



KHAT: A DANGER TO SOCIETY?

KHAT, WHAT IS IT?

Khat is a plant native to Southeast Africa and the Arabian Peninsula. Its green leaves contain natural chemicals that produce stimulant effects when eaten or brewed as a tea. Historically, khat has been used in a wide range of cultural contexts. Traditionally, it has been used as a form of medical treatment, as it was used to treat respiratory issues and digestive problems.



Most of the time, people chew khat during social conversations, similar to how other cultures chat over coffee or socially drink/smoke. In countries like Ethiopia and Somalia, khat represents an important cultural symbol to many communities. It is common to eat khat during social events and get-togethers, making it an important part of communication and cultural identity. (Mohammed D. Al Shubbar, PP. 1-3.)

MY PERSONAL EXPERIENCE

While I do not have any personal experience with khat directly, my learning experience about it came from a setting not too dissimilar from where it would be traditionally used. While exchanging stories over dinner with a family friend from Ethiopia, he described how even though it was illegal in Canada, it was used all the time in his community back home.

He described khat as a social thing, comparing it to “sharing a drink with some friends.” Because I had never heard of khat before, I was initially skeptical, wondering why something portrayed as harmless and social would be illegal in Canada. This was after even progressive pullbacks on the recreational use of cannabis. After doing more research, I feel like my instinctive reaction of skepticism revealed a bias that I had at the time. An instinctive trust in the Canadian criminal justice system made me question his story and first-hand experience rather than question the laws that criminalized his community’s cultural practices.

IS KHAT HARMFUL?

Khat is illegal in Canada, officially for the safety of public health. And research does show that usage can result in negative health effects. (Mohammed D. Al Shubbar, pp. 2-3)

Undoubtedly, khat does carry both physical and social harms with frequent use. However, many of these harms overlap with those caused by widely accepted legal substances, such as alcohol, tobacco, and nicotine. Additionally, even Health Canada's own review prior to criminalizing khat noted "insufficient research" on its long-term effects. In other words, the science did not clearly justify prohibition. (Todd Gordon, pp. 72-73)

NEGATIVE EFFECTS

Short-term

- Anxiety
- Depression
- Impatience
- Increased blood pressure

Longer term

- Potential for Addiction/Dependence
- Mental health issues
- Cardiovascular problems
- Dental issues
- Aggressive behavior
- Insomnia

Social effects

- Decreased productivity
- Strained social relationships

SO, WHY IS KHAT ILLEGAL IN CANADA?

If harm is not exclusive, what justifies its legal status?

To answer this question, khat must be analyzed through an anthropological lens of race, ethnicity, and identity. In doing so, it reveals how khat became a target of the CJS, not because it was a threat to public health, but because of who used it.



HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Canada's drug laws have long been intentionally rooted in racism. The earliest example of drug laws in Canada is a clear example; take the opium ban in 1908, for example. It was banned because of the moral panic that its association with Chinese immigrants brought, not strictly due to the harm the drugs actually caused. It was put through law because of a fear that Chinese immigrant culture was a threat to white society. Canada's Deputy Minister of Labor claimed the issue that originated from Chinese immigrants was "spreading to white women and girls" (Catherine Carstairs, pp. 69).

Here, drug prohibition was justified through moral panic in society, not based on health concerns. Drug law was used to control racialized groups and preserve white Canadian social order.

Khat followed the same pattern.

KHAT AND THE SOMALI COMMUNITY

In the late 80s and early 90s, there was a large influx of Somalian immigrants to Canada, and with them came their own unique cultures and practices, khat being among them.

During the same period Canada pursued an “American-style War on Drugs.” This led to the creation of the “Controlled Drugs and Substances Act.” (Akwatu Khenti, pp-191). Under this new act, khat was made illegal in 1997. (Todd Gordon, pp-72)

Khat was heavily used in this new immigrant community but hardly known about in traditional white Canadian society, making khat a visible symbol of a new immigrant community’s difference and nonconformity. Because of this, it also became seen as a threat to the established Canadian order. (Todd Gordon, pp. 71-72)

A quote from a Toronto police officer highlighted in Todd Gordon's article illustrates this perfectly. *“If people get involved in this type of thing [khat], we are going to end up with a lot more people on welfare. They are going to become no good to go to work.”* (Todd Gordon, PP 73)

Here, the criminalization of khat was not the result of a concern for public health but with the threat they bring as a drain on Canadian society.

CONSEQUENCES OF CRIMINALIZATION

Since khat was so prevalent in this new Somali immigrant community (estimated at about half of all people) (Todd Gordon, PP 73), banning it effectively criminalizes a large portion of that community. Police now had sweeping power to target Somali Canadians not because of harm, but because of cultural differences.

RESULTS

- Warrantless home raids
- Violent arrests
- Surveillance of community spaces
- Fear, distrust, and trauma

The results of a racialized war on drugs have been well documented. To this day in Canada we see distinct differences in levels of minority representation at all levels of the criminal justice system. (Akwatu Khenti, p. 193)

NEGATIVE EFFECTS OF THE CRIMINAL JUSTICE SYSTEM.

- Poor Mental Health
- Anxiety and depression
- Decreased Functioning
- Family separation and generational trauma
- Social withdrawal and isolation
- increased dependence on drugs for relief
- Lost employment

Look familiar?

KHAT'S, NEGATIVE EFFECTS

Short-term

- Anxiety
- Depression
- Impatience
- Increased blood pressure

Longer term

- Potential for Addiction/Dependence
- Mental health issues
- Cardiovascular problems
- Dental issues
- Aggressive behavior
- Insomnia

Social effects

- Decreased productivity
- Strained social relationships

If the goal were truly public health, the harm caused by policing, not only the drug, would matter. Instead, the War on Drugs causes much of the harm it claims to prevent.

CONCLUSION

Khat’s prohibition in Canada is not fully about protecting the public from a dangerous substance. It reflects a long historical pattern of weaponized drug laws to control, surveil, and discipline racialized groups. When viewing the war on drugs through an anthropological lens and analyzing what is criminalized vs. what is not, this trend becomes visible.

References

Carstairs, C. (1999). “Deporting ‘Ah Sin’ to save the White race”: Moral panic, racialization, and the extension of Canadian drug laws in the 1920s. *Canadian Bulletin of Medical History*, 16(1), 65–88. <https://doi.org/10.3138/cbmh.16.1.65>

Gordon, T. (2006). Neoliberalism, racism, and the war on drugs in Canada. *Social Justice*, 33(1), 59–78.

Khenti, A. (2014). The Canadian war on drugs: Structural violence and unequal treatment of Black Canadians. *International Journal of Drug Policy*, 25(2), 190–195. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.drugpo.2013.12.001>

Al Shubbar, M. D. (2024). Understanding khat: Its sociocultural and health implications in Saudi Arabia. *Cureus*, 16(3), e56657. <https://doi.org/10.7759/cureus.56657>