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SPECIAL SECTION

A Potent Chew?

Kenyan khat and the agency of drugs

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Abstract

Few other categories of things appear so bound up with questions of agency, power and responsibility as that of 'drugs'. With over a century of global treaties and prohibition of such substances, we are accustomed to thinking of them as potent things that can hold us in their thrall. Social science approaches, in contrast, tend to downplay the agency and power of the drug itself, showing how such agency and power is distributed among wider contexts. This paper explores themes of drug power and agency through a case study of khat. While relatively weak in terms of pharmacology, khat brims with potency in how people talk about it and its effects. I argue that such *talk* is crucial for understanding the potency of the substance itself. This talk helps us understand how drug potency is not just a pharmacological property, but an historical, sociological and anthropological one too; such talk also acts to reinforce this potency through influencing expectations of what being 'under the influence' entails. Furthermore, while drug potency during moments of intoxication is fleeting, the stories of succumbing to a drug that arise from these moments have a longer-term potency as they are recounted over the years.

Keywords

Drugs, Agency, Power, Khat, Kenya.

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Few other categories of things appear so bound up with questions of agency, power and responsibility as that of 'drugs'. With over a century of global treaties and prohibition of substances that have been slotted into this category, we have become accustomed to associating them with such terms as 'addiction' that speak of their power to hold us in their thrall. In such associations, they appear as potent things that bear great responsibility for all sorts of medical and social ills. Drugs, their effects and things associated with them often become active subjects in ways of talking, as when a drinker might talk of the 'bottle' as if alive, or in the notion of demon 'spirits' that can possess someone and transform their character or behaviour. There is great ambivalence and ambiguity in how these substances and their capacity to possess us are seen: drugs, like alcohol, being seen as trickster-like characters with the capacity to both help and harm, just as the trickster in mythology has both the power for creation and for destruction (Radin 1956).

This article explores such themes through a focus on khat, mostly looking at its Kenyan context with which I am most familiar. The article draws on ethnographic and archival research conducted in Kenya since 1999, focusing on the 'social life' (Appadurai 1986) of the substance as part of my doctoral research. This *social lives of things* approach served to foreground khat as subject, albeit in a manner that saw this subjectivity as something primarily generated by people. That is to say, the concept of khat having a *social life* was more methodological for me than ontological, as I let khat guide me along many trajectories from farms to consumers, as well as along several different ways of perceiving and debating it. Subsequent post-doctoral research allowed further research into the substance in Kenya, Madagascar and in the UK diaspora context, and khat has featured in later projects, including one on the urban development of Eastleigh (Carrier 2016), an estate of Nairobi home to many Somalis and a major hub for trade of various commodities, khat amongst them. In my current research in Kenya on the topic of cannabis, khat also features as many cannabis smokers also chew khat.[1] Throughout this time, my interest in khat and issues of agency has grown, especially as khat has felt at times like an active presence in my own life and career since I first made its acquaintance.

Khat is a particularly fascinating case study of drugs, power and agency, as it is a stimulant whose pharmacological potency is constantly spoken about and debated, often caught between depictions as being like coffee or like cocaine. While pharmacologically it can be deemed relatively weak when compared with synthesised or concentrated stimulants, it is nevertheless ascribed great potency by consumers and detractors alike: talk of khat brims with power, and it is often assigned responsibility for many things good and ill. Khat's potency, like that of

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other drugs, attracts ascriptions of agency that obscure the wider contexts in which its use is situated. It is these wider contexts that are usually emphasised by approaches to drugs in the social sciences, rather than the agency and power of the drug itself. In this article, I explore how Kenyan khat consumers talk about this substance and its effects—known as *handas* in Kenya—and argue that such *talk* is crucial for understanding the potency of the substance itself. This talk helps us understand how drug potency is not just a pharmacological property, but an historical, sociological and anthropological one too; such talk also acts to reinforce this potency through influencing expectations of what being 'under the influence' entails. Furthermore, while drug potency during moments of intoxication is fleeting, the stories of succumbing to a drug that arise from these moments have a longer-term potency as they are recounted over the years.

Chemical agents

Work such as Gell's (1998) on the agency of art objects, Latour's (2005) on the assemblages in which people and things both possess agency, as well as that within the ontological turn (e.g., Henare, Holbraad and Wastell 2007) has inspired much interest in non-human agency within anthropology. While older Maussian traditions within the discipline have explored how mutually permeable and implicated persons and material objects can be with a focus on the likes of the valuables exchanged in the famous Kula ring of the Western Pacific, recent approaches such as those inspired by Actor Network Theory pull not just prestigious Kula objects into focus, but also everyday objects as examples of how things can act as agents within wider networks. Yet with some exceptions (for example, Reed 2006 on tobacco in Papua New Guinea, and Russell 2019 on tobacco as a social agent more generally), psychoactive substances have been little studied in this regard. This is surprising given that those substances commonly labelled drugs are things to which people all over the world ascribe agency and power, so much so that they are seen as responsible for many social phenomena, both good and ill. This is the case not just for 'drugs' such as khat or cannabis, but also for pharmaceutical medicines, substances whose efficacy depends on both material qualities (including pharmacological properties) as well as all the meanings and culturally-mediated perceptions that can be glossed as the 'placebo effect' (see Moerman 2002; and on pharmaceutical efficacy, Van der Geest, Reynolds White and Hardon, 167–69). Such is their perceived power that the wider networks and contexts in which the agency of these substances develop are often blurred out in how people talk about them. For example, in portrayals of Africa as a continent struggling with the consequences of increased drug trade and consumption (Carrier and Klantschnig 2012), drugs become explanations for all sorts of societal ills with little consideration for much wider local, national and global dynamics that offer deeper explanations for these very same ills.

Such perceptions of drugs as potent agents relate strongly to the rise of pharmacology over the last two hundred years and the notion that the chemistry of the substance in question offers the key to understanding its use as well as any side effects. ‘Pharmacological determinism’ (Reinarman and Levine 1997)—the idea that pharmacology drives drug use and its consequences—is an extreme version of this ‘context-blurring’.

However, the idea of drugs as agential things is not just a modern phenomenon, and such is their perceived agency that historic examples abound of people actually personifying drugs. Thomas de Quincey’s famous work *Confessions of an Opium Eater* (1823) is evocative in this regard, especially its assertion that ‘not the opium eater, but the opium is the true hero of the tale and the legitimate centre upon which the interest revolves’: the ability of opium to seize control of someone’s life through use is mirrored by its power to take narrative control (Hickman 2022, 217). J. M. Barrie’s work *My Lady Nicotine* (1890) gently conveys the hold over him of tobacco, and even of a sacred object linked to it: his old, decaying tobacco pouch that at one stage he discards from a train, only to feel guilty and embark on a search to retrieve what feels like a dear old friend. This can be seen in the historically common personification of alcohol, evident in the British tradition of personifying beer as ‘John Barleycorn’ (London 1914). Altered states and the means to produce them have also been deified in such figures as Dionysus and Bacchus. In some cases, this personification speaks of a trickster-like ambiguity, with Horace’s famous wine jar a classical example that shows the ambivalence with which these trickster substances are often viewed. Horace ascribes it the potential to bring happy conviviality as well as quarrels and laments:

> O born in Manlius’ year with me,
> Whate’er you bring us, plaint or jest,
> Or passion and wild revelry,
> Or, like a gentle wine-jar, rest (translation by Conington 1863, 90).

As we will discuss, among consumers I met in Kenya, talk about khat was soaked in ambivalence: sometimes aiding the consumer to complete a task, yet at other times taking control of the consumer and making them do things they otherwise would not. In this regard, khat chimes well with the idea of the *pharmakon*, how the same substance can be both poison and remedy (see Ermansons, this issue). However, ascriptions of agency to drugs can have more unambiguous moral qualities. For example, cannabis is personified as a plant teacher among Rastafarians (Waldstein 2020), while the perception of alcohol as a demon ‘spirit’ in the temperance movement speaks of a wholly negative framing, as did the portrayal of cannabis in the classic 1936 film *Reefer Madness*.

Even where substances are not themselves personified, often they are thought to transform the consumer’s personhood, as talk of someone becoming a ‘different

person' when drunk suggests. Similarly, Emily Martin discusses how the consumption of pharmaceutical medicines in the USA becomes intertwined with how people conceive their very personhood, conceptions that vary depending on the particular pills being consumed (Martin 2006). Drugs are even reckoned capable of stripping away someone's personhood, leaving a 'zombie' in their place, part of the recent scare in the UK about the synthetic cannabinoids that are sold under the name 'Spice' (Alexandrescu 2018), and the depiction of intoxicated personhood in literature such as Stevenson's *Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* (Comitini 2012). Whether possessing someone, or inducing some form of chemical or pharmaceutical personhood (Martin 2006), the power of drugs to 'alter states' is widely reflected in popular culture and beyond.

The apparent capacity of drugs to make us do things we would not otherwise do—or make us unaware of harms we might be inflicting—is also reflected in legal debates on criminal responsibility, especially in relation to the concept of *mens rea* ('guilty mind') as opposed to the *actus reus* ('guilty act'). If an act is conducted under the influence of a psychoactive substance, then how responsible is the consumer for that act? Such questions have been posed by legal systems and scholars for centuries, and even millennia, Aristotle having addressed it in the *Nicomachean Ethics* (Klimchuk 2003). Of course, such debates on responsibility and intoxication are not restricted to legal circles, as the ethics and morality of acts conducted 'under the influence' are common topics of conversation as people consider where blame lies: with the consumer, the substance, or both.

The contextual approach to drugs

While many ascribe drugs particular power and agency in the above ways, the social science and social history of drugs take a different tack, bringing the wider context back firmly into focus. This comes out most clearly in the triad of 'drug, set and setting' coined by Leary in relation to hallucinogenic drugs, and further developed by Zinberg in his analysis of the 'controlled' use of the likes of heroin (Zinberg 1984). 'Set' refers to 'mindset', the psychological state of the consumer, while 'setting' can relate to all the wider forms of context, socio-cultural, politico-economic and environmental. With such an approach, drug effects—both short and long-term—come into being through a complex interaction of pharmacology, psychology and sociology. We also see this contextualised form of potency in historical work such as that by Justin Willis on alcohol in East Africa (2002). His work explores how alcoholic beverages were implicated in formations of and debates about power in East Africa, particularly how power and authority symbolised in pre-colonial times by elders consuming alcohol were radically transformed over the 20th century.

This contextual approach to drug potency is of course also characteristic of how anthropologists write about drugs. From mid-20th-century work on alcohol onwards, anthropologists have striven to show the cultural relativity of drug effects (especially critiquing the universalising idea that alcohol could be explained through the notion of 'disinhibition'; see MacAndrew and Edgerton 1970); how drug use could be 'integrative' within certain social structures; and with recent critical medical anthropological and related approaches, how drug harms relate to the vast inequalities and structural violence of the capitalist world order (Singer 2007). Garcia's (2010) important work is a prime example of how drug use and related harms link to much broader social, economic and historical dynamics, all ramifying together in a sense of loss and dispossession. The classic article by Bateson (1972) on alcoholism is another example of this approach, viewing alcoholism as a response to what he saw as the erroneous tendency in Western epistemology to see people as separate from the world at large. Although Moerman's (2002) research on the placebo effect does not directly address the drugs discussed in this special section, it offers valuable insights into how meaning and culture influence drug efficacy. This is particularly relevant for understanding the varied effects and uses of the same drug. For instance, the anticipation of drinking wine can elevate mood, just as the aroma of coffee may stimulate even before consumption. Anticipations of altered states can themselves be potent, anticipations often driven by how people talk about the effects of drugs.

In all such approaches, pharmacology is de-emphasised as the context comes back in view. As Hardon and Sanabria suggest in a recent review of the anthropology of pharmaceuticals, contemporary anthropological understandings of drug efficacy are as a 'processual, relational, and situated event, as well as a pharmacological one' (Hardon and Sanabria 2017, 118). This is clearly an important corrective to analyses too focused on the drugs themselves, and can help explain why a drug can be used with little harm by one person in one context, yet can be associated with serious harms when used by someone else in a different context. The recent popular work of American psychologist Carl Hart (2021) is a case in point, as his own consumption of a range of drugs—including those that might be labelled 'hard'—appears unproblematic for someone in a position of privilege as a professor at an elite institution.

However, such a contextualising approach can be taken too far if the substance in question and all its particularities—not just pharmacological, but botanical, sensorial and material qualities, as well as their commodity histories—start to blur out of focus. Indeed, keeping the drug and its qualities in focus is clearly important, all the more so as people act as if these substances do have agency, and as writers of the ontological turn might argue, we should take this seriously, as Adam Reed does when analysing the potency of tobacco (*smuk*) as currency and mediator of

sociality in a Papua New Guinea prison. He takes seriously the notion that in that context, as the title of his article has it, 'smuk is king' (2006). Given the recent work in anthropology on the agency of things and the 'more-than-human', and given the earlier analysis of the ability of the likes of Kula valuables to entrance and drive behaviour, it should of course be no surprise to anthropologists, that these peculiar substances that have noticeable effects on the human body and consciousness will be treated as especially potent and agential, as is the case with khat.

Khat: a brief overview

Khat is the most commonly used name globally for the stimulant leaves and stems of the plant *Catha edulis* (Forsk.), that is indigenous to much of Africa, Gulf and Middle East. It has been consumed—principally by chewing and forming wads of khat in the cheek—in ritual, labour and recreational contexts for many centuries, with a particularly long history in Ethiopia (Gebissa 2004) and Yemen (Weir 1985; Kennedy 1987); but a great deal of the world's supply comes from a beautiful range of hills called the Nyambenes northeast of Mount Kenya where it is grown by the Tigania and Igembe, two subgroups of the Meru people. In the Nyambenes, khat—or *miraa* as it is known in Kenya—is grown as a tree, older specimens reaching several metres in height, while in other regions, including Ethiopia, it is often grown as a smaller shrub. Khat is legal in Kenya, Ethiopia and other producer countries (albeit often viewed with suspicion), but increasingly illegal around the world, including in the UK where it was banned in 2014 due to concerns about its import and consumption by members of the Somali diaspora. Such is the legal ambiguity that swirls around khat, that it has been dubbed a 'quasilegal' commodity (Cassanelli 1986; Carrier and Klantschnig 2018).

There is much heterogeneity in the product depending on the specific region in which it is grown, the particular variety of tree, the part of the tree from where it is harvested, the length of the stems, and how it is presented. This is the case in all khat growing regions, including Yemen (Kennedy et al 1980, 196). In the Meru region, the age of the tree is very significant: trees can remain productive for many decades, and the oldest trees are known by Meru as *mbaine* in reference to an ancient age-set name of the Meru (Carrier 2007). These variations often play a part in determining price (Carrier 2006). This does not map strictly onto potency: more expensive varieties of Kenyan khat are seen as more refined in effects, whereas cheaper varieties give more 'bang for the buck', similar to how expensive forms of alcohol like wine are often viewed as more refined.

Khat is chewed for its stimulating effects linked principally in the pharmacological literature to two of its alkaloids, cathine and cathinone, the latter being regarded as stronger than the former. Cathinone is structurally similar to amphetamine (Kalix

1984), and synthetic forms of cathinone like methcathinone can be pharmacologically highly potent (Glennon et al. 1987), more so than naturally occurring cathinone. Furthermore, the pharmacological potency of khat's alkaloids is tempered by its mode of consumption: just as chewing coca leaves produces a milder effect than snorting cocaine, so does chewing khat produce milder effects than would taking doses of concentrated cathinone. In this regard, chewing limits the intensity of consumption. Alkaloid content varies from region to region and depending on the grade of khat, according to some pharmacological analysis (Geisshüssler and Brenneisen 1987), with Kenyan khat being the most potent in terms of cathinone content. Further research in this regard would be interesting to see how pharmacological analysis of proportions of khat's alkaloids maps onto how consumers speak of particular varieties having different effects. The notion of Kenyan khat as particularly strong was apparent among Somali consumers I met in the UK in the 2000s who had tried both Kenyan and Ethiopian varieties on sale there.

There is discussion in the pharmacological literature of the stability of khat's alkaloids, as cathinone degrades into cathine over time following harvesting, so in theory making khat less potent (Pendl et al. 2021). This has been of interest to forensic scientists where khat is illegal, including in the USA. There cathinone and cathine are treated differently under federal law (one being Schedule I, the other Schedule IV, the latter fetching more lenient penalties) and so seizures of khat are rushed to laboratories to ensure the substance can be treated as a Schedule I offence (Carrier 2005a). This loss of potency over time is reckoned a key reason why consumers like their khat as fresh as possible, wanting maximum effects from the twigs and leaves, and hence why transporting the substance is subject to the 'need for speed' (ibid.). However, khat is also more pleasant to chew when fresh, and taste and succulence are likely more salient reasons for most consumers preferring fresh khat, especially as consumers do not necessarily perceive older or dried khat as less potent, as we will discuss.

Learning to form the wad of khat in the cheek (known as a *takssin* in Kenya) is a key part of becoming able to recognise effects of khat: just as in Howard Becker's perspective (Becker 1953), cannabis consumers learn to smoke and appreciate cannabis' effects as positive, khat consumers learn to chew and recognise what is handas, the Kenyan name for the khat high (and a word for which I have never found a definitive etymology). Kenyan chewers described handas to me as something that induced alertness and made them busy. The term *steam* is used in Kenya to altered states related to various substances, including alcohol (Saavedra 2004, 200), and is also used to refer to handas. The way this term was used was suggestive of the phenomenology of khat's effects, as people would talk of the 'steam rising' as its effects took hold, reflecting the physical sensations of

heightened temperature and even sweating that can result from chewing (Al-Motarreb, Al-Habori and Broadley 2010), as well as feelings of energy and power that it can induce. Handas can be hard to discern for first-time chewers, and there are many stories of outsiders more used to Western-style drug cultures often involving taking pills or lines of cocaine who chew khat while on holiday only to find the effects for them are limited to sore cheeks.

Despite khat not being especially potent pharmacologically, pharmacological (im)potency captures an important but only partial aspect of the full experience of a substance. ‘Soft’ drugs can still be potent in their effects. In fact, khat’s low pharmacological potency perhaps increases its social potency, allowing it to enter a wider variety of social settings and consumption patterns. Were it more overwhelming in its effects, it could not function in this regard. In Kenya, consumers sometimes chew during the day while working on farms or in kiosks; recreational use in Kenya often involves more of a binge, chewers referring to Saturday as *sagaday*, ‘the day reserved for chewing’ (*saga* in Kiswahili meaning ‘to grind’). In such binge chewing, chewers might boast how their weekend consumption involved chewing *mpaka che* (until dawn the next day). There are different patterns of consumption in other parts of the world, with khat consumption in Yemen and Djibouti often being more of an early afternoon to late evening affair. This was similar to patterns I noticed on a research trip to Madagascar in 2006, where consumption in leisure time in the north of the country involved chewing between 3 p.m. and 8 p.m., after which supper was had. Before being banned in 2014, in the UK Somali diaspora context, fresh khat often arrived in early evening, then was often chewed in *mafrish* (places where khat is sold and chewed) over the evening and into the night.

The substance is linked to a range of health problems, mostly connected with either poor dental health (chewing with sugary drinks), or insomnia from chewing late. There are links to more worrying problems too, however, including increased risk of heart attacks, and some link it to a syndrome referred to as ‘khat psychosis’. Research on the latter has demonstrated a strong link to traumatic pasts, especially for those suffering from post-traumatic stress disorder through experiences of conflict in Somalia (Odenwald et al. 2009). While medical harms are debated in the literature, there has been much attention too given to ‘social harms’, especially in the Somali diaspora context. Khat is associated with a range of such harms (see Ermansons 2024), from high unemployment and divorce rates, to concerns with the money spent on a pastime some see as unproductive. Indeed, I remember watching a debate about khat on Kenyan TV in the early 2000s where the anti-khat guest was discussing how many thousands of ‘manhours’ were wasted to khat consumption in Mombasa alone. Similar points are made about khat consumption in Djibouti, Somaliland and Yemen, khat consumption said to be

hindering economic activities and 'growth' in these countries through 'idleness' (Beckerleg 2010). Such a view of khat as wasted time also hits hard in the Somali diaspora context where there is a strong work ethic for those seen as fortunate to live in the Global North and who are expected to send remittances home to family in the home regions (Lindley 2010).

Potent talk

> Makata is very powerful!
> —Khat trader, Isiolo, 1999

> Nyeusi is powerful miraa, we think of it as like Nescafé.
> —Khat consumer, Isiolo, 1999

The remarks above were made to me when first researching the Kenyan 'social life' of *miraa*. The first remark was made in the market of the northern Kenyan town of Isiolo—my base for much of my fieldwork—by a trader selling a variety of khat known there as *makata*. This was a cheap variety of khat whose name derives from the Swahili word for 'to cut' (*kukata*), as that variety consists of stems cut rather than plucked from the trees. I was conducting some participant observation by helping out on a khat stall just as the fresh consignments were arriving in the market from the nearby Nyambene Hills where most of Kenya's khat is grown. The atmosphere was giddy due to both the anticipation of handas and the unusual sight of a *mzungu* (European) working on a khat stall. 'Makata is very powerful' subsequently became a catchphrase for me and my friends in the market area, one often shouted excitedly from a distance.

The second remark was made by a friend when taking me on a guided tour of the Isiolo khat market, a market where several different varieties of the substance are sold. It was in reference to a variety called *nyeusi* (meaning 'black' in Swahili for its dark purple colour), also referred to as 'Black Power'. While the second remark and its invocation of instant coffee suggests limited pharmacological strength, it also speaks to how drug potency needs to be considered contextually, and in relation to cultural meanings of the sort Moerman elaborates as contributing to medicinal potency through the placebo effect (Moerman 2002). Nescafé at the time in Isiolo was seen as a rather exclusive drink, so socially potent at least.

Much of my research focused on the different meanings swirling around khat revealed in how people talk about it, and how infused this discourse is with power and intriguing ascriptions of agency to the substance. Indeed, people speak about khat and its effects in ways that seem to emphasise and even exaggerate the effects and agency of the substance itself, belying its reputation as a 'soft drug'. Certainly, affirmed chewers often appear to hype up khat's effects. This is reflected

in many of khat's nicknames that refer directly to power, such as 'Topong the power', or the 'Black Power' mentioned above, as well as in the catchphrase 'Makata is very powerful!' This potent talk was often focused on khat generally, though sometimes particular varieties of khat would be singled out as especially strong, including a type grown in the Embu region of Kenya known as *muguka*, that those more used to the Meru varieties perceived as especially strong in terms of its effects.

Kenyan chewers certainly talk up khat's power, in a way that contrasts with what Gezon found among chewers in northern Madagascar: 'Because of its gentle effects relative to other drugs that they are familiar with, like alcohol or even marijuana, people in the khat network in Madagascar scoff at the idea that the drug could ever qualify for anything other than a mild drug' (Gezon 2012, 81). Indeed, so much power is attributed to khat in Kenya, that some chewers even suggest it is capable of making one achieve superhuman feats. Two young chewers I met long ago on a bus in the Nyambene Hills showed me a Spanish newspaper they had got hold of—they said that although they knew no Spanish, once they chewed they would understand as handas makes the impossible possible. This they explained with the phrase *yote yawezekana na veve* (Swahili: 'Everything is possible with veve'). *Veve* is another word for khat in Kenya; the phrase *yote yawezekana* is more usually heard in reference to Jesus, *yote yawezekana na Yesu* being a phrase heard much in evangelical circles. Similarly, in Isiolo I was told of 'academic tourists', students who engaged little with their studies during term time, but who would borrow notes from more diligent students near to exams. They would then chew khat while reading through the notes, and apparently end up doing better than the diligent students.[2] A Kenyan comedy show, Hapa Kule News (2013), transformed talk of khat power into a sketch whereby a Somali khat chewer demonstrates to the reporter the ability of khat to generate electricity, suggesting that a variety called *giza nyekundu* has an approximate voltage of 6.5 V. The chewer subsequently demonstrates how connecting his *takssin* of khat to a car jumpstarts the car's engine.

One affirmed chewer whose descriptions of khat and khat's effects bear some consideration in relation to power and agency is a friend of mine called M'Mucheke. I first met him in 1999 in Isiolo. He is a Meru (the people most associated with cultivating khat in Kenya) and took pride in his people's connections to the substance. When I first met him, he said that a mutual friend had created a list of all the people in Isiolo knowledgeable about khat whom I should meet during my research, and that he was number one. Serendipity had brought me to a khat connoisseur, and someone who was great company with a remarkable gift for

[2] Of course, khat's amphetamine-like qualities resemble those of so-called 'smart drugs' like adderall, meaning there may be some truth in this tale.

words. He was obsessed with words, spending much time listening to the radio and writing down any new ones he came across to sprinkle into conversation. It was M'Mucheke who first interested me in questions of khat and agency with what seemed peculiar locutions describing his chewing sessions.

For him, handas always seemed to be the active agent in his descriptions of chewing. For example, instead of saying that he cannot feel handas in cold places (handas is said to be neutralised by the cold), he would say 'my handas doesn't like the cold'. Instead of saying that he doesn't like noise when chewing, he would say *handas yangu haipendi kelele* ('my handas does not like noise'). Friends in the UK report similar phrasing in the Somali language, whereby someone might say *Hayga jiidhin miqaankayga jiirin (*'don't disturb my *mirqan*', the Somali equivalent of handas). For M'Mucheke, this phrasing reflected his verbally creative self, finding humour by using a transferred epithet. Interestingly, it also reflects the notion that handas has its vulnerabilities, as something susceptible to temperature, loud noises and so forth, perhaps reflecting too the relational and processual nature of drug effects—context matters. However, in people's relationships with drugs this kind of ascription of agency seems frequent as discussed above. This is also seen in how some traders talk about khat in its commodity form, as reported by anthropologist Anders Hjort who conducted research on the substance in Isiolo in the 1970s. He wrote of how divorced women in Isiolo would refer to khat as their 'husbands' as it provided for them in a way their former husbands no longer did (Hjort 1979, 124), ascribing khat agency and responsibility for their livelihoods. Other chewers I met reported saying *bring the wife* when asking a trader for khat, reflecting how a chewer might use the language of kinship to refer to their relationship with the substance.

Handas as trickster

Such locutions regarding khat's effects—handas—relate, I argue, to the perception of drugs as being trickster-like characters, things that can help us in some ways, but always have the capacity to lead astray. In more playful, relatively innocuous forms, this capacity can be welcomed as something that adds to the fun of intoxication, as reflected in a Scottish phrasing I heard years ago of a dram of spirit alcohol as a 'cheeky wee one': this cheekiness encapsulated the drink's capacity to inject fun, though fun that might lead you astray. This 'cheeky' aspect of drug consumption was certainly prevalent in the (mostly male) youth culture that revolved around khat when I was first researching it, a youth culture where humour and pride was derived from encounters with handas. These encounters might involve maintaining control over handas, but also might revel in succumbing to its control.

Handas did not merely refer to a simple heightened sense of awareness and ability to stay awake, something that gave one more control over oneself and allowed one to complete tasks (though khat can do this), but also something capable of wresting control away and possessing you. Sometimes this could be beneficial, as in M'Mucheke's story of how his handas saved him while involved in a car crash on public transport. Other passengers had drifted off to sleep during the journey and were injured in the crash, but M'Mucheke's handas kept him awake and alert, allowing him to hold on tight at the critical moment to a rail and save himself. Here handas was his guardian angel. On other occasions, submission to this other power had more unpleasant consequences, as the trickster turns mischievous. A minor example of this was when I had been chewing with friends in Isiolo and had walked back to my lodging having left my belongings at the chewing venue. Rather than simply being due to my forgetfulness, this was ascribed by my friends to handas.

For young—and not so young—consumers, this mischievous potential was the source of much of the fun in chewing. Stories abounded among chewers of silly or even dangerous things done under the influence of khat, where handas had taken control. Typical of these were stories of people beginning to clean their house when chewing a strong variety of khat, and then ending up cleaning the house all night so possessed were they by handas. Handas is also linked to increased libido, and I was told of one man who tried to avoid khat as he reckoned when chewing there was a danger that he would be unfaithful to his wife, so powerful was the *nyege* (libidinous urge) handas gave him. Another chewer once told me of how he chewed in the USA and such was khat's aphrodisiac effect, that he left his chewing session to drive many hours into another state to be with his girlfriend. There was the alternative discourse, however, that khat might raise libido, yet induce male impotence, and some varieties are notorious for thus stripping away potency.

Handas stories abound. For M'Mucheke, handas' trickster qualities featured strongly in tales of people under the influence. One story went thus:

> A man chewing *kangeta* (a type of khat) was so affected by handas that a long khat stem pierced his cheek without his feeling it. He caught sight of the stem in the corner of his eye and thought it was a *rungu* (truncheon) wielded by a thug approaching him from behind. No matter how fast he ran he could not escape the attacker and feared the killer blow would strike at any time. He had run many a mile until he realised it was not a *rungu* but only a khat stem.

In Ethiopia too there are many such tales, one of which Ezekiel Gebissa, writing about khat in Ethiopia, recounts (2004, 8):

> [A] man was chewing khat alone in his home. As most chewers do, the man plucked off the tender shoots and leaves to chew and threw away the leathery leaves. The unwanted parts piled up and covered most of his feet except for the toes, which he wiggled unconsciously. The chewer was charged with the effect of the khat and his vision was blurred to the extent that he mistook his toes for a mouse. Scared, the man quickly grabbed a machete and chopped off his toes, only to realise after the high wore off that he had mutilated himself.

A Kenyan comedian known as Vinnie Baite (*Baite* being a common term used to address a male Merian) also has a series of YouTube videos called *Story za Jaba*, *jaba* being another name of *muguka*, the cheap and reputedly powerful variety mentioned earlier. These clips (Vinnie Baite 2021) show Vinnie narrating outlandish stories while chewing *muguka*. Although exaggerated for comic effect, these stories reflect that half the fun of chewing is submitting oneself to handas. Certainly, in recounting stories of moments of intoxication, chewers like to emphasise the funny things handas made them do. Rather like drinking stories, being under the influence allowed consumers to place themselves in the role of fools duped by another power in a way that raised their status among fellow chewers rather than undermining it. Were khat not a trickster but a more prosaic stimulant (perhaps in the way that we see caffeine), such khat humour would hardly be possible.

These stories of often foolish handas exploits are, I argue, significant, stretching out the enjoyment of the moment of intoxication into the future: while the effects of handas soon pass, the ability to talk about the funny thing one did under the influence lingers into the future. Such stories could involve boasts of how many hours someone stayed up chewing (the equivalent of boasting about how many pints were drunk in British drinking culture), but those most enjoyed were those of handas-induced silliness. Handas is also known for encouraging consumers to develop outlandish plans that rarely come to fruition, and the phrase ‘building castles in the air’ is sometimes used in relation to chewing (though Klein and Beckerleg 2007 cites a more pejorative version of this as ‘castles built of spit’). Being carried away on a stream of handas-induced enthusiasm and stories alongside friends constitutes much of the fun of the experience.

Khat addiction

However, it is not just those fond of the substance who like to emphasise khat’s power and agency, but those less enamoured of it do so too, including some current and former chewers. Indeed, khat is soaked in ambivalence for some consumers. Rather than being something funny, their relationship with the substance is framed in a darker way. In various places I researched khat I would

find some lamenting khat consumption even while their cheeks were distended with it. They would suggest their own lack of responsibility in chewing, neglecting their families and not being good parents, but also would describe their relationship with khat as being something like an addiction. One Meru friend of mine wrote me a moving letter after a chewing session in which he ended up spending more money than he had intended. One effect that consumers often note with khat is that it can make the chewer more open and generous. This is reflected in a Meru saying that when chewing khat you reveal the secrets of your home, as handas makes people less wary in sharing information. For my friend, handas made him more generous than he would have been otherwise, using up his limited resources on buying friends khat and drinks. He felt great regret of this perceived profligacy, prompting him to write the letter to me.

Of course, in relation to drugs, it is in the concept of 'addiction' or 'alcoholism' where consumers become framed as lacking control over a substance (see Ermansons 2024 on the 'jaadkaholic'). In Kenya, the English word 'addict' is heard used to describe khat chewers, though often by people who assume that as a 'drug' anyone who uses it must be an 'addict', however controlled their consumption may actually be. There is also a word that some people would use as a translation for 'addict': *quodhadhi.* This is used in Isiolo, and was offered by friends there as equivalent to 'addict', though this seems to more mean a habitual chewer rather than someone addicted in anything like a clinical sense. In my experience, this seemed to also be used in if anything a jocular sense, almost a badge of pride, although suggestive of irresponsible chewing. 'Addict', on the other hand, was used in a much more serious way, reflecting how people saw their relationship to khat. It has a long history of being applied to the substance. The British tried in the mid-20th century to ban khat in Kenya due to concern at consumption in the north of the country (Anderson and Carrier 2009). However, the ban had many loopholes, partly due to concerns over the health of 'addicts'. Colonial officials had such a clichéd view of addiction that they thought if khat was addictive then its chewers would also suffer withdrawal symptoms (chewers do speak of withdrawal symptoms for khat, though generally relatively minor ones like bad dreams).[3] They even feared that chewers if deprived of their khat might die. For this reason, provision was made that despite the ban, addicts might still obtain supplies at District Commissioners' officers if they registered. Such offices were inundated across Kenya with requests for supplies from those willing to embrace the subjectivity of 'addict' to gain supplies of khat courtesy of His Majesty's Administration.

[3] Though these dreams could be terrifying, one chewer in Isiolo telling me of a khat-withdrawal dream in which he was attacked by a snake.

In Yemen too there are terms for those who chew what are viewed as excessive amounts. These include the word *mula'I* for 'one who is "tied to" to qat' (Kennedy 1987, 190), and the term 'mudmen'*.* The latter is also used in relation to opium and alcohol addiction in Yemen, and is used for qat chewers who chew immoderately and frequently. According to Kennedy, they are seen as 'deviants' and are not held entirely responsible for their actions (1987, 191). Certainly, the spread of global drug discourse has given common currency to words like 'addict', and it is used heavily by those who criticise the practice. For many it encapsulates the power of this substance to disrupt health and society and the sense of relationships with khat where the substance has taken control. Yet, as discussed above, being possessed by khat and handas, is not necessarily seen as negative by its consumers, and in some ways is the source of much of its appeal, and certainly much of the capacity of handas stories to entertain. Furthermore, while some are keen that khat not be seen as a 'drug'—especially those who try and promote its trade who would rather it be seen as a mild energy supplement, and so as something more respectable—there are consumers who revel in the notion of khat as a potent 'drug', something which gives them more cachet as cool for consuming it (Carrier 2005b).

Clearly the potency of khat owes much to this discourse suggestive of all the varied meanings this substance has for different people. While Western tourists who try khat are often unimpressed with its effects, those involved with it—whether fond of it, ambivalent to it, or against it, or all three at different times—are convinced of its potency, potency filled with potential for good and ill. Indeed, while debates in the media about khat have often oscillated between portrayals of it as 'like coffee' or 'like cocaine', all consumers are aware that khat consumption is something that ideally should be controlled, although its capacity to take over the consumer is not necessarily seen as wholly negative given the pleasures that can be found in relinquishing control to handas.

Taming Handas

For the Meru I met during my fieldwork, there were many remarks suggestive that khat has to be used 'responsibly' (to use a term now common on alcohol and gambling advertising). On a spectrum running from those highly enamoured of the substance, and those who see it as an evil blight, Meru—especially the Tigania and Igembe sub-groups most associated with it—generally are at the enamoured end, given its links to their history and culture, as well as its great economic significance for the Nyambene Hills (Carrier 2007). Yet they are all too aware of the need to temper its potency and keep this potential trickster under control. This is most evident in the common refrain of Meru during my fieldwork that khat consumption was once restricted to the elders in earlier Meru society, just as

alcohol was said to have been restricted to elders in gerontocratic societies of East Africa (Carrier 2005b). While unclear how this related to actual practice, this discourse also reflects the perception of khat as something potent—something that only the more mature in society can handle, and similar restrictions are spoken of in relation to pre-colonial use of cannabis as well as alcohol.[4]

Consumers also emphasise how handas needs to be controlled through pre-consumption rituals. These include having a full meal before commencing consumption, ceasing consumption before too late in the evening, and having more food to 'kill the handas'. Killing handas involves not just eating to take away the stimulant effects, but also drinking milk, taking a mild sedative, or drinking a beer. Given that insomnia is the main side effect of khat consumption, killing handas is important to ensure the chewer can still sleep and therefore not suffer too much from *bablass* the next day (*bablass* being a term used in Isiolo for the khat hangover).

Handas is also tamed through patterns of use. For Meru khat traders that I came to know, khat consumption was an everyday affair (Carrier 2021), as it was for many lorry drivers or nightwatchmen. Everyday use of such a drug might strike the reader as evidence for addiction; however, this everyday consumption was much more akin to how coffee or tea are used by many of us to keep us going through the day. Khat use in this regard punctuates daily routines, helping consumers cope with their work: for khat traders, chewing on the job could help them focus at moments of pressure when fresh consignments arrive and throngs of customers line up to buy their bundles. Similarly, by limiting consumption to *sagaday* or special occasions, even those leisure consumers who binge chew at the weekend introduce an element of control to their consumption.

But for some consumers—and many non-consumers—there is a general feeling that handas cannot be tamed so easily, and that the only way to do so is to get rid of it altogether through prohibition. It is not unusual to hear consumers themselves call for its ban, and supply-side measures have been tried against it numerous times in numerous contexts. However, that khat—like other drugs—always seems to defy such measures through the rapid development of smuggling networks, further adds to its perceived potency. Such is the apparent hold of the substance upon its consumers, that many are prepared to risk arrest and fines in areas where it is illegal for the sake of handas: indeed, Meru have long argued that 'miraa is unstoppable' (Goldsmith 2017). The UK following the ban of 2014 is just the latest example of this, where consumers are still able to access smuggled khat, both

[4] On alcohol, see Willis (2002). The restriction of cannabis to elders in pre-colonial societies such as the Luo of East Africa is an emergent theme in current project on cannabis in Africa for which I am conducting further research in Kenya. This project is entitled *Cannabis Africana: Drugs and Development in Africa*.

fresh and a dried variety of Ethiopian khat known as *graba* that is easier to smuggle (Carrier and Klantschnig 2018).

Thus, although seen by many as a relatively mild substance whose potency is limited by the way it is consumed, khat consumers themselves are emphatic about its power. Even old khat or dried khat such as *graba* is viewed as potent, although as related above, according to pharmacological literature khat becomes less potent as time elapses after harvest. In fact, some chewers suggest older khat has greater potency. M'Mucheke jokes that khat that was a day or two old—known as *barehe* in Kenya, from the Somali word for 'slept', that is, khat that has over-nighted—was actually more potent because *iko na handas ya leo na jana* ('it has the handas of today as well as yesterday'). While there was much jest in this remark, it perhaps reflects a greater truth that drug potency is always a hybridised thing of pharmacology and associated meanings and discourse: expectations and previous experiences influence how we feel when under the influence, so yesterday's handas—or other forms of altered states—is always a factor in that of today.

Dissecting potency

There is, of course, bravado to much of the above talk about khat's potency and the ascription of agency to it and its handas, especially in all the talk of its power that I came across in my time researching the substance, and it was often clear how khat's power could be exaggerated. A vivid example was a chewing session in the small northern Kenyan town of Garba Tulla where I and some friends were chewing. In the course of conversation I mentioned the high value of truffles in Europe, and my friends became intrigued by this, and spoke of how truffle-like fungi are found in the Garba Tulla area. Enthusiasm grew until we were discussing plans of harvesting Kenyan truffles and exporting these to Europe. This might seem like a classic example of 'building castles in the air' under the influence of handas as, unfortunately, these plans came to nought. However, the most enthusiastic participant was the only one in attendance *not* chewing. Indeed, convivial settings can induce over-enthusiasm even without stimulants or intoxicants, although it often is tempting to put this enthusiasm down to any psychoactive substance consumed rather than the stimulation of sharing company and ideas. Similarly, M'Mucheke often put down his creative story-telling and general bonhomie to his handas, even though I find him similarly creative when not under the influence.

There is also a lot of irony in this ascription of agency and potency to handas, which makes me hesitant to take this too literally. Furthermore, there is much fetishisation of khat as a social agent going on in all this. As in much drug

discourse, the agency and power of the substance is emphasised, while much of the wider context—'set' and 'setting'—is blurred away. Khat becomes the principal actor, whether in aiding the chewer to fulfil a task or socialise, or in leading the chewer astray, as the trickster-like character of handas is wont to do according to this discourse. Indeed, as mentioned earlier, much social scientific and anthropological analysis would seek to understand how khat's potency and potent talk emerges in particular socio-cultural and politico-economic contexts that underpin this impression of agency and power. Certainly, the potential for harm or good of substances like khat are very much underpinned by such contexts, as drugs disproportionately affect those on the social margins—their trickster-like qualities being more likely to harm those with the least in terms of social support networks.

However, this potent talk is not something to ignore, viewing it merely as false consciousness, or something to explain away through contextualisation. For this potency has very real social effects. This is true in how notions of drug potency and agency underpin much prohibitory policy, suggesting that the only way to tame drugs is to ban them. But for consumers too, such talk itself creates much of a drug's appeal, affecting how its effects are felt through the anticipation of them, and in providing the stories that can stretch the fleeting feelings of stimulation into the future. In the case of khat, it may be relatively mild pharmacologically, but its cultural meanings bound up in this discourse make it still very potent historically, sociologically and anthropologically, as these meanings and effects coalesce back onto the substance itself. Drug effects in this way—at least when drugs are taken knowingly—are thus always more than their pharmacology. While Zinberg and others have shown how a 'hard drug' like heroin can be used in controlled ways, a relatively 'soft drug' such as khat can come to evoke trickster-like figures capable of taking agency and responsibility away from the consumer, and it is partly through the myriad stories of drug consumption that people tell that these trickster substances become yet more potent.

Authorship statement

Neil Carrier is the sole author of this article.

Ethics statement

Neil Carrier's current project, *Cannabis Africana Drugs and Development in Africa*, has been approved by ethics committees of University of Bristol, University of Cape Town and Daystar University, Nairobi.

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