and the more exotic, the higher the owner's prestige. Other additions listed in early Sanskrit texts were mainly spices, the luxuries from the Moluccan islands. They included cardamom, clove, camphor, musk, nutmeg, black pepper, and dry ginger. Interestingly, many of these spices are still used as additives in betel chewing today. A stick of clove may be added to secure a folded or rolled quid. Cinnamon, coriander, and ambergris add flavour and thus enhance the taste. Cardamom stimulates the flow of saliva. Tobacco is a modern addition to the quid. Sometimes shreds of tree bark are substituted for tobacco.

Click any thumbnail to enlarge it.



Figure 4



Figure 5



Figure 6

The most common method of making a betel quid in South-East Asia is: the leaf is daubed with lime paste [See figure 4 above] and topped with thin slices of an areca-nut; then the leaf is folded, like wrapping a present, to the desired shape and size [See figure 5 above]; finally, the wad is placed between the teeth and the cheek and pressed with the tongue to allow sucking and chewing [See figure 6 above]. Sometimes it is held in the mouth for hours; others sleep with it. The interaction of the ingredients during chewing produces a red-coloured saliva. Most of the betel juice is spat out. The tell-tale residue looks like splotches of dried blood on the ground.

THE ORIGINS

The origins of betel chewing are unknown but it is at least 2,000 years old. Although it has long been held that betel chewing is native to India, recent linguistic and archaeological evidence casts doubt on this theory. Only literary evidence continues to support an Indian origin.

The word 'betel' was first used in the sixteenth century by the Portuguese. According to I.H. Burkill, it is probably a transliteration of the Malay word *vetila* ('the mere leaf') which is close in sound to 'betel'. The word has undergone a series of spellings from 'bettele' to 'betre' to 'betle' and finally to 'betel'. 'Areca' may have derived from the Malay word *adakka* ('areca-nut') or from *adakeya*, the Indian equivalent. The widest range of words for 'areca' and 'betel' has been found in Indonesia,

which suggests it may be the original location where these words were spoken. In India, on the other hand, the lack of variety of words for 'areca' and 'betel' indicates a later date of origin for the plants in that area. Moreover, *sireh*, the most widespread name for betel in Malaysia, is not derived from Sanskrit, which suggests betel chewing might have developed independently in Malaysia. Based on linguistic evidence, therefore, the custom seems to be native to the Indonesian archipelago. The earliest archaeological evidence found so far is at Spirit Cave in north-western Thailand, where remains of *Areca catechu*, dating from 10,000 BC have been found. Similar finds have been reported at other early sites in Thailand such as Ban Chiang which dates to 3600 BC to AD 200-300. All finds, however, are from the cultivated plant; the absence of a wild species in the same area may suggest the custom originated elsewhere. The wild species has been found in Malaysia and adds archaeological support to the linguistic evidence of its origin in that area. Skeletons bearing evidence of betel chewing, dated to about 3000 BC, have also been found in the Duyong Cave in the Philippines. Compared with these finds, the earliest archaeological evidence for betel found in India is the early years of the present era, which is much later than other parts of the region.

Literary sources, however, point to an Indian origin. A Pali text of 504 BC mentions betel. Chinese chronicles of the second century BC describe betel chewing in Vietnam. The next known reference is the Mandasor Silk Weaver's Inscription from India of about AD 473. Areca-nut in Indonesia was mentioned in a Chinese chronicle of the first half of the sixth century (Book 54 of the History of the Liang Dynasty). Persian descriptions of betel chewing appeared in Indian literature of the eighth and ninth centuries. From the tenth century onwards, literary sources provide plenty of evidence that betel was widely used in the region. Champa (Vietnam) gave tribute to China in the form of areca-nuts in the tenth and eleventh centuries. The stele of King Ramkhamhaeng, of the Sukhothai Kingdom in Thailand, purportedly written at the end of the thirteenth century, says '*The people of this land of Sukhothai... celebrate the Kathin ceremonies... with heaps of areca nuts.*' The earliest European reference to betel was made by Marco Polo in the thirteenth century, who noted that the people of India always have a quid in their mouths and that betel chewing '*prevailed especially among the nobles and magnates and kings.*' Other early travellers, such as Ibn Batuta and Vasco Da Gama, also observed betel chewing in

the East. In addition to material evidence, the oral traditions of South-East Asia give insight into the origins of betel. The symbolical use of betel in Cambodia, for example, can be traced to a legendary Prince Prah Thong who marries a serpent princess. She gives the prince a betel quid as a pledge of her trust, and since this time betel has been used in Cambodia to bond relationships. From these sources—linguistic, archaeological, literary, and oral—it seems likely that betel chewing was practised in South-East Asia in prehistoric times. From the beginning centuries of the common era its use spread throughout the region, and from the tenth century onwards, it appears betel has been used regularly.

BETEL CHEWING AND HEALTH

Chewing betel evokes a mild euphoria, and it is this general feeling of ‘well-being’ that contributes to the popularity of the custom. The ingredients of the betel quid, though, are not narcotic and betel chewing is not addictive although it can be habit-forming. According to the universal classification of food, the areca-nut and the betel leaf complement each other and are, therefore, in harmony. Since the areca-nut is ‘hot’ and the betel leaf ‘cool’, they act together to keep the human body in balance. Some claim that the areca-nut is an aphrodisiac. Conversely, the betel leaf is believed to relieve ‘hot’ illnesses such as headaches and fever. The properties of the areca nut relevant to betel chewing are alkaloids and tannin. The main alkaloid, arecoline, is toxic and has a stimulating parasympathetic nervous action, giving the betel chewer a relaxed feeling. This alkaloid activates secretion, increases smooth muscle activity, salivation, and thirst, but reduces appetite. It gives a red colour to the saliva, teeth, and faeces. The alkaloids in the areca-nut also contribute nitrogenous matter to the diet which neutralises stomach acids and acts as an astringent. The tannin in the nut contributes the property of astringency. Areca-nut is widely used in veterinary medicine, mainly to expel parasitic worms in animals. The pulp of the nut is used for relieving pain in the stomach of humans. As an astringent it hardens the mucous membranes of the stomach. In Malaysia, young shoots of the *Areca catechu* palm are believed to be effective in aborting a pregnancy. The root of the palm is given to cure dysentery. The *Piper betle* leaf contains phenols which contribute to its aromatic scent and pungent taste. It also

contains eugenol, a clove-oil compound, which is a powerful natural antiseptic. This role as an antibacterial agent accounts for its effectiveness in curing infections, especially of the skin and the eyes. The juice of the leaf is used to aid in the healing of headaches and fever, while stalks of the betel vine are used for glandular swellings.

The relationship between betel chewing and oral cancer is unclear. In some areas where the custom is concentrated, a high percentage of mouth cancer is reported. These claims, however, are not supported by research. The effect of betel chewing on the teeth has also not yet been determined. It does, though, turn the teeth red, and if betel is chewed over a prolonged period without cleaning the teeth, they will turn a black colour. Prolonged chewing is generally believed to keep the gums healthy by strengthening them. It also seems to prevent tooth decay as long as the teeth are cleaned. The reasons for these positive aspects of betel chewing on the teeth are probably the fluoride content and the antibacterial effect of the betel leaf. Surveys in New Guinea and East Java have shown that cavities are markedly less frequent among betel chewers. Gum disease, though, is common because of the irritating effect of the lime. Pieces can become wedged between the teeth causing gaps where food can lodge and attract tooth-destroying bacteria. The teeth may become loose and with prolonged chewing can even fall out. Lime grinds the enamel black and, when chewed, also blackens the dentine.

BETEL AND THE SPIRITS

According to ancient belief, all spirits whether good or evil must be dealt with and controlled through rituals. Offerings of betel are made to satisfy, win over, or thank good spirits and to exorcise evil ones. The spirit Phra Phum, Lord of the Land, is given special attention in Thailand. It is believed that if he is taken care of through appropriate offerings he will guard and protect the people who live on the land near his miniature spirit house. Spirits of the land and water are carefully looked after in agricultural areas where adequate rainfall and fertile soil are essential for the cultivation of rice. Evil spirits are the most feared of the supernatural forces because they cause illness, so many rituals focus on exorcising

the evil spirits and replacing them with protective ones. A medium is considered to possess supernatural power in establishing communications between the spiritual and earthly worlds and is especially adept in dealing with evil spirits. Betel plays a symbolical role in rituals associated with ancestral spirits. It is customary in parts of South-East Asia to provide the deceased with appurtenances from the worldly life to accompany them to eternity. The importance of betel on earth makes it an essential item to go with the deceased on the journey to the spiritual world. The use of betel for funeral rites is also believed to pave the way for a better incarnation for the deceased. Betel quids and rice are typical offerings used to honour and propitiate the spirits of deceased ancestors.

THE SYMBOLISM OF BETEL AND SEXUAL RELATIONSHIPS

Betel is considered a significant element in fostering both social and sexual relationships between a male and a female. It figures prominently in the language, folklore, and poetry of the region. It has even penetrated the vocabulary as numerous words derived from the equivalent of 'betel' to relate to a union between the male and the female. In Malay, for example, compounds of *pinang* ('areca-nut') mean 'to court' or 'to propose'. *Meminang* is to 'ask in marriage' and *pinang* is 'betrothal'. *Pinang muda* is a euphemism for a go-between of lovers and draws a correlation with the ideal areca nut which has two perfectly matching halves. Sireh, the Malay word for betel leaf, means 'a young girl who is eligible for marriage'. *Leko passiko* ('a bundle of betel leaves') is an offer of marriage in Makassar. *Khan mak* ('a basin of betel nut') refers to a wedding in both Thai and Lao. In Thailand today, the phrase means a present for an engagement. The idea that chewing betel stimulates passion and brings out charm is reflected symbolically in many tales and beliefs involving relationships between a male and a female. Betel is present from the earliest encounter between the two. Ancient legends reflect the symbolism between betel and love which also extends to erotica. Betel was listed as a necessary adjunct to sex in the Kama Sutra. And in parts of South-East Asia it has explicit sexual symbolism. In Vietnam, for example, the vine of the betel leaf (vagina) wraps around the areca nut (penis) with lime at the base which, when ground, produces a lime paste (male and female union) which dresses the leaf

and the nut. Betel has played a role in ceremonies involving marital union since ancient times. Even today it is offered as a prelude to discussions of partners, dowries, and other necessary arrangements for a marriage. Acceptance of the betel signifies agreement to the proposal under discussion. It serves as an offering in traditional betrothal and marriage ceremonies.

CONCLUSION Betel chewing gave rise to an entire artistic genre that included implements for preparing, serving, transporting, and storing betel ingredients. These are as varied and distinctive as the custom itself, but a discussion of these wares is outside the scope of this paper. A remaining consideration is the impact of cigarette smoking on betel chewing in South-East Asia. Articles in journals often report that cigarette smoking has replaced betel chewing but they fail to cite the basis for the statement. Others maintain that the introduction of tobacco has had little effect on betel chewing. One of the few surveys conducted on this aspect concluded that cigarette smoking has largely replaced betel chewing amongst adult Indonesian men. Women, though, according to the survey, continue to chew betel. Over 85 per cent of the men in Indonesia smoke cigarettes compared with 1.5 per cent of the women. As we move towards the twenty-first century, the 2000 year-old custom of betel chewing seems to be losing its appeal in South-East Asia, at least in urban areas. This is in contrast to other parts of Asia, particularly India. In Bombay, for example, the number of people who chew betel is actually increasing. Discernible changes in the marketing of ingredients in South-East Asia reflect a response to changes in consumption. Vendors selling leaves, nuts, and lime from a plastic bucket on street corners in the cities are gone, suggesting a decrease in the demand for the ingredients and, by deduction, a decrease in the custom. The present generation seems to be chewing less betel than their grandparents. The younger ones, many of whom have been educated abroad and have inculcated Western ideas, find betel chewing no longer socially acceptable. Other modern social taboos, such as spitting, have contributed to the decline of betel chewing. Progress in urban areas has created an increased pace of life and discourages a leisurely chew. Despite these trends pointing towards a decline in the custom, the legacy of betel chewing remains and its use for medicinal and symbolical purposes continues as a vital part of the culture of South-East Asia.

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Betel Chewing in South-east Asia / Figure 1



Betel Chewing in South-east Asia / Figure 2



Betel Chewing in South-east Asia / Figure 3



Betel Chewing in South-east Asia / Figure 5



Betel Chewing in South-east Asia / Figure 6



Betel Chewing in South-east Asia / Figure 6



Betel Chewing in South-east Asia / Figure 7

