BETEL NUT-chewing is an archaic practice that many young people today probably only hear about briefly in social studies or anthropology classes. But this tradition apparently still thrives in the highlands. As National Artist Benedicto "Bencab" Cabrera — long-time Baguio resident and passionate collector of Cordillera indigenous art — has witnessed for himself, betel nut-chewing remains a widespread daily habit among the Ifugao, Kalinga, Gaddang and Bontoc tribes.

Bencab's interest in the art of the Cordillera region led him to his first encounter with an integral accessory in betel nut chewing. This is the lime powder container which the Ifugao call the "tabayag".

Lime powder, as anyone who knows his nganga will tell you, is an essential component of the betel nut chew. The tabayag is an intimate personal container that in its own literally small way, as Bencab has learned, is also an intriguing form of creative expression.

So taken was the artist with these containers that in the last five years, he has accumulated some 200 pieces. Today, this unique collection is in the limelight through the book "Tabayag: Lime Containers of the Cordilleras — From the Collection of Bencab." Published by the newly formed Bencab Art Foundation, the book features a selection of 100 tabayags from the artist's still-growing collection.

Photographer Wig Tysmans captures the beauty and character of each tabayag in 200 color photos. Meanwhile, television director Floy Quintos, himself a collector of indigenous Philippine art, writes the introduction entitled "Expressive Offerings" which tackles the social ritual of betel nut-chewing.

A TRADITION SO ALIVE

Putting the book together was quite challenging for Bencab as there is a lack of written materials on the tabayag. But it proved interesting for him as well as he conducted field work and anthropological research. He particularly enjoyed interacting with the tribesfolk in different communities and talking to them about betel nut-chewing which he himself tried once. He also photographed the lime-making process which is part of the book.

Bencab marvels at the intricacy of the lime containers, and the variety of materials that the highlanders have harnessed in...
fashioning them. Some are carved from bone, wood or horn, some woven from fine rattan and others made from — gulp! — animal scrotum. The containers are adorned with zoomorphic or anthropomorphic figures and reflect the painstaking craftsmanship abundantly conveyed by mostly unknown artisans on these simple implements.

In collecting the tabayag and in making the book, Bencab says, "I've learned that betel nut-chewing is still a living tradition in the North. But the containers themselves are close to becoming a lost art as the Cordillera folk now prefer to use small recycled plastic bottles to put their lime in. Hopefully, this book can encourage them to continue the tradition of making lime containers by hand and also expose readers to a largely unknown craft."

As an ardent collector of Cordillera primitive art, Bencab says it was just natural for him to be captivated by the lime containers, especially since they are small in size, making them even easier to collect. "They remind me of the Japanese netsuke — importance is given to the object as functional art."

About five years ago, he bought his first two pieces from Henry Beyer, an antique dealer in Baguio. "They were finely carved from wood and had animal figures as stoppers and human figures on the containers. I became even more fascinated when I discovered that they also came in materials like bone, rattan and bamboo."

EXQUISITE COLLECTION

Of all the lime containers that he now has, Bencab has two favorites, both of which are classic examples of very fine basketry. One is shaped like a boat with an opening on each end, covered with a stopper of a bulol figure; the other is a long, tubular basket shaped like the letter "J," with a wooden stopper of a chicken head.

As his collection grew, he felt that the exquisiteness of the tabayag deserved to be highlighted in a book which took about a year to produce.

Bencab keeps his tabayag collection in Baguio. To maintain their patina, there is a need to constantly wipe and brush each piece — which the artist does anyway with the rest of his collection of bulol figures, stools, spoons, baskets and other functional objects from the Cordilleras.

Eventually, he intends to house all these objects in a museum that he is building next year on his farm in Asin, Tuba.

The museum will consist of two elements: The primitive art of the Cordilleras and contemporary Philippine art which he has also collected through the years. The Bencab Art Foundation was in fact set up mainly to manage the planned museum although it will also be involved in other art-related projects seeking to preserve traditional art and crafts and to showcase contemporary art.

Since being named a National Artist, Bencab has found his days to be even much busier than ever as he gets invited to grace art events, judge art competitions and attend to other responsibilities. But being an artist is of course his foremost priority and in this area, he continues as best as he can to be more creative in his work.

For instance, he is currently involved in a collaborative project of the Asia-Europe Foundation wherein four choreographers will interpret the work of four artists (two artists from Europe, and two from Asia). The other Asian artist is Ibrahim Hussein of Malaysia. The final result will be a dance performance in Warsaw, Poland in
December, which Bencab will attend.

Recently, he was in Macau together with three other Filipino artists — Soler, Claude Tayag and Phyllis Zaballero — on the invitation of the Macau Tourism Board. An exhibition of their impressions of Macau is planned for February. In March, Bencab is also scheduled to hold an exhibition at the Alliance Francaise de Manille which he is already working on now.

SOURCE OF PRIDE

Bencab points out that he is also occupied with developing his farm in Asin, which is why he shuttles back and forth from Manila to Tuba on a regular basis.

"When the museum is set up, I see myself getting more involved in art publications, workshops and seminars. I would also like to expand my artistic career and get more into sculpture, photography and digital drawing. I want to learn and experiment with new media."

For now, however, his attention is on the book that the precious tabayag inspired and which he hopes will be a source of pride for others. As Bencab says on its pages, "The lime containers of the Cordilleras reflect much that is admirable about the culture of the northern tribes. Each of the pieces featured in this book is an expression of the genius of the Cordillera people, and a work of genuine Filipino art."

"Tabayag: Lime Containers of the Cordilleras — From the Collection of Bencab" will be launched on Nov. 24, Friday, 6 p.m., at the Yuchengco Museum, RCBC Plaza, Ayala Ave. cor. Gil Puyat Ave., Makati. A selection of lime containers will be on display as well as photographs by Wig Tysmans.

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