



American Expression E2424 Kangaroo court

IOTS Publishing Team
International Online Teachers Society
Since 2011

A kangaroo court is a derogatory term for a court that disregards recognized standards of law or justice, or where the verdict is predetermined. The term likely originates from the notion of kangaroos making great leaps, suggesting that such courts jump to conclusions or are not grounded in legitimate legal practice. These courts are characterized by their ad-hoc nature, absence of impartiality, and disregard for formalities that typically ensure fair and just proceedings.

Kangaroo courts are most commonly associated with situations where the rule of law has been set aside, such as in prisons, where inmates might form a mock court to settle disputes internally, or in authoritarian regimes, where they may be used to suppress opposition without the burden of a fair trial. In these contexts, the courts do not operate with the authority of the legal system established by the state; instead, they often serve the interests of those in power, whether it's the leader of a prison gang or a tyrannical government.

These informal or illegally constituted courts can also emerge in workplace settings or amongst groups of peers, where a mock court is formed to pass judgment on minor disputes or behaviors within the group. While these are often less severe and sometimes humorous, they can still impact the individuals involved, as the accused may face ridicule or social ostracism based on the group's informal verdict.

The term is also used metaphorically to criticize legitimate legal proceedings where biases are believed to be so overwhelming that a fair trial is impossible. For example, critics of certain high-profile cases might describe them as being tried in a kangaroo court if they believe the proceedings are unduly influenced by public opinion, media coverage, or political pressure.

Historically, kangaroo courts have been noted in times of war and civil unrest. During the American Civil War, for instance, soldiers from both the Union and Confederate sides were known to establish kangaroo courts to deal with thieves and other minor offenders within their ranks. The hasty and often punitive nature of these courts served more to maintain immediate order rather than to dispense justice.

In addition to their use in real-life situations, kangaroo courts have made their way into popular culture, often depicted in films, books, and television shows where characters face outrageously unfair trials in both dramatic and comedic settings. These portrayals serve to underscore the absence of justice and the arbitrary nature of the penalties imposed.

In conclusion, kangaroo courts represent a breakdown in the judicial process, where the principles of fairness, legality, and impartiality are abandoned. They are a manifestation of injustice and power imbalance, whether used in jest, as a means of social control within closed groups, or more gravely, as instruments of oppression by authoritarian entities. The term itself serves as a critique of such practices, emphasizing the importance of legitimate and impartial legal proceedings.

Questions for Discussion

1. What are the potential social and psychological impacts on individuals who are subjected to kangaroo court proceedings?
2. How do kangaroo courts reflect the power dynamics within the groups or societies that use them?
3. In what ways can the concept of kangaroo courts be applied to analyze biases in officially sanctioned legal systems?
4. What measures can be taken to prevent the formation of kangaroo courts within communities or organizations?
5. How have representations of kangaroo courts in media influenced public perception of justice and legal fairness?