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## THE ARECA-NUT TRADE AND THE EAST INDIA COMPANY (1600 to 1661)

By

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Areca is defined to be the tree and fruit of a genus of palms, "a species of which bears nuts chewed normally with betel-leaf." In 1599 we find mention of "a great quantie of Archa. . . . which fruite they eat. . . with the leaf of an Herbe which they call Bettele." Betel-nut is of course a misnomer. It is called so because it is chewed with betel-leaf. I shall use arecanut here to denote what is commonly called betel-nut.

As to the variations of the actual name in the documents they are many. We have already noticed "archa." We also find "arcaes," "arequa" and "areque."

Regarding the use of this nut among women in the East during this period we need not go further than Pyrard's "elles vsent aussi jour et nuict du bettel comme font les Indiens", and Linschoten's "the whole day long" the Portuguese and other women " (doe nothing but sit and) chawe leaves (or herbes) called Bettle with chalke and a (certaine) fruit called Arrequa" "like oxen or kine chawing the cud." This habit according to Linschoten they "received of the Indian Heathens" who are "so used to chaw it that wheresoever they go or stand they must alwaies have (of) those leaves carried with them." "Betteles Arreguas and Chalk", he adds, "standeth by their bed" "in the night." The beauties of the day like many of today used to "let the sap goe down in" "their throats" "and spit the rest out" "whereby they make their mouthes so red and blackish, that to such as know it not it is strange to see."

In the Maldives Pyrard noticed royal officers distributing "a portion of betel and areca arranged and prepared in a different style from their ordinary (I mean of the common folk, for the king and the great lords always use it prepared in the same way)." The Commoners "carry betel always on them in the folds of their waist, and it would be a dishonour to a man to be found wanting it."

Chewing betel was thought to be responsible for their not "know(ing)" "what it is to suffer from toothache." It was also regarded as "a very heating herb" and one of the reasons why the women were "so hot and amorous" was thought to lie in the fact that they were "continually eating beetle."

Fray Sebastian Manrique who visited India during the period under review speaks of a present of "a bira of betel leaf" from a local military officer off the Hijli coast, and "a magnificent golden Betel-carrier studded with diamonds, rubies and emeralds" belonging to a Magh prince. The

prince, added Manrique, "then took off it a small box of gold ornamented with sapphires and rubies, filled with aromatic Betel, and presented it to me with his own hand." The box was ninety tolas in weight and the gems that decorated it were valued at over 60 rupees of those days. After presenting the betel-box the prince left. The custom of honouring a guest by handing him over "little packets of betel with his own hand" (thus doing him great honour) is also referred to later by this author. He also noticed "lovely green shade-giving areca-palms in the famous island of Gaṅgāsāgara" at the Bhāgirathā's mouth. "Areca... is daily eaten, says Manrique," by practically all Oriental Peoples, who mix it with Indian-leaf which the natives call Betele." It was regarded as "an excellent stomachic and sedative, besides removing unpleasant odours in the mouth and preserving the teeth when mixed with pure lime."

Arecanut grew not only near the mouth of the Hughli but also in various other parts of India, "not within the cuntry" (as Linschoten says "but only on the sea coast, unless it bee some small quantitie." "The Bettele in Malacca," adds Linschoten, "tasteth well." "In Malabar this leaf" "is called Bettele, in Deca Gusurate, and Canara it is called Pam, in Malaion Siri, by Auicenna Tambul."

It also grew in Ceylon. Manrique found the island to be "covered with areca-nut palms." Pyrard testifies to Ceylon's rich crop of areca-nuts which grew "in such abundance that all India is furnished thence, and a great traffic is carried on to all parts, for whole ships are laden with it for conveyance elsewhere."<sup>1</sup> According to Dr. Pieris who relies on the *Documentos Remittidos da India*, "the areca crop though not properly attended to, yielded eight thousand amanoes, valued at twenty thousand pardaos." A pardão according to the Linschoter "is van silver : maer van equade alloy" and was coined at Goa. It was "as much as three Testones or three hundred Reijs Portinyall money." But there were pardãos of gold, a gold pardão being equivalent to half a gold pagoda. The latter was worth at this time about 5s. 8d.

Ribeiro who came to Ceylon in 1640 pointed out that "every year there (was) exported from the kingdom of Cotta up to a thousand champanas of areca... for this article is in great demand over the whole of India." The normal annual export was thus easily above 30,000 tons. It was according to the same writer "highly valued in the whole of India." "So great," says Father de Queyroz, "was the (merchant's) thirst for areca that while its price there (in Candea) was formerly four larins, it was not available in the last days for 15. . . . and there was no silver jewellery which was not disposed of to invest in areca, with the result that whatever the Portuguese had,

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1. Hakluyt Society's (1) *The Voyage of François Pyrard of Laval*, (2) *The Voyage of John Huyghen van Linschoten* and (3) *Travels of Fray Sebastien Manrique*.

went into that Kingdom." In this connection the demand for "wax, sapan and other things" of Ceylon is also alluded to.

"The Captain-Majors of the arrayals," he continues, "had at one time four fine villages wherein they had much areca, besides what they obtained with the arms of the king from other villages and from Candea through the Vidānas."

Maetsuyker however thought in 1650 that though "a large quantity of arecanuts is yearly obtainable in this Island, and the best quality on this side," it is an article of little importance or value, "and may therefore well be resigned, without prejudice to the Company to private inhabitants." But because of its connection through Asiatic dealings with the lucrative cloth trade of South India, the Dutch decided to buy yearly "a large quantity of arecanuts and (send) it by the ships returning from Persia, Surat etc. to Coromandel, obtaining with the proceeds useful assortments of cloth goods." Later on however a considerable revenue was obtained by the Dutch from betelnuts.

"Arecanuts" were "much the most important item" in the products of Alutgama, Beruwela, "Caliture," Maggone, etc. and trade in them was very lucrative according to Van Goens (1663). "The inhabitants" used to supply quantities of the same "at a cheap price." The Dutch officer also refers to "the fine, heavy and durable timber" of Ceylon the quest for which and arecanuts led (as we shall see later on) some Englishmen into captivity. The "people of the king" also had stocks of "rice, sugar, cattle and goats, chickens, butter etc." which van Goens expected them to sell to the Dutch in exchange for "cloth goods, salt, opium, copper etc."

Ladders made of areca trees were used for siege operations of those days. There is a reference to this by De Couto (for example) by 1560. In 1665 Pavilioen says that along with "paddy, plough oxen. . . coarse cloth, cotton, iron, steel, different kinds of dry stuffs, tobacco," opium, etc. areca-nuts were imported into the "Commandment of Jaffnapatam." The supply of betelnuts probably came mostly from other parts of the island at this time.

The English Company used to obtain it through the usual commercial channels. But on a few occasions privateering also procured some. It formed, for example, a part of the merchandise plundered by the Expedition, and is mentioned in a list of prize goods dated 15th February, 1619.

In the same list we find logwood, rice, sugar, coconuts and cinnamon also. The two Malabari ships which the Hopewell seized on 20th March, 1628, carried cocoanuts, betelnuts and cardamomum seeds. Predys "Cape Merchant of (Hall's) Fleete" says that these Indian ships were then off Vijayadurga, later the stronghold of the famous privateers (and quasi-privateers), the Angrias. When chased they took refuge up the river at the mouth of which that town was situated. The local authorities ransomed them for 9,000 "larees" (about 3601). Of this amount 4,000 were actually paid, "which we thought better to take than nothing." The English fleet

was at the same time carrying on peaceful commerce. "A brisk trade was carried on with the natives for cattle and sheep in exchange for red beads" on 9th July. At Cape Cabeceira however the English landed, and marching into the interior "returned with some oranges and lemons and nineteen negers" after the inhabitants had fled in panic. Captain Slade's exploit in capturing a cargo of "dried penang," (betelnut) is referred to, for example, in Bix's letter of 20th June, 1628. A number of cocanuts and a quantity of "Cophra which is the meat within the cokernutts" (all captured goods) were sold at Bantam the same year. We are also told on 21st December, 1628 that the flotilla from Bantam brought the captured "areck or bettle nuts," cinnamon and red-wood to Surat.

Everyone in Bengal knows the story of an inspector of police who was given a cow in order that he might have a chew of arecanuts and betel-leaf. They have become the symbolic equivalents of a gratification (often illegal) in India. It is therefore interesting to find in Halstead's letter of 16th April, 1622 (from Ahmadabad) a reference to this idiom. The document speaks of a European quasi-orivateering attack on a "Choule juncker". The English factors were (according to this account) "kept prisoners in "Mausūf Khān's "house four dayes and four nights." "Our hellhound Governor (the local Indian magistrate) "sayd wee were ransadoes and one with the (Dutch?) and comanded the "Kotwāl (Police-Superintendent) "to keep us saufe." Afterwards he "bed the Cottwall let me (Halstead) free upon givinge suertie. . . . (which was) given to content, yet nothinge could be well, till the Cottwall had somethinge to eate bettle." The cost of this "belle" was Rs. 25 (of those days). "So we agreed with him for 25 rupp(ees) besydes somethinge that his followers had, which I could noe wayes shunne, it beinge a custome that all which come in the comon prisone must paye or have their clothes torne from their backs."

In this connection it may be noted that Lewis Smyth writing to George Ball at Bantam says in 1617, "Since, the Polema sent for him and gave him tobacco and serre (betel), he (an English factor) took it for such a kindness that at that time before he came home he promised to sell fifty Caftas for him at the English house." The offer of pāna-supārī is a recognition of social intimacy in India, even today. The English Company became deeply interested in its commercial possibilities as the period under review progressed. By the close of 1617 (for example) William Eaton wrote to Sir Thomas Smythe from "Firando in Japan" that he "arrived at the bar of Syam the 19th of January last past." They succeeded in obtaining among other merchandise a lading of "450 cattes of bittal nuts, cost laden aboard, the sum of 0012 tayas." The catty was equivalent to 1 1/3 lb. avoirdupois, and the "tay" to "5s. sterling."

We thus find that Siam was another country which grew betelnuts at this time. A sale of betelnuts in Surat is referred to in Wylde's letter of 11th-13th April, 1629. A lading of that commodity, arrack and coir in the

Francis is spoken of by Surat by the close of 1639. Next year we find that 175 bags of betelnuts were obtained from Goa by Surat. The Supply (of about 300 tons) which carried it was searched by the Dutch. Francis Day, factor for the First General Voyage is accused of investing 4,000 rials of eight in the betelnut trade, by 1642. A rial of eight was "a Spanish coin more exactly described as a piece of eight rials—worth about 4s. 6d." Once he confessed "hee would private trade soe deepe that he would neither value his wages nor his stocke that hee putt in with the Company."

The betelnuts were said to be obtained through Tranquebar and brought to Madras. Shortly afterwards, four hundred packages of betelnuts were said to be brought for Day by the Hopewell. While on this voyage, Day and his friends (we may note incidentally) are said to have consumed two butts of Canary wine and two more of arrack, a part of it on an occasion when a great feast aboard the vessel took place, and 110 guns were fired. According to Day's own version, the betelnuts cost him 400 to 500 rials, and were packed in 180 or 190 bags. 30 bags were also brought on the same voyage for the Company. Bowman tells us by the close of 1646 that Ceylon "shipped" "beetle nutts in great quantities" "twice a yeare for Cost Cormondell etc." It was "worth heer (in Ceylon) commonly 10 Zerapheens a amanon (containing 27,000 nutts)." We however find that according to Day who made a statement before the Committees by about that time, betelnut was purchased by "the aminah by tale, which aminah contained 12,000 nutts and weighed 170 lb." The goods were put in bags weighing 150 to 160 lb. each. Temple pointed out that an amona was a measure of five and three-quarter bushels. Wylde's letter from Bantam (of 1647) says that a Daines sheepe. . . brought four horses for a pischcash to the king of Candy, and are likely to gaine comerce with the Chingalas which are the natives of this place (Zealan)." Some of the lucrative merchandises of the island are thus referred to. "They trade here in cynamon, beetlenutts, and all sorts of grayne, which yields great proffitt one the Coast betwixt Trinckolamar and Metchlepatam." "Zealan," he adds, "(is a) place I thinke man never sawe a better, I say only for the mannaging of the Companies affayres; for trimeing of there ships and for good tymber man never saw better in these parts, Madraspatam being but a dunghill to it." On 12th October, 1651, the Assada Merchant after informing those interested of the withdrawal from Assada, reached Swally (as we have seen above) with a cargo of gold and elephants' teeth. She was next employed on a voyage to Bhatkal to pick up ladings of betelnuts on the way. A letter of 1654 alludes to what must have been a frequent annoyance of these days, a levy of "customs upon petty things sold" "in the market, as beetle, herbes etc."

By about this time, the eagerness of the English to trade with Ceylon and purchase her products directly from the local inhabitants led to various ventures. The gaining of some vantage points for developing commercial relationships with the island entered their minds rather early during this

period under review, and in the weakening of the Portuguese power they saw another opportunity of fulfilling their desire. "The Portugals" a letter from Persia (for instance) points out in 1632, "doe dayly decline in the Indies; and noe question oportunitie wilbee offered, either at Syndie or Seland or other partes there adjacent, whereby to joyne issue with those people and settle a trade may prove very bennificiall." A few years later, the English are thinking of gaining certain commercial facilities as the result of an understanding with the Portuguese. "This yeare they (the Portuguese) have no succour from Portugall; so that they are very much distrest and oppressed by the Hollanders at Goa, Zeiloan and Mallacca. . . . We believe they would readily subscribe to furnish you (the Company) with pepper, cinnamon and as much freedome and security in some of their forts (if not the fort itself) as wee can desire or they themselves owne. . . . They (the Dutch) intend now to assault Columbo, and it is thought they will carry it; and then the Portugalls may bid adiew to Zeiloan, whilst the Dutch may boast of being masters of all the spice countries in the universe, pepper excepted."

Fourteen years later, Blackman and Pearce say, "What the Dutch hold in Zelon we believe the Portugalls would bee willingwee should enjoy, if by our assistance, they could bee driven out; which were noe hard matter to doe, if the Parliament would please to engage therein." The forces of the Dutch according to them could be vanquished without great difficulty. "Seven or eight frigatts (and) four or five good ships would soone give them a law in India; for though they are too hard for us at present, yet there strength is not soe greate as is imagined by us in England." They are also rather glad of the success gained by the Portuguese over the Dutch in Ceylon about two months previous to the date this letter bears. It was according to them an important victory. What happened was that Gaspar Figueyra de Cerpe, the Captain of Colombo (who was half a Simhalese) defied Homem (the Captain-General) imprisoned him, gathered an army, and vigorously attacked the Dutch in their fortifications at Anguruwatata, defended as that place naturally was by the waters of the Kaluganga almost on three sides. Before the resolute onslaught of this half Asiatic commander, the fortified post yielded after a gallant resistance of eleven days, and about 94 Dutchmen with a number of "lascarins" passed into captivity. A letter of 28th August, 1658 again speaks of direct English trade with Ceylon. "They (the Dutch) have taken three vessells belonging to some of our nation in the Bay, as they were trading to Zeylon and Jafanapatam, seizing upon the goods, imprisoning the men, and traversing them from ship to ship." Dutch documents point out that two English ships (not however belonging to the Company) were violating laws of war by supplying the enemy in Northern Ceylon with munition. Their seizure was thus justifiable.

Colombo—the "Origin" and "Mother" (according to the distracted Simhalese monarch) "of all the evils that have come upon this Island and on the natural kings of the same"—was attacked by the Dutch with charac-

teristic vigour and determination in 1655-56. As those Portuguese warriors bruised and famished dragged themselves away from the possession they had held so long, with full military honours, the Ceylonese historian could see not only the passing away of that European country's colonial grandeur, but also of the opening of a new chapter in the history of his own. "On that day, the 12th of May," says Father de Queyroz, "there marched out to lay down arms, 94 Soldiers, Captains and Officers . . . many of them sick and wounded and walking with sticks in hand; the *casados* who were not so numerous, but equally emaciated and feeble and with their banners displayed, drums beating, matches lighted, balls in their mouths," and carrying "swords and arquebuses," when "able to carry them."

With the perseverance and doggedness which characterised their tremendous Eastern efforts during this age, the Dutch under their capable Commissioner, Superintendent Admiral and Commander, Rycklof van Goens took Tuticorin on 1st February, 1658. Next the control over the pearl fisheries was to be rendered safe by the capture of Mannar. All Portuguese resistance was overcome. The cannon crashed through the enemy's ranks and the seas were swept off their flotillas. De Menses and others laid down their lives, but nothing could save the doomed Portuguese. The islet passed under Dutch control after the peaceful surrender of the fort. Then they sprang on Jaffna, where, after a gallant resistance of more than two months, the Portuguese flag was hauled down, and the fort changed hands in June, 1658. In the meantime the fort of Ham-en-Hiel guarding the entrance to Jaffna had fallen, because no drinking water was available.

"The enemy began the attack of the *praça*," says Father de Queyroz, "on the 16th of March of 1658 and continued it up to the 23rd of June, the play of the artillery and mortars being incessant." "An ounce of tobacco reached the price of 20 patacas, five leaves of betel half a *pardao*," and "there was no Arrack to dress a wound." "The greatest battle was with famine and pestilence."

The English documents of the period naturally take full cognisance of these momentous happenings in the history of the Eastern activities of European nations. The letter of 12th April, 1656 written by Weale from Persia to Surat refers to the hostilities in Ceylon leading up to the surrender of Colombo. "The day after departure of the *Dyamont*, the Dutch landed their Portugall prisoners that came from *Zealoane* (five of their ships being arrived in the road thence). Most of them had *bine* captaines, and one gentleman of great quality; also a *padre*. In number their was 30, who, being cast on the shoare and not haveing wherewithal to buy themselves foode, came to the Companies house and desired us to furnish them with a place to lodge in, till wee could procure them a *tranky* to transport them to "their (then) chief station at *Kung* situated to the north of the Persian Gulf."

Again, a letter to the Company of 28th January, 1657 says :—" Last yeare they (the Dutch) took Zeloan and at this present by before Goa with 19 saile." On 12th July, 1658, shortly after Jafna had been taken by the Dutch, Greenhill and Chamber wrote from Fort St. George, "The Dutch are now become lords of all Zeylon, having taken Japhnapatam under command of Signor Ryckloff van Godes, and threaten both St. Thoma and Negapatam on this Coast, to extirpate the Portugall utterly in these parts." In a record of 16th October of the same year we find, "The Dutch now (though with the loss of a great many of their men) hath purchased all Zelone to themselves."

All this Dutch success in Ceylon was rather disconcerting to the English factors of those days. Surat says on 18th January, 1659, that "Mr. Hoddesdon" (employed sometime in Cochin) "is newly arrived from a port called Caile Velha" (Kayal to the south off Tuticorin). "He had been at a place called Tutticoree three leagues further, but the Dutch had newlie made an agreement with the people to settle there and would not suffer them to receive any benefitt of the shoare, not so much as water." The local people did not probably like this Dutch monopoly. They extended their hands in friendship to the English merchant. Tuticorin lying close to the Ceylon coast had heard all the news. The Dutch were held by Rājasimha to be guilty of breach of faith, and the Simhalese ruler was eager to see the last of them. "The King of Zealone (was) much discontented with the Dutch for their false dealing after they had assisted them to take Columbo." His soldiers had been kept out, and the terms of the surrender of the city arrived at without Rājasimha's previous approval. Therefore Kayal promised the English representative that "if the English would settle a factory there, they would procure them great priviledges" from their own government, and "they were confident from Zealone they could procure store of cinnamon to be brought in small vessells that comes from thence to their ports." "Eight of the Chiefe merchants of those parts" wrote "a verie kind letter" to the English President, and he thought of sending Hoddesdon and others to establish "a factory there in the most convenient place for shipping." On 22nd August, 1659, the Committees enthusiastically approved of the project, and ordered, "And therefore you may goe on in the provision of them, in severall sorts, as much as you can with conveniencie." Hoddesdon died. But Travers and two others were sent to Kayal with money and "Europe commodities." When the Society called there in course of the same year, the factors were able to lade it with Calico and a parcel of pearls from the waters of Manaar.

Surat instructed Travers to supply them with betelnuts, redwood, saltpetre, pepper and cowries. By this time the Calicut factory also began its existence and Masters was sent there to obtain ladings of redwood and cardamon. "The wood though but little quantitye, (was) selling now for more then two for one, and the pepper 70 and 80 per cent." Masters was able to obtain "at short warning—to procure the lading of the Vine for Mocho, of

pepper, cardamons, bettlenuts and ginger. . . . Wee intend two persons to reside there, and if so bee one of them have occasion to journey to Cannanore" "the best place to procur cardamons, this may be done in the raine tymes."

On 16th December, 1659, Masters was authorised to resort to privateering to keep other rivals out. Cloth and cinnamon however proved to be the two chief attractions at Kayal.

Travers was therefore instructed in 1660 to get into touch with "our vackeele" (wakil) at Cochin, Antonio Galvão, and find out the pros and cons of having a factory at Cochin, Porakad or Quilon "for the procury of pepper and beetlenutts." The Rajapur factors state in the same letter which refers to "Sevagyes forces" (dated 4th February, 1660) that they "intended to have fild her (the Rajapore Merchant) with rice, bettlenutt etc. and so sent her to Persia and Coung." The Dutch however were determined not to allow this English project to succeed. In 1660, it is reported that "the Dutch will not vend any of the better sort (of cinnamon). Since their taking of Collumba they, having all in their owne hands will not vend any till it cometh to their desired price. Experience also hath frustrated our hopes in the attaining any Zealone cinnamon in Cale Velha." "Cinnamon, according unto order, shall be provided, though it will be dearer then what hath been sent home."

The Company's letter of 22nd August, 1659 had already pointed out that the price the Dutch were charging for their cinnamon at Surat was too dear. But nutmegs and mace were to be obtained from them. The officers were to make an attempt to fetch the aromatic bark through Kayal. It was to be transported here in small ships from Ceylon.<sup>2</sup>

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2. *Ceylonsche Archiefstukken*, Nos. 1 & III; *Marine Records* Mis. vol. IV, No. 6; O. C. 1260, 1273; *F. R. Sur.* CII; L. R. VI, 582; 569; *F. R. Mis.* I; O. C. 1725; 1784; 2009, *F. R. Sur.* CII A.; O. C. 2378; 1461; 1725, 2318; Father de Queyroz, *Conquista*, Book V; *F. R. Java* vol. III, pt. III, 97, 626; *H. T.* I, XX, No. 586; XXI, No. 613; O. C. (Vol. XXV) 2548 2608; *F. R. Java*, vol. III, pt. III 96, 624; *F. R. Rajapur*, 79; *F. R. Sur.* vol. LXXXV, 14; *The Company's Letter Books*, Vol. II, 2350.