

Betel: The Sheaf of Greeting in Sri Lanka

Posted on

Maureen Seneviratne



*By rising to greet him from afar
She circumvents their sitting on one seat;
by the pretext of fixing betel
she prevents his quick embrace
her skill is such that by politeness
she satisfies her wrath.
Sri Harsa: Amaru collection: from the Sanskrit*

Etiquette: Right behavior: good manners: politeness: all these played a part and continue to have their place in Sri Lankan society. With a civilisation dating back to over two thousand years of recorded history and the heritage of a living past, it is only to be expected that customs became a most essential component in the life-style of the people. Moreover, in a society structured as it was, if not as rigidly as in most of the Orient, albeit a social pyramid with the king and the royal family in the topmost 'layer' and a system of 'caste' prevailing below, where each person had his role to play and was actually 'born' for and into it, every member also knew his or her place.

At the same time without social graces leavening the mass, as it were, the charm and flexibility of good manners, which pervade Sri Lankan society and makes for an 'easiness' of behaviour or rather a putting of the visitor at ease in a matter of moments, would hardly have been possible. It is interesting to find that one of the artefacts used most often, symbolic in itself and signifying this grace, this regard, this respect one for the other courteously displayed in all social intercourse in Sri Lanka has been - still is, the sheaf of betel (Piper betel).

It has been described as an emissary of felicity and a courier of goodwill...sanctified by custom and legend for centuries... A Sanskrit poem describes it, when used as a chew as has been done in South Asia for countless centuries as, containing thirteen qualities not to be met with even in Paradise. The sheaf of betel plays its part part in all social exercises in a most significant way. The sheaf itself consists traditionally of forty leaves laid neatly one upon the other and presented with the stem of the leaf held towards the recipient of this token of goodwill. "Trees and leaves, creepers and plants have always exercised a serious influence on the lives of our people. Tree worship and the holding of certain plants and creepers as lucky and unlucky have a history which eludes written evidence going deeper into the psychological development of our people, " says writer Gamini Mahanama. Many legends relate of its origin but all have the idea in common that it came forth, perfectly formed, perfectly fashioned, complete in every facet from the ethereal regions. The best known of the legends about the origin of betel is the one which says it was a gift from the mythical kingdom of the Nagas. According to this legend the betel is associated with one of the meritorious acts of the Buddha in a previous incarnation. In the story known as the Sasa Jataka, when the Buddha was born as a hare, he had seen a hungry man huddling to keep warm near a fire. Taking pity on the man the hare leapt into the fire and gave himself as food. To mark this act of compassion Sakra decided to paint the scene on the moon. When the deity finished sketching the scene on the moon he dropped the brush which fell down in the kingdom of the Nagas and struck the head of the Naga King killing him. When the king was cremated the Naga King was reborn as a betel vine with his head as the leaf. The betel leaf does have a good resemblance to a cobra head. Hence the name 'Naga Valli.'



A Heppuwa - traditional betel tray, a sight that will greet you at most rural Sri Lankan homes, complete with arecanut, tobacco, gire, nut cutter, and the killote - chunam case.



A Saarawita Karaya - betel chews prepared and garnished with sweeteners and spices - a favorite with the young and old.

To this day people who chew betel break off the tip of the leaf before chewing and it is believed to have a little of the Naga venom. Similarly never is a betel sheaf offered to a person with the tips of the leaves pointing at the recipient. Another story relates that it was thrust down to mortals from Paradise by the 'devas' (spirits of wellbeing) who were generous enough to share its supreme qualities with us.! However, the "Naga" theory of its origin persists in the tale that it came to Sri Lanka with the Naga immigrants from Vengi in Eastern India, at some distant date, and to this day the betel leaf plays an important role in the important religio-social affairs, the day to day life of the people of South Asia. The sheaf of betel is taken round when good news is communicated by word of mouth in Sri Lanka's villages and suburban areas. It is taken along with wedding invitations, invitations to attend almsgivings made on behalf of dead persons in town or village, with invitations to attend homecomings of the newly married and the attainment of puberty by girls, the celebration of anniversaries, housewarmings, the births of children to families, etc.

At times when communal help is needed such as when reaping the harvest or ploughing the fields, betel leaves are carried to neighbours when requesting their assistance. When meals are served to helpers the betel chew - a delight by itself - is never omitted. As a wedding procession advances to the gate of the bride's home her "avassa massina" (son of the

paternal uncle or of the paternal aunt) receives a sheaf of betel to signify he has voluntarily resigned his rightful claim (according to tradition) to the bride. Marriage ceremonies conclude with an exchange of betel leaves between the bride's and bridegroom's families. These are allowed to fall in a shower upon the "poruwa" or wedding throne and are taken away by the washerman of the bride's family.

Teachers are presented with betel leaves by their pupils as a mark of their respect. The astrologer is never visited with the sheaf of betel to offer him. Money for the astrologer is respectfully concealed within the sheaf. Patients take sheaves of betel to the village doctors, also as a sign of their regard for his skill and ability to cure. Cartloads of betel were collected by the chieftains in their heyday and they in turn always carried sheaves of betel at the annual Dekkuma (going before) ceremony conducted by the Ruling Monarch in his Audience Hall. Gold, Silver and and precious gems were also presented but the symbol of their deference to their king -was expressed in this offering of the betel leaf.

Those who paid fines at the annual assizes in ancient and medieval times aiwa) took their payments along to the magistrates, with the customary sheaf of betel. The custom continued into Very recent times. In the past "caste offences" could only be assuaged with the offering of betel: so symbolic of fraternity and fellowship had this pungent leaf become! Today some wedding invitations are printed on cards designed as betel leaves, and cakes for the traditional new year are made in the shape of the leaf.

Betel is offered with a low bow with the stems of the leaf directed towards the elders or the honoured ones. During festive times, especially during the Sinhala and Tamil New Year in April the betel leaf plays a prominent part in social intercourse. No ceremony during this time is complete without it. Today the betel creeper best flourishes in the Siyane Korale in the island's western hinterland Many ancient customs and traditions are connected with its cultivation and betel vines are guarded from malign influences as much as possible. The betel leaf is the main component in a "betel chew". If the custom of chewing betel has been replaced with cigarette smoking or worse, still the fixing of a chew is yet the same as it ever was consisting of most piquant ingredients such as silvers of the arecanut of tobacco, clove, a crushed cardamom, a slice of ginger and of course a pinch of lime (chunam) which lends the concoction the reddish colour which is associated with it, turns the teeth blood-red and the spittle crimson.

Betel vendors shouting "Sara Bulath" (simply "a tasty chew of betel") can yet be seen in their colourful costumes, carrying their even more colourful "chews" (rolled up leaves with all the other ingredients inside and the edges tinted brightly). There are many songs they sing to attract customers and all extol the merit of their wares:

*"Whither do you hasten O maidens?
Come tarry and listen to the song I sing;
Your faces are beauteous like lotus blossoms, And your smiles like sunlight in the spring;
But fairer you'll be with lips ruby,
With the rich red hue of betel I bring,
Spices for tongues that whisper love's secret, Roses to garland dark, silken hair,
Sandalwood for faces gleaming like ivory, Betel leaves like no leaves so fair!"*

Betel leaves with their almost mystic significance were good enough to be offered to and by kings and commoners as a symbol of fraternal exchange and how much this would have promoted good and healthy relationships in a society full of social taboos and yet never fragmented as such. And how many would have sat together, as many people still do, to chew betel and chat most convivially . •