

Fear and Loathing in Port Moresby: Chewing Over the Betel Nut Ban



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Chewing betel nut, a mild stimulant, is a widespread and growing cultural practice throughout Papua New Guinea. Betel nut is the country's most important domestic cash crop, supported by a large, complex, and often lucrative trade, which is today the most visible manifestation of a flourishing informal economy (Sharp 2012). Its consumption produces the voluminous amounts of red saliva splattered across the country's roads, walls, posts, bins, offices, and buses, and has deleterious health consequences, not dissimilar to smoking tobacco. This has been the justification for recent attempts by National Capital District (NCD) Governor Powes Parkop to ban the sale and consumption of betel nut in Port Moresby. But the bans have also been fuelled by elements of moral panic that have flared a charged and divisive debate, and by government fears of what is beyond their control. This *In Brief* discusses the background to these bans, and considers some of the implications.

Within Papua New Guinea, betel nut is viewed with some ambivalence. The substance has long been important in lowland areas of the country, used to welcome, resolve conflict, lubricate social relations, mark rituals, exchange, and to chew as an everyday stimulant. With the growth in consumption over the past 40 years, and the substance now being consumed by almost half the population (Bulman 2013), betel nut has been drawn upon as a symbol of indigenous identity and an emerging national culture — among the few things that unites a country of such diversity. But it has also become entangled in the often competing discourses of tradition and what it is to be modern and civilised (see Foster 1992, 1996; Hirsch 1990), with many of the calls for regulation reflecting a cultural cringe and concern about how Papua New Guinea is perceived internationally. Selling betel nut, despite its ubiquity, has also commonly been viewed as an illegitimate livelihood practice.

Betel nut bans are not a new thing; town authorities in Port Moresby and other urban centres have touted and imposed bans in various forms intermittently since at least the 1970s. The discussion of bans

in Port Moresby was reignited in 2007 by the then newly elected governor, who has since made several attempts at regulation. The most recent, which began in October 2013 and has included the development of the National Capital District Betelnut Control Law 2013, is a more serious effort to rid the city of betel nut. The law prohibits the sale, consumption and spitting of betel nut in public places within the NCD, including 'villages and settlements', although it does not mention sales within private residences. More significantly, it bans the transport of more than two kilograms of betel nut (about 100 nuts) into the NCD without a permit (granted primarily for cultural purposes). This amount is economically viable for smaller sellers but not for larger traders and market vendors. Sales are to be restricted to a number of yet-to-be-built dedicated betel nut markets outside the NCD, although, in the interim, selling has been restricted to designated markets within the city limits. From November, hefty fines will be imposed on those who breach the new regulations.

There are clear public health and aesthetic benefits to regulation, but the fear and loathing that has driven the ban has seen it imposed without adequate consideration given to the full implications, particularly the impact on people's livelihoods. The trade is central to the redistribution of wealth in the urban context — an economic activity that, according to the 2000 Papua New Guinea Census, 21 per cent of households in the NCD were engaged in (NSO 2003). The impact will be greatest on lower income families, many of whom depend on betel nut sales for their rice and tinned fish in an urban environment that has become increasingly expensive due to the recent resource boom. Bans will also impact the family members of wage earners who supplement inadequate wages by selling betel nut.

The impact of the ban will not be limited to Port Moresby. The trade is an important mechanism for redistributing money from urban to rural areas. Virtually all the betel nut consumed in the capital is produced in the neighbouring Central and Gulf

provinces, where over 50 per cent of households were reported in the 2000 Census as earning income from betel nut or betel pepper. Many of the communities are heavily reliant on transporting betel nut to Port Moresby for resale, with the trade often representing the primary source of income. For both urban and rural Papua New Guineans, betel nut earnings are often equal to or exceed those from formal employment and export cash cropping. It is the staple upon which they depend 'thirteen days a fortnight'.

The NCD Commission's fervent attempt to clean up the city has failed to appreciate the glitter of this 'green gold' of the grassroots. In many remote communities, and neglected urban settlements, income from betel nut enables people to attain some of the improvements in their lives that they desire. It buys dinghies that allow people to access health services and schools, and facilitates the transport and sale of other cash crops. People are buying corrugated iron and water tanks for their houses, paying school fees and purchasing the vehicles that service the city and highways. They are delivering development where the state has failed.

There are other troubling dimensions to the bans. The plan to centralise the trade in out-of-town markets ignores the reasons for the trade's present form. Wholesale trading occurs behind cyclone wire fences and in the city because it provides security and avoids the travel risk of hold-ups on the highways. Small markets and street selling have flourished throughout the urban area because of the importance of locally grounded social networks in providing protection as well as regular customers. Enforcement is also likely to prove problematic. The 'city rangers' tasked with moving on vendors have often physically intimidated and attacked vendors and stolen produce, and the issuing and administration of the proposed spot fines is likely to be subject to abuse. A further concern is that the ban has stirred up a highly emotive debate in the media, social media, and on the streets, that has been punctuated with evangelical zeal, and questions of who belongs in Port Moresby. The debate has also provided space to air anti-Highland sentiments (towards those who did not 'traditionally' chew and are today prominent in the trade) and to blame the residents of Port

Moresby's informal settlements for the city's ills. Concerns about law and order have also hinged themselves to the debate, with betel nut sellers being accused of harbouring criminals and encouraging illegal activities.

The question begs: is the ardent pursuit of betel nut really the most worthwhile use of scarce government resources? Prohibition is unlikely to succeed in the long-term, evidenced by the fact that betel nut daily infiltrates the fortified and heavily regulated camps of the resource extraction sector. The ban might have short-term successes in particular locales but Port Moresby will likely find its borders too porous and its people determined and innovative. The substance is too culturally engrained, and the trade is simply worth too much money to too many people.

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