Reflections on buai (betel nut)

Kiri Chan, Queensland Museum, 2018

Figure 1. Buai equipment (left to right: MAC3171, MAC1217, MAC1188, MAC1184 and MAC2015). These buai pestles and mortar were transferred to Queensland Museum's care by MacGregor between 1892-1897. Image courtesy of the Queensland Museum, not for reproduction.

To enjoy buai, you need three key ingredients: the nut from the areca palm (known as buai, or Betel nut – not actually from the betel plant), mustard sticks from the betel plant (daka) and lime made of crushed and burnt coral (kambang). You prise the buai from its kernel with your teeth, chew it to a paste, dip the moistened end of a dakka in to a jar of kambang, take a few bites and await the chemical reaction which turns your saliva bright red and apparently makes your day just that little bit brighter.

Of course, an essential instrument in the chewing process is your teeth. And when one's teeth give out with use or age, one must resort to mashing their buai and a little bit of kambang with mortar and pestle before popping it back into one's mouth. However, the humble mortar was not just used to alleviate the disposition of those with chewing issues. It was also employed in other tasks such as being a vessel from which magic was imbibed as well as assisting in the application of paints for sing-sings and canoe painting, especially within the Trobriand Islands.

Governor Sir William MacGregor collected up to 78 mortars from Papua New Guinea and transferred them to the Queensland Museum in three separate batches during 1892, 1894 and 1897. With the exception of two mortars obtained from Tugeri (Marind Anim 'pirates') in

Western Province during 1896; and two others with a collective field collection term of "Papua", the remaining mortars were catalogued as originating from Milne Bay Province. The latter coming mainly from Woodlark Island or Trobriand ("Troubriand") Islands, or else simply noted as "Massim style". According to the Museum's records, the mortars were acquired and given collection numbers following their transfer from Papua New Guinea during the 1890s. In 1918, the same objects were reassigned new collection numbers and placed within the MacGregor (MAC) Register. All the mortars are labelled in black ink and stamped with both the old collection number and its corresponding MAC register number. Fifty of the mortars were returned to Papua New Guinea and are now housed in the Papua New Guinea National Art Gallery and Museum, while the remaining mortars are still located in the Queensland Museum.

Covering a variety of styles, the mortars collected from Milne Bay Province come in the form of carved representations of animals, canoes, plain barrel shapes and the upper torso of humanoid figures. Facial features, zig zag patterns and elaborate scrollwork were engraved in to the ebony wood, many infilled with lime to enhance the patterned appearance. As well, in terms of size the smallest mortar from Milne Bay Province measures just 47mm in height and the tallest is 202mm. In direct comparison, the two mortars from the Tugeri measure 250mm and 272mm in height and are both open and barrel-shaped narrowing down to a point at one end.

Could the styles and types indicate a particular officer or collecting moment? Our work continues to tease out these puzzles in the collections. It would be interesting to investigate as to why these particular mortars were chosen by Sir William MacGregor, how they were acquired, as well as the distribution of these various styles within their localities. For the MacGregor project, we are looking to find out more about how and from whom the mortars were collected, and integral to this is understanding the collecting process implemented during that period.

Nowadays, when I see a betel nut mortar - it is intricately carved, usually from somewhere in the Sepik with two to four spirit figures carved in to the midsection and sitting placidly on someone's shelf serving out its days in a purely ornamental role with the slight smell of buai nearly overcome by the overarching smell of Mr Sheen or a similar cleaning agent. With Port Moresby's buai ban from 2013 being lifted in 2017, again you see pieces of daka sitting pen-like in a front shirt pocket or behind the ear of a local; buai safely ensconced in hand or within a small bilum; the kambang residing not in an incised bamboo container, but in a clear glass jar sealed with a bright yellow lid reminiscent of its Kraft-branded condiment days; and the brilliant red smiles of those who chew buai experiencing a bit of a lift in their day.

By Kiri Chan, Queensland Museum, 2018

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