



made from the charcoal from the betel nut (or gratings from the nut). It is referred to in the Sanskrit work (known as the *Susruta Samhita*) of about 600 from the Benares area of India. In the 1970s it was thought that as many as 300 million people in the Old World followed this practice – one that has inserted itself into a traditional role of courtesy in greetings and festivities (in the same way that until recently cigarettes have been offered in the West). The betel nut charcoal is mixed with a little lime (made by burning seashells) with leaves of the betel shrub (*Piper betel*) and sometimes with the addition of an aromatic spice such as cardamom (*Elettaria cardamomum*) or turmeric (*Curcuma longa*). The mixture stains the lips and teeth red (and eventually black – a mark of distinction that has led to increased social status in some island cultures). It has an acquired, hot, acrid taste and is usually discarded (not swallowed) once the flavour dissipates. There is increasing incidence of oral cancer associated with betel chewing to such an extent that the centuries old practice is beginning to be discouraged.

In the Philippines the fragrant flowers have been added to salads. There and in Java (now an Indonesian island) and Malaysia the bitter-tasting terminal bud or ‘cabbage’ of the betel nut palm is also eaten either uncooked in salads or pickled.

In veterinary medicine it has been used for worming animals (tapeworm).

The charcoal from the nut is still employed in the East as a dentifrice, and the ground seeds are said to have been included in some European tooth powders.

The leaves are used locally for thatching. They have also been woven into bags and matting.

The lower part of the leaf surrounding the stem ie. the sheath, has not only been used locally as writing material and wrapping, but has also provided material for making hats. (The fruit husk is used commercially in the manufacture of brown wrapping paper – and hardboard.)

Locally the split trunks have provided a flooring material – one which would be durable for several years.

Some records mention that Malaysian fishing boats were launched in a ceremony during which the vessel was garlanded with a string of betel nuts. The scented flowers have played a role in various Indonesian and Malaysian rituals including weddings.

Unripe nuts were used in Malaysia to blacken the edge of the blade of their traditional kris. The nuts have also been used in Java (now an Indonesian island) both for tanning and for dyeing cotton. Today the fruit and the hard wood are used on a commercial scale for tanning.

Malaysian children played with the hard nuts, spinning them like tops.

In Borneo (an island that now includes Brunei, and parts of Malaysia and Indonesia) the flowers have been employed as charms for healing purposes. While in Malaysia one doubtful practice that was once held to be able to rid children of worms required the young patient’s eyes to be circled with a paint of the root pulp. Then in the Kelantan district of Malaysia the local wizard used a bunch of sprouting stems as a divining rod to find lost or stolen objects. In some east Asian regions the copious smoke from the burning husks was believed to repel evil spirits.

The palms have been grown as vine supports not least for black pepper (*Piper nigrum*).

Medicinally, betel nut has been a part of the treatment of urinary tract disorders, and has also been employed for the expulsion of tapeworms (particularly in India) and as a remedy for snake bites and octopus bites. Scrapings from the nut have been applied externally to ulcers. In years gone by the powdered seeds have been used as an ingredient in some European remedies for worms. In Malaysia a decoction of the seeds has been prescribed for diarrhoea, the roots have been used to treat dysentery and some venereal diseases, and it has been applied externally for some eye disorders.