

# The Economic Significance of *Cannabis sativa* in the Moroccan Rif

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In his 1966 paper in *Economic Botany*, Mikuriya discussed the cultivation of *Cannabis sativa* or kif in the Rif Mountains of Morocco. The present paper will amplify his statements concerning kif, particularly within an economic context, based upon data gathered during a year and a half of anthropological field work in Northern Morocco.<sup>2</sup> Grown in large quantities in the Rif and smoked by a fairly high proportion of native adult males, kif ranks, along with citrus fruits, lumber, cotton, and palmetto fiber, as one of the area's chief cash crops.<sup>3</sup> Unlike the other crops, it is illegal, but for various reasons to be developed, it continues to flourish.

## Ethnographic Sketch

The northern part of Morocco is perhaps the poorest agricultural area within the regime. This fact is due to two conditions, the first of which is basically ecological. Lacking any stable water source except that along the banks of Wad Ghis and Wad Nkqur, subsistence agriculture depends on the dry farming of grains and fruits, necessitating an adequate rainfall. When sufficient precipitation is available, the peasantry manage a livable existence. However, when drought occurs, survival becomes more hazardous. Occasionally, as in 1947, famines have been recorded. The ecological situation is further complicated by land denudation through destruction of the natural forests. This has

been due in part to local consumption of wood for building houses, burning to clear fields for cultivation, and the use of wood and charcoal for fuel. However, the major agents in the deforestation process were the Spaniards, who held this part of Morocco as a protectorate. This period of Spanish "custody," which lasted from 1912-1956, was one in which massive amounts of timber were cut and exported. Although the period was relatively short, Spain managed by using modern equipment, according to Mikesell (1961: 101), to "cut more trees in a decade than the local tribesmen could destroy in a century." The process, which has been somewhat reversed by government programs in planting new trees, has left large sections of mountainous area without any natural protection against water runoff and further soil erosion during the rainy season.

The second factor in northern Morocco's poverty is political. Spanish colonial policy sought extraction of whatever economic value was to be found in the Rif mountains, while contributing little to the country's economic condition. To a certain extent this was due to the very low base line of economic potential which existed in the Rif. Of equal importance was the fact that Spain itself was poor, and spent much of the period between 1912 and 1956 either fighting rebels within the Rif led by Abdel Krim, or fighting internal wars within its own boundaries. Unlike France, which held control over the larger part of Morocco, Spain was unable to make many economic improvements.

Given these ecological and political factors, kif remained an important cash crop as well as stimulant among Rif tribal groups. The center for kif cultivation is in the mountainous region around Ketama, a small *ville* located within the province of Alhucemas and administered by a government appointed *caid* at the *ville* of Tar-

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<sup>3</sup> Mikesell, in his very excellent study of the cultural geography of northern Morocco, makes only occasional mention of kif. He does, however, acknowledge the plant as an important cash crop (1961: 82).

guist. He, in turn, is under the political jurisdiction of the Governor of Alhucemas Province, located in the city of the same name. Although kif could be grown in other areas in northern Morocco, its cultivation is centered almost exclusively in the tribes (*qabilas*) of Ketama and Beni Seddath. The kif from other areas is regarded as inferior in strength and texture. The Berbers have a saying that "the land of Ketama likes only kif," referring not only to the fact that most other crops do not grow well there, but also to the superior quality of the kif product from this area.

### Economics

The mature female plant, as harvested, consists of brownish stems and golden leaves. The leaves are stripped off by hand and the stems are either thrown away, or retted by submerging in water for a period of time, after which the fibers are separated and used for making hats, baskets, shoes, and the like. The leaves are separated from pods or seeds, then cut up by a small hand sickle into very minute particles. The kif is then mixed with uncured tobacco. Since there is a government monopoly on tobacco, it is necessary for the producers and distributors of kif to provide their own tobacco. In the economics of kif, tobacco plays an important role. Uncured tobacco is ground up and mixed into any quantity of kif prior to smoking the drug in a ratio of .3 tobacco to .7 kif. Mikuriya's data on this admixture of .5 and .5 is, to the best of my knowledge, inaccurate. The Berbers maintain that without the tobacco, kif "doesn't have salt."

Tobacco, oddly enough, costs more in bulk than does kif. Prices fluctuate according to the product's availability. Within the province of Alhucemas, during the years 1965-1966, uncured tobacco in leaf form cost approximately 40 dirhams (one dirham equaled 20 cents American) a kilo. The natural kif plant during this period was marketed at between 12 and 30 dirhams a kilo within the same province. A kilo of kif ground up and mixed with tobacco would fetch about 70 dirhams, the additional cost stemming from the

labor input. Higher prices in urban areas were due in part to additional middlemen in the distribution system, as well as the added risk of marketing under closer police surveillance. Tourists and persons uninitiated in the price structure paid considerably more.

Kif is usually smoked in a pipe called *sibsa*. The long stem can be dismantled into two connecting parts and presumably offers greater security to the carrier, in addition to a cooler smoke (Fig. 1). Stems are made from the wood of the walnut tree, and a small bowl made of baked clay is fitted at one end of the *sibsa*. It is reputed that a clandestine factory exists in Tetuan Province to manufacture such pipes, although I was unable to get further information on this matter. The price for a simple *sibsa* in local *suqs* or marketplaces was 3 dirhams, although again tourists and strangers were charged more.

The kif and tobacco plants are distributed directly to middlemen from the farms in the Ketama region. Since, at this point, kif as an economic commodity becomes illegal, it is extremely difficult to gather information on the complexity of transportation to urban markets and buyers or middlemen outside Morocco. Mikuriya's presumption that large vehicles are used to transport kif to outside markets is probably valid, although in order to do this, merchants would need some influence with segments of the national police. Too careful questioning along these lines, however, is discouraged by everyone involved directly or potentially in kif traffic. During the period of field work in the Rif, it was made explicit to me that if I wished to remain in the country or, for that matter, preserve my health, it would not be wise to investigate this problem too closely.

With regard to crop yield, I was equally unable to obtain much information. Mikuriya stated that he was informed that the average yield was two kilograms of dried tops and stems (excluding leaves) per square meter. While I cannot confirm this, I do have figures on the amount of profit per man hour of labor. Informants estimated that to realize a net income of 1,000 dirhams for a crop of barley, six

months of labor would be required; the same amount of profit that could be derived from a kif crop necessitates only five days' labor.

While I was unable to obtain information about kif traffic outside the Rif, it was fairly simple to acquire data about distribution and price structure within the area itself. This can be attributed to the fact that most kif merchants inside the Rif are relatively low-level middlemen, who are marginal and are neither as protected nor endangered as large producers. Because of their marginality and intimate knowledge of the distribution system, these middlemen do not have to bribe officials. Their customers are located in such remote areas that it is impossible to police their activities.

These middlemen transport their product on their backs or on donkeys in specially made bags of cloth which contain up to 40 kilos each. Supplies are picked up at night. Staying on isolated dirt paths, these individuals branch out to their regular distribution points. Unlike large scale distributors who operate from primary markets such as cities and abroad, these rural points can be viewed as secondary links in a market system indigenous to the area. They are generally located in small cafes in the local *suqs* market centers in the province of Alhucemas. Rif market systems are cyclical, with a market (*suq*) held once a week at a permanent location within each tribe or large tribal section. By holding their markets on separate days, tribes have produced a weekly staggered system of markets all across the Rif. Thus, a merchant selling any commodity, including kif, can travel to a different *suq* every day of the week, except Friday, the Muslim sabbath. The marketplace itself, except on market day, is usually rather deserted, with the exception of a few cafes that remain open all week long. These cafes generally serve as terminals for secondary distribution. A cafe owner occasionally may also serve as a middleman, but he is more likely supplied by a relative or friend. It is also rare for a kif producer to serve in any role other than producer. This accords with other cash crop activities in the Province, since

the farmer's role terminates once he meets his middleman who then acts as distributor. Once kif plants reach the cafes, the owners grind up a certain amount for sale in small lots, which are generally packaged in small empty match boxes and sold for 70 or 80 francs<sup>4</sup> per box. Regular kif smokers prefer to buy the unground, unblended kif and tobacco because it is easy to process into smokable form. Hence, they save on labor charges by doing their own work. However, the occasional kif smoker finds it more convenient to purchase a small match box or two of the drug.

There are at least ten cafes in the city of Alhucemas that cater to kif smokers, and one or two depots operated by local large-scale distributors. They are well known and presumably pay for protection against prosecution. In addition, at least one cafe in every market center deals in kif. These cafes, both within the city and at the rural markets, are terminal points for distribution within the secondary kif market. No one buys at a cafe to resell later, since this would involve two middlemen transactions, thereby placing expenses outside the normal competitive range.

#### Native Attitudes

Although the socio-cultural significance of kif is somewhat outside the scope of a study such as this, treating mainly economic aspects of this plant, we can obtain some insight into the lack of restrictive mechanisms on kif distribution. Not regarded as particularly evil among Berber males, it is, unlike alcohol, not prohibited by any religious stigma. This is explicitly recognized by the judicial sanction system. A person caught smoking kif is generally ignored or placed in jail overnight, whereas a Muslim can receive from three to six months in jail for drinking alcohol. Some informants explained to me that this rather lenient at-

<sup>4</sup>One hundred Moroccan francs are equal to one Moroccan dirham. The monetary value of the dirham is pegged roughly at the same level of the 1965 French franc, although this value is maintained artificially. There is a considerable black market in Moroccan currency.

titude was based in part on the fact that a high percentage of the soldiers and local police smoked kif.

Kif is regarded by the educated literate elite as an evil, as they themselves have become accustomed to emulating western customs. Many of those who decry the use of kif drink alcohol. To a certain extent, a stigma is placed on the kif smoker, as poor, illiterate, and backward. On the other hand, kif smokers regard the urban elite who frown upon the use of kif as bad Muslims, since they accept so much of western culture, including alcohol drinking. In 1959, kif cultivators argued in a confrontation with the government that if the production of kif were to be eliminated, the import and export of alcohol must also be banned. Since Scotch has become a favored drink among some elite circles, and inasmuch as considerable revenue is derived from the exportation of wine, such a policy was not instigated and kif growers won something of a moral victory.

Another element to be considered from a socio-cultural point of view is that within the mountain area, kif is largely restricted to men of middle age or older. Unlike many industrial nations where marijuana smoking is regarded as a rebellious act against an older generation, kif smoking in the Rif is regarded as part of the older establishment. Young men who fancy themselves poets or moderns are more likely to drink beer or wine as a sign of rebellious feelings.

A third factor in the use of kif is that it is not generally associated with any ritual or mystical features. Users may employ kif in order to induce what they consider a transcendental experience, but kif smoking seems to be completely disassociated with mystical searches, and is not encouraged by any of the local *sufi* organizations. In fact, it is somewhat frowned upon by most prominent religious brotherhoods in the area. Kif smoking seems to be motivated more by the pleasure it brings or the depression and anxiety it alleviates. One can therefore say that the use of kif in this area is not regarded as a manifestation of a "sick" society but rather as a means of relieving everyday pres-

sure. At the same time, it is not irreligious to smoke kif, as it is to drink alcohol, and kif is considerably cheaper.

In a society where social structure is devoted primarily to relationships between social groups, personal behavior that does not affect traditional mechanisms of social order is not regarded as a dereliction. The use of kif remains an integral part of the culture and is regarded as no great threat to community or group relationships. Since kif smoking is considered to be outside traditional legal and religious structures, its use becomes a matter of personal disposition and economic ability.

### History

The origins of kif use in Morocco are too hazy to attempt any precise reconstruction. The plant may have been indigenous to the area, but equally possible is that it was accidentally introduced during one of the Arabic invasions of Morocco or else transported to the region by an individual returning from a pilgrimage to Mecca. It is also possible that it came to Morocco from the south carried by slaves imported from West Africa. Whatever route its introduction took, its cultivation and use became firmly established by the 19th Century.

Informants insist that their great grandparents smoked kif. To the best of my knowledge, however, Spanish chroniclers of the early days of the Protectorate make no mention of its use. I was told by veterans of the Spanish Civil War that when Franco enlisted Berbers from the Rif to support his cause, he paid them in part with kif supplies. Whether this is true or not, the drug was available to them in Spain; the Spanish in fact took a lenient position towards kif-use among the Berbers, both during the Civil War and within Morocco itself.<sup>5</sup> Spain made no attempts to suppress the cultivation of kif, and very little effort was made to halt its distribution within the Rif. This is interesting in

<sup>5</sup> An army which fights under the influence of marijuana is not necessarily an inefficient army. Berber soldiers were more feared by the Republican army than even Franco's German Axis troops.

view of the fact that the Spanish government is not favorably disposed towards the use of *Cannabis* and has stringent laws within its own boundaries governing the possession and use of the plant.

To a certain extent it is possible that Spain inadvertently encouraged the spread of regular kif smoking. This conjecture arises from the fact that Spain created a special social class which regularly used kif, namely the native Moroccan soldier. While kif smoking was never associated with any particular group or institution, the rise of a full-time militia also gave rise to a social group that regularly engaged in using the plant.

The Rif is regarded as part of the land of *siba*, an area outside the administrative boundaries of the traditional Moroccan Empire. Although the Riffian had always been a warrior, prior to the advent of the Spanish Protectorate he was never really a soldier. There is, I think, a basic difference between these two activities. Tribal warriors operate within a specific context of family and kin communities. They are called together only as temporary congregations. They are not full-time specialists in war. Rather, they devote only a portion of their time to war, another parcel of time to cropping, and still another to their community's social affairs. They are rarely burdened with the repetitiveness of police activity or garrison life. The business of warfare takes up only a small portion of the time of the professional soldier. There are long breaks between the time he is fighting. These breaks are filled with routine activities, which are divorced from his usual occupations and amusements. The soldier's social life is a good deal different from that of tribal warrior, in that the former is placed in an all-male society that has a professional rather than a community basis for existence. His new social group sets up a different sort of social and personal relationships. His orientation is changed from one of family and neighbours to one of professional peers. It is within this later context that kif became an accepted part of everyday life.

The Spanish point of view showed limited concern towards the native use of kif because within their cultural mapping it

reflected an attitude and behavioral pattern which they considered barbaric. This lent an additional self-justifying motive for their "civilizing" venture into Morocco. It is equally likely that the Spaniards found themselves in the same position as that of the present independent Moroccan government, inasmuch as it is practically impossible to control the cultivation of kif in the Rif.

From time to time, the current Moroccan government had made attempts to halt the cultivation of kif, although this has met with complete lack of success. Mikuriya pointed out that the Moroccan army mounted a campaign to eradicate the Ketama kif fields in the early 1960's, but because of the poor communication systems, rugged terrain, and armed resistance this attempt failed. I suspect that any army attempt would be more in the nature of a dramatic charade to placate world opinion. Morocco, like other countries such as Turkey, China, etc., faces occasional censorship from international organizations such as WHO, if it makes no attempt to eradicate illegal plant supplies. However, producers are not only well entrenched in their environment, but also wield considerable political power. While I doubt the accuracy of Mikuriya's conjecture that Ketama is "reputedly producing the most kif in Asia," the kif growers have not only a large indigenous market, but as a result of proximity to Europe and an increasing market there, the commodity has an expanding demand curve in which huge amounts of money are involved.

While no slur against the Moroccan government is intended, to a large extent public officials here as elsewhere are susceptible to bribes. The collusion between some officials and producers, the awareness that the crop provides Rif inhabitants with possibly their only familiar alternative to starvation, as well as the resulting inflow of hard foreign currency, makes it problematic that effective control can or will be established over the production and sale of kif. The present government position is a paradox that can be explained in terms of the above factors. The government prohibits the sale of kif but does not prohibit the production of kif.

When I was first told of this situation, I feared my translating of Berber into English was faulty. Repeated statements of this nature lead me to believe that it is true. I only conjecture that this situation is a rather ingenious way of keeping external pressure off the Moroccan government, while at the same time allowing for the continuation of a kif market. Occasionally, small lot dealers of kif are arrested and sentenced to short prison terms. While such arrests are widely publicized in Moroccan Arabic, French and Spanish language newspapers, they are really fictions in that they do not reflect any com-

prehensive campaign on the part of public security officials to terminate kif supplies. They serve as announcements to the external world that Morocco holds an anti-*Cannabis* position, but at the same time production, distribution, and consumption of kif go on at an unabated rate.

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