

Modes of betel consumption in early India

Bhoga and *abhoga*

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In this article, I analyse some food practices surrounding betel in early Indian history. Betel consumption was not prescribed for everyone in Brahmanical society. Hence I examine texts referring to betel from the late pre-modern to early modern era (roughly 300–1800 CE) in order to explain proscriptions of betel in the legal discourse that discusses religious practice. The literature I consider in my analysis of betel consumption ranges from the *kāmasāstra* genre, influential works of tantra, texts detailing worship, and ascetic and renunciant guides. Material cultural studies aid my exploration of betel as a socio-religious identity marker and my development of three modes of betel consumption and one mode of non-consumption.

Betel ‘deserves its reputation ... it lightens up the countenance and excites an intoxication like that caused by wine. It relieves hunger, stimulates the organs of digestion, disinfects the breath, and strengthens the teeth. It is impossible to describe, and delicacy forbids me to expatiate on its invigorating and aphrodisiac qualities. (Abdur Razzāk of Herat, commenting upon his visit to the Vijāyanāgara court, 1443 CE, translated by Elliot 1966: 114)

Betel is pungent, bitter, heating, sweet, alkaline, astringent, a destroyer of wind, a destroyer of worms, a remover of phlegm, a kindler of the fire of desire – it adorns the speech of women, causes pleasure, and eliminates grief. These thirteen qualities of betel are known. Such qualities are rarely encountered, even in dreams! (First verse on betel from the *Bhojanakutūhala* [Curiosities about Food], seventeenth century CE, my translation, *Bhojanakutūhala* 1956: 219)

The food item today commonly called *pān* (or *tāmbūlam*, the betel leaf roll) is ubiquitous in India. The betel roll typically comprises one or more leaves of the betel vine with various ingredients wrapped inside, usually areca nut and slaked lime paste. Its consumption results in a stimulating, digestive, and purportedly aphrodisiacal effect; it is also a vasoconstrictor which the World

Health Organization has declared a carcinogen. People have consumed this foodstuff on the subcontinent from before the beginning of the Common Era, with attested references from at least the third century CE.

Betel chewing is still prevalent today across India and Southeast Asia. A recent study indicated that approximately 30 per cent of men and 7 per cent of women in India chew the areca nut, typically combined with other ingredients, and the figures are similar for Pakistan and Bangladesh (Betel quid and areca nut 2012: 336–7). People chew betel after a meal, give *pān* to guests or as a formal invitation to special functions, and share it at marriages, religious festivals (Gode 1961: 139), and other auspicious occasions.¹ Its popularity has reached such heights that the number of people chewing betel and spitting out the juice without spittoons has resulted in a ban on spitting in public places across much of India. This is due to the red staining that results from the chemical reaction of mixing lime powder (calcium hydroxide) with catechu, an extract obtained by boiling the heartwood of a particular species of acacia tree (*Acacia catechu*) (Zumbroich 2007–8: 94). When chewing betel, a consumer swallows some of the liquid resulting from the chewing, but typically spits out the indigestible bits, much as tobacco chewers do.

In this article, I analyse some food practices surrounding betel in early Indian history, focusing on their cultural and religious aspects.² Betel consumption was not prescribed for everyone in Brahmanical society (the orthopraxic followers of various Hindu religious texts).³ Hence I examine texts referring to betel from the late pre-modern to early modern era (roughly 300–1800 CE) in order to explain proscriptions of betel in the discourse. As part of this exploration, I consider references to *pān* chewing in the later legal literature that discusses religious practices (from approximately the second half of the first millennium onwards). For example, some texts state that religious practitioners should offer betel to deities and priests. However, texts also resolutely proscribe betel consumption for ascetics, widows, those practising penance, and students

- 1 One Tamil tradition specifies offering a roll of betel leaves (*kaiccuru*) as a wedding rite itself and on other auspicious occasions. For example, wedding party members present their gift of money together with a roll of betel leaves (*Tamil Lexicon* 1924–36: 1103).
- 2 I use the term religion in a broad sense, meaning that I consider texts and practices involving or mentioning deities, such as the Brahmanical legal texts, to be religious texts and practices. Hence I describe practices stipulated for members of a Brahmanical group as religious.
- 3 For the sake of intelligibility and convenience, in this article I use the term ‘Hindu’ anachronistically to refer to the early Brahmanical traditions and texts that many Hindu practitioners of later times have largely adopted.

learning the *Veda*. Working from the assumption that texts reflect some level of historical food and religious practices,⁴ I explore how betel consumption may have affected certain religious and societal roles in the past. Along the way, I offer an explanation for the great disparity between prohibitions of betel chewing for some people and the condoned use of betel (past and present) in temple worship, its prominence in religious texts such as the *Purāṇas*, and betel chewing as a prescribed practice for the religious elite and priests of India, the Brahmins.

I argue that betel chewing became important as a socio-religious identity marker via three modes of consumption involving *bhoga* – the enjoyment or experiencing of some worldly element. The modes of consumption I outline for betel *bhoga* are; 1) the royal mode, 2) the romantic mode, and 3) the householder mode. I posit that Brahmanical religious ideology reflects the bhogic associations surrounding these modes of betel consumption, resulting in discourses of *abhoga* (abstinence from a material thing) in legal and religious texts from approximately the seventh to the ninth centuries CE onwards, concerning people such as ascetics, widows, and the like. I suggest that the rise in the popularity of tantra as a religious alternative from the second half of the first millennium to some extent provoked this concurrent increased prohibition of betel. In tantra, *bhoga* was necessary for attaining the ideal goal of liberation (*mukti*) and was fundamentally involved in the soul's bound existence in the body. Hence I argue that the prominence of *bhoga* as foundational to tantric ideology partly explains the traditional orthodox *dharma* writers' prohibition of betel consumption, as Brahmanical followers desired to distance themselves from tantric practices.

Consideration of some recent theoretical approaches to material studies as developed by David Morgan, Karen Barad, and others furthers my argument of betel consumption (or abstinence) as an indicator of permitted participation in religious activities. These new theories, including new materialism (see below), illumine how this foodstuff could have caused such ideological concern and why food practices involving betel consumption or abstinence were important within the Brahmanical religious framework. Generalizing broadly, thinkers who embrace new materialism envision large composites of elements

4 While texts may offer imperfect representations of the past, the sources I use (the *Kāmasūtra*, the *Purāṇas*, and so on) are intellectual histories in their own right, which responded to other works in their milieu. These sources might not always indicate what people actually practised or ate. Nonetheless, it is the record left to us today and suggests certain practices and tropes surrounding betel consumption.

interacting in open systems in which human subjects are not the only agents.⁵ Proponents of new materialism like Donna Haraway and Karen Barad endorse notions such as the entanglement of subject and object, ‘intra-acting’⁶ elements, and the idea that nothing exists independently of other things. More importantly for discourses involving foodways, new materialists like Rick Dolphijn and Iris van der Tuin (2012: Chapter 5) consider that ‘(a)n object is no longer passive matter that has to be re-presented; meaning-making takes place on a two-way track’. Thus, a foodstuff may create meaning, determine social identity, or differentiate, at the same time as humans attribute certain social significances to food practices of consuming or abstaining.

For the purposes of my discussion, this means that the betel roll and the human consumer both intra-act as part of a larger composite. The human affects the betel roll – biting, masticating, swallowing some of the betel juice, and spitting out the rest of the foodstuff, thus permanently affecting the betel roll’s form and content. Likewise, the object – the betel roll – has agency and creates effects on the human, including physiological ones; betel colours the lips, freshens the breath, aids digestion, and, significantly, stimulates the body, a topic that has relevance for my later discussion of tantra. Both the betel leaf and the areca nut are stimulants, accounting for textual proclamations of betel rolls’ properties of aiding digestion and stimulating passion (*rāga*).⁷ I suggest that the betel roll’s physiological effects impart certain social meanings and religious identities on the human consumer and partly explain the concern that betel has occasioned for Brahmanical legal authorities and compilers.⁸ Hence, the materiality of *bhoga*, observed in the foodstuff of betel, plays out in the theology of the subcontinent. My selection of betel as an object of study is not arbitrary;

5 For an overview of new materialism, as espoused by Bruno Latour, Manuel Delanda, and others, and a discussion of the agency of matter, see Chapter 3 and Chapter 5 of Dolphijn and van der Tuin 2012.

6 Karen Barad coined the term ‘intra-activity’ (Barad 2001: 98). The term describes the dynamics of changing material-discursive structures. Her quantum-physical vision of things proposes an ongoing machine-network of intra-actions ‘across an assemblage of humans and non-humans’ (Barad 2012).

7 ‘Betel is pungent, bitter, heating, sweet, alkaline, and astringent, a destroyer of wind, destroyer of worms, remover of phlegm, (and) a kindler of the fire of desire...’ (*Bhojanakutūhalam* 1956: 219).

8 This new materialist argument sounds like old materialism, but in fact, new materialism embraces past thought. ‘It is not necessarily different from any other materialist, pragmatic or monist tradition... since it carefully “works through” all these traditions... New materialism says “yes, and” to all of these intellectual traditions...’ (Dolphijn and van der Tuin 2012, Part II: Introduction).

I choose it among many potential examples in order to test the possibility of using a material object such as food to determine if its materiality fits theoretically and theologically within a given system.

Bhoga and abhoga

Bhoga, prescribed consumption

The *Pūjāprakāśa*, one of a number of books contained in the lengthy legal text called the *Vīramitrodaya*, which is part of the Hindu *dharmaśāstra* tradition, describes how to worship and revere deities by performing *pūjā*. The section on betel states, ‘A person intent upon devotion who offers Viṣṇu betel combined with fragrance and camphor is highly esteemed in Viṣṇu’s realm’.⁹ Texts from the past like this one recommend ideal practices, and present-day worship corroborates that this ideal exists in modern practice: devotees today typically give betel among other offerings, especially in South Indian temples. Much earlier than the *Pūjāprakāśa*, at least four South Indian medieval inscriptions also offer historical evidence that this long-standing prescribed ideal had resonance in practice. They detail the quantities of betel leaves given to deities and land grants given for the agricultural production of betel intended for deities’ consumption. For example, an inscription from 1166 CE records a land grant for betel leaf production for the god Cenna Keśava (Inscription 13, lines 66–9, Kundangar 1939: 112). An inscription dated 1135 CE mentions a gift of 500 betel leaves for service to the god Jakkeśvara, gifted by some Setṭis (Inscription 232, Hultzsch 1939: 236–7). A further inscription dated 1292 CE states that certain merchants gifted a quantity of betel for service to a deity (Inscription 344, Hultzsch 1939: 366–8). Another inscription dated 1235 CE details that the Yādava King Singhaṇadeva gave a grant for the betel leaves of the god Bhāvaśuddhadeva (Inscription 18, line 64, Kundangar 1939: 153). While these inscriptions report the divine consumption of betel, one might speculate about the implied chain of consumption. Gifts of betel offered to gods in a temple might finally come into the possession of Brahmin priests working in those temples, or, equally likely, might find their way back into the hands of devotees as remnants of worship. While devotees do not typically chew the betel leaves returned to them after having wrapped temple offerings, I do suspect that such

9 *Gandhakarpūrasamyuktam tāmbūlam yo nivedayet | viṣṇave bhaktiyuktas tu viṣṇuloke mahiyate ||* (*Pūjāprakāśa* 1987: 86, my translation). This work dates to the first half of the seventeenth century CE per P. V. Kane (1930: xlviij).

vast quantities of leaves as are detailed in these inscriptions probably did serve for the most part as objects of human, in addition to divine, consumption.

P. V. Kane, renowned scholar of Indian legal texts, has suggested that such gifting in supplication to gods and their *mūrtis* (effigies) – especially using food items – developed naturally as an extension of earlier patterns of gifting to Brahmin priests.¹⁰ Indeed, other legal sources, such as the *Yatidharmaprakāśa*, a guide for those who want to renounce and become ascetics, confirm that priests should receive gifts of betel. This text declares that a man planning to renounce offers reverence and gives ‘betel leaves and the sacrificial fee to the *Brāhmaṇas* (Brahmins)’.¹¹

Abhoga, abstinence

Yet other *dharmaśāstra* legal texts clearly specify that certain members of Brahmanical society – namely, ascetics, widows, and those performing penance or rites for their deceased ancestors – should *not* consume betel. The *Vṛddha-Hārīta* (dating from around the ninth century CE) prescribes that a widow should give up adorning her hair, chewing ‘betel’ nut, and taking two meals a day, and should rather wear a white garment, rein in her senses, and so on.¹² Another legal authority of roughly the same period or earlier, Pracetas, forbids ascetics, Vedic students, and widows from indulging in ‘betel leaves, oil baths, and eating out of brass vessels’.¹³ The *Yatidharmaprakāśa* also quotes the *Vāyu Purāṇa*, which states, ‘(l)iquor and betel leaves are of equal potency. With all his effort, therefore, let a renouncer avoid betel leaves’.¹⁴ These injunctions display contrasting attitudes toward betel in the discourse. I consider this indicative of a concern on the part of the legal authors toward to this foodstuff. Later in this article I elaborate why texts approve the use and gifting of betel for some people but recommend abstention from betel chewing for certain groups.

10 ‘When image-worship became general items offered to invited *brāhmaṇas* were also offered to the images of gods. It was a case of extension and not of borrowing from an alien cult’ (Kane 1941: 734). ‘After *naivedya* (an offering of food), *tāmbūla* (betel) is to be offered to the God worshipped’ (*ibid.* 730).

11 Section 21: Rite of Renunciation: An Outline, 21.34 (*Yatidharmaprakāśa* 1976: 104).

12 Verses XI.205–10 of *Vṛddha-Hārīta*, cited and translated by Kane (1941: 584).

13 My translation of Pracetas, quoted in the *Smyticandrika* I, 222, and *Śuddhitattva* I, 235, with *tāmbulābhyañjanaṃ caiva kāmśyapātre ca bhōjanam | yatiśca brahmacāri ca vidhava ca vivarjayet ||*. Compilers who cite Pracetas typically date from approximately 600–900 CE. Per Kane (1941: 584, footnote 1367).

14 *Vāyu Purāṇa* 68.17–18, trans. by Patrick Olivelle (*Yatidharmaprakāśa* 1976: 189).

Many other works also present an ideal of abstention from *pān*. Texts indicate that those fasting as a penance or as part of a regime of regular religious observances (for example, *ekādaśī*; fasting on the eleventh day after full and new moons) are not to eat betel.¹⁵ According to one of the latest classical *dharma* texts, the *Dharmasindhu* (1790 CE), anyone observing eleventh-day rites (*ekādaśī*) and the restrictions leading to the fast 'should avoid taking food in a vessel of bell metal, ... over-eating, drinking too much water, (and) ... *tāmbūla* (betel leaves and nuts, etc.)'.¹⁶ Another *dharma* text cites the *Matsya Purāṇa* and states, 'A fast is vitiated by drinking water often, by eating *tāmbūla*, by sleeping in (the) day time and by sexual intercourse'.¹⁷ Further, a minor *Upaniṣad*, the *Itihāsoṣopaniṣad*, states that a person giving funeral oblations to his ancestors should not consume betel, although the deceased ancestor(s) may be offered betel.¹⁸

While rules about how one should practise religion may not necessarily have been followed, an Italian traveller to India in the early sixteenth century (1502–8 CE), Ludovico Verthema, comments in his travelogue that on the death of any of the King of Calicut's wives 'the King abstains from the company of women for the space of a year, when likewise he forbears to chew betel and areka, which are reckoned provocatives' (Verthema 2004). If one accepts foreign travellers' accounts at face value, abstention from betel-chewing had some degree of observance in practice.

- 15 An episode reflective of the complex injunctions involving betel consumption played out in the popular *bhakti* tradition: a medieval story retained in later literature recounts how guru Gopāla Bhaṭṭa Goswāmī rejected his disciple Hita Harivaṃśa for eating betel on *ekādaśī*. The *dharmaśāstra* forbade betel consumption on this day, but for Hita Harivaṃśa, what could be more holy than the remnants left after making an offering to his god (in this case, betel)? This episode is recorded in the Bengali *Bhaktamāla* of Lāldās Bābāji, per Tivārī (2006: 273). This sort of controversy reflects the opposing values of *bhoga* and abstinence for the orthodox tradition, which tantric traditions were able to resolve by melding *bhoga* into practices supportive of liberation, as I discuss in the section 'Points of concern: *kāma*, *bhoga*, and the rise of tantra'. I thank Rupert Snell for his assistance in locating this Vaiṣṇava story.
- 16 *Dharmasindhu*, 19 (Kane 1941: 107).
- 17 *Matsya Purāṇa* cited by Hemādri, a thirteenth-century *dharma* author, from his section on 'Vows' (*vrata*), vol. 1, 331 (Kane 1941: 116).
- 18 *Itihāsoṣopaniṣad* 40, *dantadbāvanatāmbūlaṃ kṣaurābhyañjanabhoganam | ratyauśadham parānnaṃ ca śrāddhakartā vivarjayet* (dating unknown). A later thirteenth-century source quotes this same passage (Gode 1961: 135).

Modes of consumption

How and why have these ideas about chewing betel leaf developed? Some of the earliest attestations of betel may offer some clues.¹⁹ The Buddhist Pāli *Jātaka* collection (c. first century BCE – fourth century CE; per Cousins 2013: 113–18) includes two stories involving episodes of betel consumption. The first details how to eat betel, in agreement with recommendations described in Hindu legal texts a millennium later.²⁰ The king in this first story has an abundant meal followed by a drink of water and finishes by chewing betel.²¹ This tale exemplifies what I call the ‘royal mode’ of betel consumption.

Mode one: the royal mode of consumption

As I define it, the royal mode typifies *bhoga*; the enjoyment of pleasurable things such as a nice meal, a relaxing bath, luxurious footwear, or sweet-smelling perfumes and incenses. The royal mode appears almost de-sexualized in many sources, although texts suggest that royalty’s *pān* consumption reached excessive quantities. An eleventh-century royal encyclopaedia commissioned by the Cālukya King Someśvara III indicates that the betel bundle for the king

- 19 Two other early betel references not discussed in any academic work appear in the Gāndhārī documents from Cadhota (third–fourth century CE). This collection of 760 fragmented documents records legal disputes and mercantile transactions. Two documents reference betel transported in bags (Cadhota was on the silk road into western China). See Niya Document #77 and #721 (Burrow 1940). These texts offer evidence of betel consumption as far north as central Asia by the third or fourth century CE. Various authors, including Gode and Kane, posit that betel was introduced to the sub-continent via South India from Southeast Asia by the Common Era or earlier. A recent article by the historico-linguist and archeo-botanist Thomas Zumbroich dates betel’s introduction to South Asia significantly farther into the past, as far back as 1500 BCE, asserting that *pān* chewing as a practice can be ‘dated to some time after 500 BCE’ (Zumbroich 2007–8: 119).
- 20 ‘After finishing one’s meals one is to ... drink some water ... then sip water again and take *tāmbūla*’ (Yājñavalkya 1.138, trans. by Kane 1941: 769). *ācamya ca tataḥ kāryaṃ dantakāṣṭhasya bhakṣanam | bhojane dantalagnāmsca nirbr̥tyācamanaṃ caret | Dharmasāstra* compiler Marīci, as cited in *Smṛticandrikā* I, 225. *bhūyo ’pyācamya kartavyaṃ tatas tāmbūlabhakṣanam | Mārkaṇḍeyapurāna* 29.39 cited in *Smṛticandrikā* I, 225 (Kane 1941: 769).
- 21 *Mahāsīlavajātaka rājā nahānānūlitto maṇḍitapasādhito nānaggarasabhojanaṃ bhūñji... ath’ assa pāniyaṃ pivitvā mukhaṃ vikkhāletvā hatthe dho vitakāle corarañño sampāditaṃ pañcasugandhikaparivāraṃ tāmbūlaṃ āharitvā adamsu, taṃ khādītva...* (*The Jātaka* 1963: 266).

should contain fifty-two betel leaves.²² If this seems too much to chew, another *dharmasāstra* text has a section on betel that stipulates that a betel roll with thirty-two leaves should be given to a king.²³ This suggested quantity might be ceremonial rather than practically intended for a single mastication. A Persian *farmān* of about the same period records regular gifting to a Brahmin of *birās* (betels) containing sixteen leaves and five areca nuts, and various other sources reference betel stacks with numerous leaves.²⁴ Even if not consumed in one bite, sources suggest that a high level of consumption of this stimulant continued over a period of at least half a millennium.

Mode two: the romantic mode of consumption

A second Buddhist *Jātaka* story mentions how a vendor selling perfume and garlands gives countless flowers and betel rolls to a young man.²⁵ This story also describes using betel for *bhoga* (enjoyment). One finds a discourse surrounding betel much like the one in this *Jātaka* in another very early text containing references to *tāmbūla*; the *Kāmasūtra*, compiled by Vātsyāyana in the third century CE. The *Kāmasūtra* is a perfect example of the second mode of betel consumption as I classify it – the romantic mode.

One should recall that the *Kāmasūtra* is a guide to suggested activities. Following this text, there is a large, derivative body of *kāma* (romantic or erotic) literature spanning over a thousand years. The time span and number of works imitating the style, themes, and discourse of the *Kāmasūtra* suggest that it exerted a long-standing social and ideological influence, not merely projecting idealised recommendations. In the *Kāmasūtra*, one reads that a lover should use betel both as a precursor to sexual relations, at various points during the sexual act, and as a post-coital activity marking a ritualistic finish and freshening the breath. According to the text, a ‘man about town’ or urban man (*nāgaraka*) cleans his teeth and perfumes himself in the morning, uses mouthwash, and takes some betel, which the commentators suggest he reserves to use later, much as we might do with gum or breath-freshening mints today (1.4.5 of

22 *Pamāni prāntakṛttāni dvīpañcāsanmitāni ca*, verse 967 (*Mānasollāsa* 1939: 84).

23 Verse 9 of the section on *tāmbūla*, in Vaidya 1919: 235, cited by Gode 1961: 140. This text dates to no later than 1524 CE per Gode (*ibid.*).

24 *Farmān* dated Hijri 819 (*Śaka* 1228 [1416 CE]), transl. by S. A. F. Moulvi, Appendix Ū of the 1884 *History of Śukayajurvedīya Brāhmaṇas* (Gode 1961: 143).

25 *Aṇḍabbūtājātaka amma, kin te aññthagatena, ito paṭṭhāya mam’eva santikā harā”’i mūlaṃ agabetvā va bahūni tāmbūlatakkolakādīni c’eva nānāpupphāni ca adāsi* (*The Jātaka* 1963: 291).

the *Kāmasūtra* 2002: 18 and commentary, *ibid.*). The text also recommends that betel be given as a token of affection to one's beloved, possibly with bite marks in the betel roll to suggest sexual advances.²⁶

Further examples from the *Kāmasūtra* are emblematic of the romantic mode of betel consumption. Two passages comment on betel's key placement near the bed and near the lover before, during, and after the sexual act (1.4.4 of *Kāmasūtra* 2002: 17 and 3.2.21; *ibid.* 80). A box called the *pāndān*, which keeps the pre-prepared betel rolls fresh and sometimes stores ingredients for making more *pān*, should also remain near the bed. If we accept Razzāk's statement, quoted at the beginning of this article, which claimed aphrodisiacal properties for betel rolls, the *Kāmasūtra*'s recommendations make perfect sense. The *sūtras* mention that '(w)hen the woman has accepted his [the man's] embrace, he gives her betel with his mouth' (3.2.11, *ibid.* 79). This transfer of betel from mouth to mouth reappears up to the present day in wedding rituals in Maharashtra, where marriage dinners typically conclude with the groom biting a betel held in the bride's mouth. The groom bites off a part to eat himself, and gives the closest thing to a kiss that can be done in public in India.²⁷

It is not coincidental that this act of eating a betel roll taken from another's mouth also appears in various *Purāṇas*. The *Brahma Vaivarta Purāṇa* (c. tenth century CE) recounts an episode in which Kṛṣṇa and Rādhā engage in a romantic encounter. Kṛṣṇa 'ate with pleasure the fragrant betel leaves offered to him by Radha. Radha the mistress of the *rasa* also merrily chewed the betel given to her by Krishna. When Hari (Kṛṣṇa) gave Radha the betel leaf chewed by him the passionate Radha smiled and cheerfully ate it up...' (Varma and Mulchandani 2004: 86). A similar episode appears in the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa* [c. ninth–tenth centuries CE] in a description of Kṛṣṇa's dalliance with the *gopīs* (cow protectresses), of which Rādhā was Kṛṣṇa's favourite: 'a slender maiden received with joined hands his (Kṛṣṇa's) chewed betel' (White 2003: 86). This trope of transferring betel from one lover's mouth to the other's is prevalent across textual genres and images and continues to be practised in a similar form today in Maharashtra, suggesting that this romantic mode of betel consumption has had significant impact on the Indian *imaginaire* of love.

A fifth-century Gupta era inscription from South India supports my claim that these proposed modes of betel consumption extended beyond restricted

26 *Kāmasūtra* 2.5.19 reads: 'When a man applies scratches, bites, and so forth to a forehead decoration, an earring, a bouquet of flowers, betel, or a sweet-smelling cinnamon bay-leaf used by the woman he wants, he is making advances' (*Kāmasūtra* 2002: 49).

27 This is called splitting the *viḍi* or cutting the betel-leaf roll (Gode 1961: 149).

time periods or specific genres of text. In this case, the inscription fits the romantic mode. The Mandasor silk weavers composed this inscription as an advertisement for their products: ‘Young and charming ladies, so adorned with beautiful necklaces, flowers, and betel, when approaching their beloved will not go so far as the meeting place until they have put on outfits made of silken cloth’.²⁸ Here, the mention of betel alongside lovers appears in a context that is neither literary in genre nor pertains to the *śāstra* of love, the *kāmasāstra*, although its discourse appears to be imitative of it.

Mode three: the householder mode of consumption

My third category of betel consumption has links with the royal mode and explains the gifting of betel for Brahmin priests’ consumption, as well as the gifting of betel to gods; this is the householder mode of consumption.²⁹ The householder (*grhastha*) mode shares with the royal mode its relation to *bhoga* or enjoyment. In this usage, an individual enjoys *pān* after a large meal just as someone today might enjoy a cigarette or liqueur after eating; in order to savour the moment. The householder lifestyle, according to the Brahmanical social construct of the *varṇāśrama* system, is one of the four life stages in which a ‘twice-born’³⁰ man participates.³¹ Firstly one dedicates one’s life to study of the *Veda* as a *brahmacārin*; typically abstaining from distractions such as women, sexual relations, and entertainment for the benefit of one’s studies. Secondly,

- 28 An inscription from 473 CE from Fleet 1963: No. 18, lines 11-12 (Gode 1961: 114). *tārūnyakāntīyupacito’pi suvarṇahāratāmbūlapuspavidhinā samalamkṛto’pi | nārījanah priyamupaiti na tāvat āsrathām yāvanna paṭṭamayavastrayugāni dhatte ||* The correction of the text from footnote 3 of the same page reads: ‘*nārījanah śriyam upaiti na tāvad āgrathyām*’.
- 29 There is also, of course, the almost ritualistic consumption of betel typically gifted to a person, in which the goal is not *bhoga*, as when accepting betel rolls while bidding farewell. This type of *tāmbūlam* might not necessarily contain the sweet or spiced ingredients that typically make chewing betel a bhogic activity. However, since this sort of betel consumption is still prohibited for renunciants, I designate it a form of *bhoga* contained within the householder classification.
- 30 Twice-born refers to a person who in childhood participates in an initiation rite (his second birth), from which point he wears a *sūtra* (thread) signifying his vows to observe Brahmanical religious practices and follow his *dharma* throughout life.
- 31 For a more precise and authoritative presentation of the *varṇāśrama* system than I can offer, consult Olivelle 1993. Early Brahmanical ideologies presented the four life paths as independent paths to be chosen, living out just one throughout one’s life. Later ideologies, already existing at the time of the texts I consider here, treated the *āśramas* as four stages, all to be completed in progression during one lifetime.

one follows the householder path, gets married, has a family, and enjoys the material delights of *kāma* (desire/sex) and *artha* (money/material concerns) as well as fulfilling ones *dharma* (duties). Later on, thirdly, one may elect to live as a forest hermit, or *vānaprastha*, renouncing the material comforts so valued by the ‘man-about-town’ of the *Kāmasūtra*, in order to abandon the trappings of urban living. Fourthly and finally one might renounce virtually everything pertaining to one’s material existence, withdraw from the world, and become a *saṃnyāsīn*.

The second *āśrama* (life stage) of the householder is the one that most embodies *bhoga* and allows full participation in a material existence. Thus logically, the householder is entitled to betel consumption. A king, of course, follows this *āśrama*, has wives, children, and so forth, and perfects the householder ideal, which explains commonalities between the royal and householder modes of betel use.

More importantly, Brahmin priests also follow this life path. For a priest to execute rites properly, he must be married and remain a householder. In fact, the presence and participation of his wife is necessary for the correct performance of many rites (Jamison 1996: 10 and 30–9). Therefore, one must not view betel consumption by priests as an irregularity, but rather as the correct fulfilment of *dharma* as delineated in the later legal texts. Following the same logic, offering betel to deities and to Viṣṇu in particular is a form of supplication to a god, using something that householders appreciate. Devotees conceive of Viṣṇu in particular with his consort(s); for Viṣṇu’s followers, he exemplifies a married god. Further, he conjures up associations with prosperity, abundance, and the like, and is particularly apt to receive offerings of betel as a sign of *bhoga*. Viewed in this way, inscriptions recording gifts of agricultural terrain for betel production intended for a god such as Cenna Keśava (Viṣṇu) fit into this model under both the householder mode of consumption (Viṣṇu as married god) and the royal mode of *bhoga*.³²

By contrast, Kṛṣṇa’s frequent association with betel does not exemplify the householder mode, but does fit under the rubric of the romantic mode. After all, Kṛṣṇa with his *gopīs* was not a king or married, but rather came from a humble agricultural family. Using my categories of romantic, royal, and householder use, one can better understand why betel-chewing is permissible for priests, gods, and followers of the *varṇāśramadharmā* (Hindu) householder lifestyle, but not

32 Many present day temples similarly honour the householder aspect of such deities in yearly ceremonies celebrating and re-enacting the marriage of, for instance, Viṣṇu to Lakṣmī and Śiva to Pārvatī.

for ascetics, renunciants (*yatis*, *saṃnyāsins*), or forest hermits who have opted out of the pleasures of a life filled with *bhoga*.

Points of concern: *kāma*, *bhoga*, and the rise of tantra

References to betel have appeared in literature since the beginning of the Common Era or earlier, with numerous mentions dating from the first millennium CE that I do not have space to discuss. I suspect that the genre of *kāma* literature attests to betel's actual presence in Indian life. Yet betel gets almost no mention in the legal literature until the latter part of the first millennium, after which time texts dictating practices increasingly mention betel. The increasing presence of betel in these legal *dharma* texts might indicate a corresponding growth in concern surrounding betel consumption, which I posit resulted from the popularity of *kāma* literature and the rise of tantra as a practice. A case in point which reveals this concern surrounding betel is the ascetic text the *Yatidharmaparakāśa*, which details the rites which need to be performed in order to renounce from the material world, one's family, estate, and so on. One section specifies that a person should give betel rolls to a Brahmin priest representing the gods the very night before permanently renouncing and yet later on, the compiler warns that one who gives betel leaves to Vedic students (*brahmacārins*) goes to hell.³³ Here one observes an intersection between betel and religious ideology in India, and that betel might make lifestyle differences apparent.

These socially important identity differences – choosing *bhoga* or *abhoga* – held greater significance in the second half of the first millennium and the first half of the second as tantra rose in religious and social significance on the subcontinent. The resonance of *bhoga* in tantra is evident in two of the principal tantric texts, the *Kiraṇa Tantra* and the *Kulārṇava Tantra*. The *Kiraṇa Tantra* (c. fifth–eighth centuries CE), while originating in Kashmir, attained prominence across the subcontinent and was influential for the broader tradition of Śaiva Siddhānta and its localized, later development in South India (Goodall 1996: xxxii–xxxiii). The *Kulārṇava Tantra*, another text of the early Kashmiri Shaivite school, is a primary text of the Kaula tradition, part of the *trika* system upon which later influential figures such as Abhinavagupta relied (Olson 1981: 382). Both the *Kiraṇa* and the *Kulārṇava Tantra* indicate that *bhukti* (bhogic consumption or enjoyment) and *mukti* (liberation) are compatible goals

33 Verse 21.34 (*Yatidharmaparakāśa* 1976: 104). Also, 'Vyāsa says, "By giving gold to renunciators, betel leaves to Vedic students and safety to thieves, the giver also goes to hell"' (*ibid.* 190).

in tantra and do not have to form two discrete paths, although one should exercise caution while participating in *bhukti*. The *Kulārṇava* doctrine pairs bhogic consumption and ultimate release outright by first describing other inferior forms of yoga which aim toward release through the practice of *abhoga*: 'One who is only a *yogin* indeed cannot be a *bhogin* (consumer of worldly things), and the knower of yoga indeed cannot consume. Kaula is of the nature of both *bhoga* and yoga, therefore it is of the utmost order [instigation], my dear.'³⁴ The following verse equates consuming in the material world with liberation: 'Consuming becomes yoga (devotion, contemplation, and so on), and any sin actually becomes a good deed; moving though the circular worldly existence (*saṃsāra*) becomes release, oh mistress of Kula, you whose *dharmā* is Kula!'³⁵

While the *Kulārṇava Tantra* delineates the compatibility of the consumption of worldly items with the attainment of liberation, the *Kiraṇa Tantra* explains the necessity of a material body for processing karmic experiences via bhogic enjoyment and consumption in order to arrive eventually at liberation. 'The soul is bound for the sake of liberation; this [liberation] does not come about for him otherwise. Until he is linked to a body he cannot experience (*na bhogabhuk*, i.e., not be a consumer of *bhoga*). His body is derived from primal matter; if he has no body then he cannot be liberated' (Goodall 1996: 346).³⁶ This form of experiencing or consumption (*bhoga*) is not for the sake of pleasure, as one might envision the enjoyment of food or sex. However, the soul participates in this *bhoga* within a material body as a necessary process for the development (*paripāka*) or transformation of impurities and *karma*, explaining why the soul is bound to a physical form. The later commentary elaborates: 'As a rule, there is absence of liberation in the absence of maturation of impurities (the maturation of impurities occurs via the enjoyment or experiencing of

34 *yogī cennaiva bhogī syād bhogī cennaiva yogavit | bhogayogātmakam kaulam tasmāt savādhikam priye || 2.23 (Kulārṇava Tantra 1965: 146, my translation). Vocatives of 'dear' and 'mistress' appear because this tantra is a conversation between Śiva and his wife, Devī; Devī asks questions to which Śiva responds, elucidating the doctrine. The reading of *savādhikam*, which I have translated as 'of the utmost order [instigation]', is questionable. Two other manuscripts read *sarvātmakam* or *savādhikam*, per footnote 12 of *Kulārṇava Tantra (ibid.)*.*

35 *bhogo yogāyate sāksāt pātakam sukṛtāyate | mokṣkāyate ca saṃsārah kuladharme kuleśvari || 2.24 (Kulārṇava Tantra 1965: 147, my translation). Kula refers directly to śakti, the divine female energy of transformation embodied in the goddess, hence the name for this tantra.*

36 *Kiraṇatantra 2.7-2.8ab. muktyartham sa paśurbaddho nānyathā sāsyā jāyate | yāvacccharīrasaṃśleṣo na sañjāto na bhogabhuk || 7 || māyeyam tadvapustasya tadabhāvānna nirvṛtiḥ || 8ab || (Kiraṇatantra 1998).*

things in a body); the dependent soul is yoked to the bond that is the individual body of experiencing or enjoying (*bhoga*) solely for the sake of the maturation of impurities'.³⁷

As these two tantras demonstrate, *bhoga* is a requisite component of tantra practice. Religious transformation cannot occur via something that is insentient; a material body that experiences or enjoys (*bhoktr*) is necessary to consume the results that have matured from past karmic actions. 'Thus Ananta created this means of bondage to a [gross] body (*dehanibandhanam*). Without a [gross] body there can be no liberation, consumption, knowledge, (or) action, and no teacher (*guruḥ*)' (*Kiraṇa Tantra* 4.27cd–4.28; Goodall 1996: 375). Ideally, a follower of tantra controls his or her desire expressed in the experiencing of various *bhogas* (Doniger 1969: 334) and can eventually detach from and sublimate those experiences in such a way that tantric practices do not oppose ascetic discipline (*ibid.* 332). Nonetheless, this increasingly popular doctrine challenged the orthodox Brahmanical theology that balanced *bhoga* within the householder mode and prohibited it in the ideal abstinent modes of asceticism. Therefore, I speculate that, in an effort to contain dalliances with tantric *bhoga* among members of Brahmanical societies and their increasing initiations into tantra, writers of *dharmasāstra* and ascetic literature became increasingly concerned with detailing prohibitions of consumption broadly speaking, and of betel more specifically.

Materiality, identity, and objects of entanglement

Betel's myriad appearances in prescriptions and proscriptions of the past mark lifestyle differences for us today just as betel marks its consumer with red stains on the mouth. This, incidentally, might also have marked one's identity. The red colour resulting from mixing lime with catechu made a perfect ingredient for cosmetics in earlier times. In combination with adorning garlands and perfumes, it was suggestive of enjoyment, luxury, and even romance. Ascetics and renunciants would have wanted to avoid all that was encapsulated in its colour. A word for red in Sanskrit, *rāga*, also designates passion, desire, and love; the things that one renouncing worldly existence ought to avoid at all costs. The same would hold true for widows, who, since at least the ninth century if not earlier, were instructed not to eat betel and were mandated to dress in white

37 Bhaṭṭa Rāmakaṇṭha's commentary (partial) of 2.7-8: *nyāyena kevalasya malasya paripākābhāvato muktyasambhavān malaparipākārtham eva bhogātmanā bandhena paśuryojitaḥ* | (*Kiraṇatantra* 1998, my translation).

clothing without colour or adornment.³⁸ A widow's *dharmā* was not supposed to allow for colour, passion, or *bhoga* in her existence.

The coloured staining aspect of betel consumption, then, might also have been an indicator of one's identity and status, especially significant for those who were prescribed not to wear colour on the body. The staining effect of betel might have made *pān*-chewing a praxis-based demarcation of one's religious or social identity as a householder, widow, renunciant, and so on. So, the discourse surrounding betel consumption in texts might reveal a concern to mark individuals within certain religious or societal groups which legal texts envisioned as fixed and defined groups, but which were not always so. For instance, having renounced his worldly existence, an ascetic was considered dead to his family in terms of religious ritual authority. Most texts suggest this status was permanent and irreversible, meaning one could not change one's mind and go back to being a householder after renouncing the worldly life (Freiberger 2005: 235, 245, and 250).

Ascetic texts, however, also suggest it was not so permanent or irreversible, as allowances were made for reincorporation into society, and re-renouncing later, if desired (*ibid.* 239–42 and 246–8). Thus, anxieties about unclear status and fluctuating groups might have led to the use of identity markers such as betel chewing. Legal injunctions concerning praxis-based identity markers – for example, carrying a staff and begging bowl for an ascetic, or using betel in the case of a householder, might reflect this anxiety to differentiate roles in Brahmanical society more clearly. I posit that anxieties about roles played at different times in one's life resulted in the creation of injunctions about what to hold and what to eat, or what to abstain from eating; this includes injunctions about betel chewing, which subsequently played a part in marking social identity.

Examining the evidence in these texts, betel consumption does not appear to have marked boundaries between individuals. If anything, betel consumption might dissolve boundaries, as is the case for the romantic mode of consumption. Passing *pān* from mouth to mouth, whether between the bride and groom or between deities like Kṛṣṇa and Rādhā, suggests a merging of individuals via close contact involving the potential exchange of saliva and the sharing of food.

38 *Vṛddha-Hārīta* XI. 205–10, cited in Kane (1941: 584). The composition of the *Vṛddha-Hārīta* probably falls within the common *smṛti* dates of approximately 600–900 CE, per Kane (*ibid.*).

In exploring betel consumption, we may find that David Morgan's work on religious experience as sensation offers a useful approach. Morgan's material focus suggests that objects pass through the interface of the human body and that certain objects must be present or absent to facilitate a religious experience (Morgan 2010). Betel does not *per se* enact or cause a religious experience. However, I argue that betel is present for those individuals who participate in Brahmanical religious worship – for householders who perform rites and kindle household fires, for priests who enact sacrifices, and for gods who enjoy or consume offerings such as betel. Betel is absent for those who exist outside the mainstream of Brahmanical religious life – a Vedic student (*brahmacārin*) does not perform daily rites; a widow cannot participate in Vedic rites since her husband is deceased, and a renunciant gives up his involvement in religious rites and social life. In this way, it is not incongruous for someone participating in a *śrāddha* rite dedicated to deceased ancestors to refrain from consuming betel in observance of religious restrictions and at the same time offer betel to those deceased ancestors (see the section here headed 'Abhoga; abstinence'). In this case, the deceased ancestors are the revered religious participants, while others are not allowed this religious experience, as per Morgan's theory.

When considering the *dharma* restrictions on betel chewing in the light of Morgan's ideas about the experiencing of material objects, one observes that, within Brahmanical society, those permitted to participate in the experience of eating betel also participate in Brahmanical religious rites. Similarly, those proscribed the eating of betel – ascetics, widows, and Brahmanical students who practise the mode of non-consumption of betel – typically do not. Considering the counterpoint of tantra, those who participate in the consumption of betel and other material substances access their religious experience via *bhoga*, as the soul is bound to the material body as its way of experiencing and consuming in order to attain liberation. In tantra, the consumption of betel and other food items, along with countless other worldly phenomena, facilitates and leads one to the religious experience of sublimation and, ultimately, liberation. The effect of this materiality was that, because of *bhoga*'s role in mediating religious liberation within tantra, orthodox Brahmanical writers became more concerned with excluding bhogic experiences and verbalized their preference for abstinence within the mode of non-consumption. Hence, one form of religiosity in South Asia, expressed via the theology of *bhoga/abhoga*, crystallized in betel's materiality. Consequently, religious discourse expressed concerns about betel's materiality, which ultimately meant that the religiosity practised by an individual – tantric, orthodox, renunciant, and so on – determined the permissibility or prohibition of betel consumption.

Conclusion

In this article I have forgone a comparative analysis of material from a focused time period, in part because dating is uncertain for some of the *smṛti* and *nibandha* legal texts I have cited. Scholars estimate a three-to-five-hundred-year period during which the compilers composed these works. My aim has instead been to investigate some tropes that became associated with betel and subsequently influenced its consumption and abstention. Using this longer view of history, one may gather a sense of the trend by which betel consumption increasingly came to be considered to be a sexualized activity. Likewise, there was a trend of greater and more specific limitations being placed on renunciants and practitioners of religious observances. This restrictive trend is certainly apparent upon examining the body of legal texts, which shows ever-increasing limitations on behaviour through the first and second millennia CE. Orthodox legal discourses responded to the rise in the *kāmaśāstra*'s prominence with heightened restrictions on modes of consumption. Concurrently, the increase in the popularity of tantric practices which applied *bhoga* as a means toward liberation certainly affected dharmashastric and ascetic restrictions on consumption as well.

Future research on the topic of betel would benefit from examining more narrowly defined time periods. In particular, the early period when betel references began to appear more frequently in textual sources (from the fourth to the fifth centuries CE) up through the Puranic references and early mentions of betel in legal *smṛti* texts (roughly the seventh to tenth centuries CE) would offer fruitful study. Similarly, the vastly larger body of material available both in travellers' accounts and visual works dating from the thirteenth through the seventeenth centuries CE offers abundant resources from which to build future explorations on betel.

As the topic stands, it is possible to observe three dominant modes of betel consumption and one mode of non-consumption that had religious implications: 1) the royal mode of betel chewing, for which *bhoga* (enjoyment) is the foremost concern, 2) the romantic mode, which most strongly affected proscriptions for ascetics who were denied the pleasures of *bhoga*, 3) the householder mode, still concerned with *bhoga* allotted to royalty and the elite, but which also accounts for Brahmin priests and other participants in Brahmanical ritual life, and 4) the non-consumption of betel as practised by renunciants, widows, and the like. In particular, discourses of romance associated with betel chewing and tantric doctrine which endorsed the consumption of material items affected the meanings of betel consumption, resulting in proscriptions of the use of betel for widows, Vedic students, and renunciants.

My classification of betel chewing is not exhaustive. Other modes, often ritualistic in nature, include chewing betel to seal a deal, accepting a betel roll to show subservience to a higher authority, and gifting betel rolls to bid farewell or announce an auspicious occasion to the public. However, the modes I have detailed in this article engage the intersections between the topics of food and religion most directly. Certainly, the much denied aphrodisiacal effects of betel chewing had some social agency in the identity-marking of individuals, which resulted in the legal authors' concerns to dictate who could and could not chew betel. Similarly, tantra's emphasis on *bhoga* and experiential enjoyment within material realms affected the dharma authors' preoccupation with what to consume or not to consume. Legal guides, inscriptions, and religious texts such as the *Purānas* show numerous iterations of entanglement between the religious subject – be it a human, a deceased ancestor, or deity – and the material object being consumed or prohibited: the betel roll.

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