The Art Of Betel

Posted on

Throughout the years, the sheaf of bulath or betel leaves has stood as a symbol of welcome and respect, of friendship and goodwill. The myths and legends, traditions and customs as well as the elaborately made implements that have surrounded the betel leaf and the practice of chewing it, are testimony to its significance in our culture. Today, these implements are considered ornaments of traditional beauty, displayed in homes as a proud reminder of the artistry that sustained a beloved custom.

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From royalty to the common man, from monks to village damsels, the practice of chewing the glossy, heart-shaped betel leaves is one that has existed in Sri Lanka for centuries. At all significant moments in Sri Lankan life, the sheaf of bulath is a symbolic presence – be it a New Year celebration, wedding or funeral. The betel leaf itself has sacred connotations and is usually the first offering from a student to his teacher, from a man to his superior, from a bride to her intended.

A ‘chew’ of betel or a bulath vita typically consists of the leaf, some shavings of puwak or arecanut, a pinch of chunam or lime and a piece of tobacco. Ingredients such as cardamom or mace are sometimes included for additional flavour and aroma.

In times of yore, it was the norm in homes to greet visitors with a bulath heppuwa, or tray on which the betel leaves and other ingredients were arranged. The leaves would be artfully arranged in a circle facing outwards, with lime, tobacco and arecanuts in the centre. The type of tray used was indicative of the family’s position on the social strata, with the poorest using a simple ‘vattiya’ or reed tray, middle class families using trays of brass and the upper class, tall brass trays with carved designs.

The village temple would also have a ‘chew’ available for monks on a heppuwa or vattiya. Buddhist priests are offered the dahath vattiya after the consumption of their meals at alms givings, which are held at homes. Furthermore an invitation to an alms giving is also done by first offering a sheath of bulath.

In a gathering of village folk, as they helped one another get about their daily chores, this tray of stimulants was an indispensable presence.

A vital item on the tray was the giraya or arecanut cutter. The ripe arecanut, which is an important part of the revitalising properties of a betel chew, is of a hard, wood-like consistency that can only be sliced with these special cutters.

The giraya is a metal scissor-like implement that came in a variety of shapes and forms using Sinhala art motifs of the times. The abstract art motif serapenda was commonly used. The head of the cutter was often cleverly carved into various shapes such as the bust of a woman in the pose of anjalimudra (with her palms pressed together) and animals such as crocodiles or garden lizards. Works of skill produced by local smithies, these girayas were usually made of brass, while in some, the body of the upper blade was in silver.

The implements that were used for betel chewing were not mere utilities but objects of art that sustained this beloved custom

The other essential ingredient in a chew is hunu (lime, or calcium hydroxide), which

assists in the absorption of the active ingredients into the blood stream.

While the simple villager carried his lime rolled up in a betel leaf, the elite had special killota or lime boxes for this purpose. Generally made of copper, brass or one of the precious metals, these boxes often portrayed intricate carvings and came in circular, star or other shapes. The containers came of two covers that folded together and were meant to be suspended from a decorated chain, reminiscent of an European gentleman’s pocket watchcase. It was the custom among kings, to have special attendants to carry these boxes, as well as bulath malu or elaborately embroidered, large betel bags in which to carry the betel leaves.

For the elderly folks, to whom chewing the tough arecanut may not have come easily, it was customary to pound the ingredients of a chew in a small device called a *bulath vangediya* or betel pounder. These were small iron mortars with a brass-mounted pestle working through a screw lid. The ground mix took on a deep red hue and was coveted by the faithful but toothless betel chewer.

At a time when betel chewing was an important part of social life, every home also had a padikkama or spittoon, usually made of brass. These were commonly kept near the visitor’s chair to dispose of the bright red saliva produced during a chew. Once a utensil that was brought out merely to serve the purpose, these spittoons are today cherished ornaments in urban homes.

There was a time when the betel-seller was a familiar figure in the streets of the city – tinkling the bells on his giraya he would invite people to enjoy a chew from the betel stand, which hung from his neck. The stand itself had two round trays to carry the chews.

Betel leaves are also used as an ingredient in remedies for many ailments including cough, stomach disorders, boils, burns and bad breath. Indeed, the betel leaf has been held in high esteem not only locally, but in the entire South Asian region, for thousands of years.

Today, the sight of a red-lipped betel chewer is not as common as it once used to be. Yet, these elaborate ornaments stand as perpetual reminders of a time when the culture of chewing betel was an integral part of Sri Lankan society and that the betel chewer is still in our midst.

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