

Betel Chewing

HANUNOO MANGYAN, MINDORO ISLAND PROVINCE, CENTRAL PHILIPPINES. *The Hanunoo is one of the seven subgroups of the Mangyan of the island of Mindoro. They are known for their use of an ancient syllabary in writing a poetic form called ambahan.*



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Teeth blackened through years of using the betel quid chew, this Hanunoo Mangyan smiles in contentment.

THE MILLENNIA-old custom of combining burnt shell lime with betel pepper leaves and other vegetable alkaloids as a chewing stimulant is common to many southwest Pacific and south Asian cultures. The production and distribution of these required substances are of vital daily concern to hundreds of millions of chewers, and are of considerable economic importance within the betel chewing area.

Not only is the betel combination the most widely used masticatory in the world today, but it is also one of the oldest. The custom was first described by Herodotus, the Greek historian, in 340 B.C. and was well-established in India before 200 B.C. Most evidence points to insular Southeast Asia as the probable home of this custom which appears to have involved, at first, the mixture of only three elements: lime, betel leaf and areca seed.

As such, the practice became established in the Philippines at a very early date. It spread rapidly from island to island. In various other parts of the Malaysian region, cloves, cinnamon, cardamom, nutmeg or other spices came to be mixed with the betel chew. In the Philippines, a fourth major element, tobacco, was introduced around 1500 A.D. and is at present, often chewed together with the three original ingredients throughout the archipelago.



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The condiment: betel leaf, areca nut, lime and tobacco.

In many areas, there has been a surprising proliferation of belief and custom law governing associated behavior patterns. In fact, among populations where betel usage has become all but universal, the significance of these associated patterns frequently tends to eclipse the physical importance of the chew as a drug.

The Hanunoo, who inhabit the southeastern mountain region of Mindoro island in the central part of the archipelago, group the betel quid ingredients into four categories, the components usually mentioned in the order that they are prepared for mastication: the *bunga* or areca seed, *lilit* or the betel pepper leaf, the *'apug* or slaked lime and *tabaku* or tobacco.

Harold Conklin