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Betel chewing

Shukor Rahman

THE practice of sirih (betel) chewing in Malaysia has steadily decreased since the 1950s. Today the situation may best be described as "hidup segan, mati tak mahu" (which when roughly translated means "barely hanging on").

Antique dealer Azman Mohamad Ali of Kampung Melayu in Air Itam, Penang, said sirih chewing will not die out as the sirih still plays an important role in Malay wedding and betrothal ceremonies.

"The sirih is also a necessary item in the cures of many bomohs or traditional healers," he said.

However, the majority of those still taking sirih, he observed, belonged to the older generation.

Traditional Malay herbalist Zakaria Ahmad from Bedong, Kedah, said only about 20 per cent of sirih consumers are left today as compared to the 1960s.

It was in the early 1960s that a Kedah Member of Parliament, a certain Dr Mahathir Mohamad, warned that the practice of sirih chewing was a major cause of oral cancer.

Tests have been carried out in Britain and other countries and these have shown some links to oral cancer.

In late 1990, Richard Chang, chief oral surgeon at Veterans Hospital in Taipeh, said: "We cannot say there is a direct relation between oral cancer and betel chewing, but the fact is that 91 per cent of our patients who have oral cancer are betel chewers."

Herbalist Zakaria said the danger came from the lime paste which many use as an ingredient to go with the betel leaves, betel nut and gambier.

"Without the lime, the betel leaf, nut and gambier would certainly be good for health. But many sirih consumers say the lime provides the 'kick'," he said.

P. Murugiah, Malaysia Hindu Sangam's social and welfare committee chairman, recalled that the Consumers Association of Penang (CAP) had carried out tests on the lime used by betel chewers and had found it to have a high lead content.

"In recent years, sirih chewing seems to be popular again among Indian youths, especially at weddings where the sirih offered is attractively packaged," he said.

Foodstall operator Maheran Sudin, 48, of Kampung Sulok in Teluk Kumbar, Penang, said her late father, Sudin Mat Dahari, a padi planter cum fisherman used to consume a lot of sirih - complete with betel nut, gambier and lime - without suffering any adverse effects.

"He had strong teeth and was hale and hearty in all aspects. He was in his 80s when he died of old age in 1964," she said.

Housewife Rokiah Hassan, 56, of Kampung Raja in Besut, Terengganu, said most of the elderly kampung women who could not go without sirih have since passed on.

"The present generation does not seem to be missing sirih at all, and none is served to visitors as in the old days," she said.

Pensioner Ismail Salleh of Alor Star said there were fewer "kebun sirih" left in Kedah today. The decline in betel chewing, he said, began just after Merdeka.

"Sirih is no longer offered to guests at weddings today. Perhaps the present generation regards betel chewing as an unhygienic practice," he

said.

However, Zoyah Abdullah from Kubang Semang, Bukit Mertajam, said sirih chewing was still very much alive in her kampung, especially among women in the 50-plus age group.

"Their teeth seem to be in much better condition than those of younger people who do not consume sirih at all," she said.

Quite a few villagers, she said, plant sirih in their gardens and backyards and there is no problem obtaining a regular supply.

State Chinese Association president Datuk Khoo Keat Siew said sirih chewing was a common practice for Nyonyas especially during pre-war days.

"You could find sirih in almost every Nyonya home in those days and it was the practice to offer sirih to their visitors," he said.

Only a few older generation Nyonyas, he said, were still chewing sirih today while the younger generation has shown no interest in the practice.

Sirih also featured prominently at Baba Nyonya wedding ceremonies in the early 1900s.

A fortnight before the wedding, the mothers of both bride and groom would prepare small pieces of betel nut (about 1.3cm long or even smaller) which were rolled in betel leaves.

These were put inside a small silver container which was brought by the mothers as they went around to the homes of friends and relatives to invite them to the wedding.

In Penang, this practice was called "pang low heoh" which means "to give out sirih".

For the tea ceremony at the bride's house, there would be a tray bearing a banana stem with rows of sirih leaves arranged in tiers on a table in front of the altar.

After the ceremony, the bride and groom would pray to their ancestor and household deities. The bride would then touch the tray of betel leaves with a fan.

As soon as she did this, those present would try to get some of the sirih leaves to take home to chew with betel nuts for good luck.

After dinner, the groom's friends would be introduced to the bride in the bridal chamber. They would be served with wine or tea and in return the guest would have to reply with some kind and witty words in the form of poetry or pantun to tease the bride.

Those who could make the bride smile would be entitled to another dinner from the groom as a forfeit. In order to foil them, the bride would be made to bite on a piece of betel nut, which in most cases prevented her from smiling!

While sirih chewing is languishing in Malaysia, it is still flourishing in its traditional strongholds such as India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Myanmar and the Maldives.

In the last few years, however, it is Taiwan which has gone on a betel nut binge, with the nut being described as "Taiwanese chewing gum".

The nut is challenging rice as Taiwan's No. 1 cash crop and has found a whole new market among young, educated people.

Taiwan has an estimated 70,000 betel nut sellers who do business from small roadside stands.

The nut is split in half and filled with a combination of ingredients that often include ginseng, liquor, spices and Chinese medicinal herbs.

Aficionados of the nut, which surveys show number in the millions, say it is a mild stimulant with a pleasant spicy taste.

In the past, the betel nut was only associated with the unskilled worker but it has now attracted new fans including students, actors, journalists and professionals.

Penang businessman Chang Cheng Guan, 68, a frequent visitor to Taiwan

since the 1980s, said one could find betel stalls all along the highway as one travels from north to south.

Chewers spit out red globules of paste, leaving the sidewalks stained and strewn with discarded seed husks. (Penang cinemas Paramount and Royal also faced a similar problem in the 50s and 60s. Both cinemas have since been demolished to make way for Komtar).

Last May the government warned the people to stop chewing betel nuts as it may cause oral cancer.

But politicians in southern Taiwan were spitting mad over the warning as betel nut is their county's major agricultural crop.

"These allegations about the health risks of betel nut have never been proven," said a deputy for the Pingtung County Council.

Pingtung, where the nut is known as "green gold", produces Taiwan's largest crop, valued at RM550 million a year.

Taiwan's health department said mouth cancer mortality rates are five times the national average for men and 17 times for women in counties where betel nut chewing is prevalent.

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