

traditions 2005

**COMMEMORATING THE FIFTH ANNIVERSARY
OF
SEAMEO CHAT**

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Myanmar Traditional Snack: *Laphet*

Soe Min

A Myanmar traditional saying goes;

A-ywet-hma Laphet,

E-thi-hma Thayet

Tea is king of the leaves

Mango is king of the fruits

In Myanmar, *Laphet* refers to the tea-leaf in its dried form which is used for making both green tea and in its pickled form which is mixed with other ingredients and eaten as a snack. The *laphet thoke* (fermented tea-leaf salad) is more than just a food; it is an integral part of everyday social life. It is served to welcome guests to the house, as a peace offering after an argument, as a snack in front of the TV, as an appetizer or dessert, a taste cleanser after a meal, and as a stimulant to ward off sleepiness. It can be eaten either with fingers or with a small spoon. *Laphet* can also be mixed with rice and eaten.



Tea Leaves

There are different stories concerning the origins of tea and how the tea leaf was received by the Myanmars. Tea leaf is also called *nat thit ywet* or leaves given by the nat (spirit). One of the versions of the tea legend is given by the famous Myanmar poet and writer U Ponnya who wrote a famous poem on tea, both the tea leaf dried and tea leaf fermented. In the poem, U Ponnya wrote that tea was introduced into Myanmar during the time of the legendary Pyu King Duttaboung when the first tea seeds were brought to King Duttaboung by seven nats. The tea seed was metaphorically called "spirit seed" (*nat thit si*). The King in turn gave the seeds to the Palaung people while they were living in western China.

According to Chinese legend, tea was first used during the reign of Emperor Shen Nung in about 2737 BC. It is probable that tea was first cultivated in China, although it is possible that people in Thailand and Myanmar have used tea in some form as long as the Chinese have.

The best tea leaves from which *laphet* is made are grown in the mountain slopes of Nam San, in the northern part of Shan State over 5,000 feet above sea level. The tea plantations are tenderly nurtured by one of the ethnic races of Myanmar called the Palaung. The premiere or first shoots of most tender leaves are picked in the month of Tabaung.

Traditionally, *laphet* is served in a container with several compartments, one for each ingredient. The most common variety is made of lacquer. The main

Betel Chewing Habit of Myanmar

Soe Min

The habit of chewing *kun-yar* or betel quid is widespread in Myanmar. You cannot miss seeing small shops in the streets of Yangon and other towns in Myanmar. The people with their small shops or their portable stalls sell *kun-yar*, cheroots and cigarettes local and imported.



Lacquer ware betel boxes of different styles

The hospitality of Myanmar is seldom complete without *kun* (betel), *hsay* (tobacco, i.e. cheroot), and *laphet* (tea) when it comes to entertaining guests at home. Traditional culture and custom require that guests be offered these three items regardless of whatever other food or delicacies may be served. *Kun* or betel takes pride of place among the three and a betel box

is placed before the guests. It is believed that betel chewing originated in India.

Betel chewing is an old Asian custom and still continues in vogue today. The habit is rooted in the Asian way of life and woven into the fabric of national culture. Its magnetic influence over chewers is understandable because it makes them feel physically relaxed.

Betel quid is betel leaf packed with such ingredients as a dash of lime, small pieces of areca nuts, some cutch and a strip of tobacco. For a tastier and more elaborate chew, condiments like cinnamon, cardamom, cumin seeds, fennel seeds, camphor, cloves, licorice and dried coconut may be added in small quantities.



Areca Nut Palm

Kun-yar is stowed in the side of the mouth and chewed until it becomes finely ground. The resulting red juice expectorates along with the remaining pulpy mass. Sometimes the areca nut is



A bundle of betel leaves

The Origin and Development of Myanmar Traditional Marionette

Myo Aung

In Myanmar, there are four kinds of *thabin* (an entertainment by singing or dancing or both). They are *anyeint thabin* (an orthodox theatrical performance), *amyint thabin* (a performance on a stage), *ati thabin* (a performance of musical instruments), and *aso thabin* (a vocal performance). Myanmar marionette is included in the *amyint thabin*. Myanmar kings promoted marionette performances and Myanmar marionette performances served to entertain the Royal Court.



There are differing accounts of the origin of the Myanmar marionette. The earliest mention of the Myanmar marionette is in the *Buridat linka* and the *Thanwara pyo*, poetical works of Shinmaharahtathara in the Inwa period (1364-1577). There is also a saying: Bagan with its triple moat, the origin of the marionette. The statement can have two different meanings. First, that the Myanmar marionette started in the Bagan period (1044-1287) and second, that the Myanmar marionette began in the reign of King Bagan (1181-1225). During the reign of King Sinbyushin (1763-1776) there were two kinds of performances: *Yoke kyi* (marionette show with life-size figures) and *Yoke thay* (marionette show with smaller figures). According to

Deedoke U Ba Cho, Thabin Wun (Officer of Entertainments) U Thaw originated the Myanmar marionette in 1778. Another version has it that it was Myawaddy Wungyi U Sa, a Court official of the early 19th century, who initiated the Myanmar marionette. The story goes that when U Sa was imprisoned by the King Tharyarwaddy (1837-1846), he was unhappy and made dolls with torn pieces of clothes and that was how the marionette started. Thus, there are various versions of the origin of the Myanmar marionette but it would seem that the Myanmar marionette developed in the Konbaung period (1752-1885).

To supervise the *thabin*, the Myanmar King appointed U Thaw as Thabin Wun and issued an order concerning the *thabin*. Deedoke U Ba Cho states that U Thaw served as Thabin Wun during the reign of Singu Min, who ascended the throne in 1776.





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