

North Yemen is now taking over 50 per cent of the world's rhino horn despite the government's ban on its importation since late 1982.

Esmond Bradley Martin



The old Yemeni daggers with rhino horn handles often have extremely fine silver scabbards.

North Yemen and the rhino horn trade today

by Esmond Bradley Martin

A Yemeni craftsman files a piece of rhino horn into the shape of a handle for a dagger in the Sana'a market.



In 1978, when I first visited North Yemen, a country which had just opened to the outside world, I discovered and later publicised that the people there were the major consumers of rhino horn. From 1972 to 1978 the North Yemenis were importing approximately 40 per cent of all the rhino horn which entered international trade. It was used for making high quality handles for traditional daggers, called *jambias*; and most of this work was carried out in the capital city of Sana'a in the market, which is perhaps the most traditional one remaining in Arabia.

Subsequently, the African Wildlife Foundation sponsored a world-wide campaign against this use of rhino horn and encouraged conservationists to write letters of protest to the Yemeni government, with the result that North Yemen officially banned all imports of rhino horn on 22 August 1982.* However, in early 1983 there were strong suspicions that large quantities were still entering the country, but no details were known. Supported by the African Wildlife Foundation, I returned to North Yemen in October 1983 to ascertain how the rhino horn was coming in, from which countries it originated, the prices that were being paid for it, and whether something could be done to reduce the high demand for rhino horn handles on *jambias*.

During the five years since my initial visit, the overall structure of North Yemen's economy has little changed. Just over one million North Yemenis (44 per cent of the total labour force) work in Saudi Arabia and other Gulf States, and in 1982 they sent home \$1.2 billion in remittances. Agriculture, except for *qat* (*Catha edulis*, the same plant known as *miraa* in Kenya), has continued to decline. The main export crop, coffee, accounted for only \$191,000 in overseas sales in 1980, and much of the land that had been under coffee for hundreds of years has now been given over to *qat*.

The disparity in value between the country's imports and exports remains extraordinary. Officially, in 1978 for every dollar's worth of exports \$185 in goods were imported; while the ratio improved in 1980 with \$ being spent on imports for every dollar of exports, there is still probably no other country in the world with a similar pair of statistics. The cities of North Yemen are awash with imported consumer items which include cars, trucks, refrigerators, air-conditioners, clothes, watches, gold jewellery, video machines, radios, cassettes and other electrical gadgets. Many of these are in addition to the official imports and have been smuggled into the country to avoid paying high taxes — such as the 200 per cent import duty on automobiles. The Ministry of Economy and Industry estimates that during the first five months of 1983 \$100 million worth of vehicles and spare parts were imported illegally from Saudi Arabia.

An expatriate residing in North

* See *Swara* January/February 1983, page 21. Ed.

Yemen carried out a survey over a period of several months in 1983 to try to determine the proportion of smuggled goods in Sana'a shops. He informally interviewed many shopkeepers who admitted that between 50 per cent and 70 per cent of the manufactured goods they had for sale entered the country illegally. He learned that the vast majority came from Saudi Arabia, where traders are very happy to supply commodities to Yemenis at fair prices and they will even accept Yemeni riyals.

There is a great deal of profit to be made on smuggling in alcoholic beverages. These, of course, do not come from Saudi Arabia; there are import firms in neighbouring Djibouti which legally buy tax-free alcohol in Europe and keep it in bond at the port to await the arrival of Yemeni dhows (*zarouks*). As a strict Moslem country, the consumption of alcohol is severely frowned upon, and its legal sales within North Yemen are confined to special bars in the international hotels, ostensibly for the overseas tourists and 100,000 foreign workers (mostly Egyptians, Sudanese and Ethiopians), but which often cater to Yemeni men. Some grocery shops make arrangements to buy the contraband liquor for their regular customers, and liquor is fairly easily obtainable from taxi drivers in Sana'a. Curiously, there is little difference in the price paid for it in a hotel or elsewhere in Sana'a.

The North Yemen government makes no attempt to quantify the value of the black market, which is financed almost entirely by the money earned by Yemenis abroad. Moreover, in official statistics *qat* is not included, although it is the major agricultural crop and accounts for most of the income earned by farmers in this still rural society where over 70 per cent of the people are engaged in agriculture. Because *qat* sells for very high prices, there is much more money being circulated among the North Yemenis than indicated by official statistics on gross domestic product and per capita income, which are absurdly low. Officially, and according to the United Nations, North Yemen is one of the very poorest countries of the world, having a per capita income of just \$449 in 1980, which partially explains why donor countries have

given so much aid for the construction of roads, hospitals, airports, ports and schools.

Compared to many countries in the Third World, however, North Yemen has progressed very significantly during the past 15 years. Where roads have been built, the government expands its authority, consolidating its influence and power over parts of the country which were formerly ruled entirely by tribal law. Today's government is more stable than at any time since the Revolution.

On the other hand, North Yemen remains a very traditionally oriented country, where men wear *futta* (gathered skirts) instead of trousers and settle disputes with an eye for an eye; where women live within the confines of their homes, and where poverty was extreme at the outbreak of civil war in 1962. Only gradually is the life-style becoming attuned to the 20th century. Given the history of the country, it is not surprising that what the men want today most of all are two traditional commodities: *qat* and daggers. Now that they can afford them, they spend a very considerable part of their income on them.

Qat is regularly chewed by more than 95 per cent of the male population. It gives them energy and an exhilarated feeling; but because *qat* chewing is a social habit, the centre of a man's daily life, when he gathers with friends after lunch, the energy expended usually goes into nothing more than conversation. Yemenis buy a bunch of *qat* at noontime, freshly cut in the morning and rushed to city centres. There are various qualities, from the area around Taiz. After lunch, they begin chewing it into little balls of green sludge which they suck sometimes until as late as 8.00 p.m., by which time they are in a state of torpor but unable to sleep. It is because of this that the demand for whisky is growing for its use as a counter-effect to *qat*. While some women have begun to complain bitterly that their men are spending too much time and money on *qat* (on average, about \$10 per man per day, 365 days a year), others are beginning to partake of *qat* themselves. Severely undermining the productivity of the country, *qat* chewing sessions are none the less considered as integral custom, and even government offices close down at two o'clock in the afternoon, allowing the bureaucrats also to join in this activity.

Almost all men have daggers. In the northern part of the country practically every man wears his dagger every day; probably over 90 per cent do so in the capital city. While in Taiz and along the coastal Tihama plain it is not necessarily a part of daily dress, the men still generally own at least one which they will carry on ceremonial occasions.

The finest quality daggers have rhino horn handles. For how many centuries rhino horn has been imported to make these handles, it is not known. It seems to be a well entrenched tradition, and according to an employee of the East India Company, William Milburn (*Oriental Commerce*, London, 1825), significant



Esmond Bradley Martin is back in Nairobi again, writing reports on his latest research on the ivory industries of various African countries. A geographer who specialises in the trade of wildlife products, his story of rhinos in the wild in Asia and Africa was published in the March 1984 issue of *National Geographic*.

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quantities of rhino horn were imported to Mocha in the early 1820s; Milburn also stated that a good horn landed in Mocha, weighing about five kilos was worth \$17, which was a relatively high price 160 years ago.

The Yemenis believe that rhino horn is the most attractive substance from which a dagger handle can be made; when well carved, it has the translucence of amber, and its appearance improves even more with a lifetime's handling, whereby the patina becomes shinier and the colour becomes softer, almost golden. This is greatly appreciated and, indeed, a dagger with a rhino horn handle that is antique is very much more valuable than one recently made. People do not usually sell a dagger that has been in their family a generation or more. It is considered very bad form to do that. However, some antique shops do deal in old daggers. One merchant told me that he sold what had reputedly been a 300-year-old *jambia* with a rhino horn handle for \$163,000 in 1981. He may have exaggerated both the age and price, but he insisted that it was the most beautiful dagger he had ever seen and well worth any price. Rhino horn lasts indefinitely. Unlike other horns which tend to break, crack or flake, it remains solid and durable.

Until their mass exodus to Israel in 1948, Jews in North Yemen made fine silver-covered scabbards for the best daggers. These, too, are highly prized today. I saw a hundred-year-old dagger in a scabbard partly inlaid with gold, and this was offered for sale at \$21,000. The second most expensive one that I priced was \$4,300; it was also dated from the 19th century and had a finely worked silver scabbard.

Rhino horn to the Yemenis is like gold to the French and jade to the Chinese. It has an intrinsic value which

furthermore is almost magical. Some Yemenis believe that if you are bitten by a snake, you should rub the bite with a rhino horn dagger handle to cure the infection. Milburn obviously came across a similar belief about rhino horn in Mocha around 1820 for he wrote: 'Rhinoceros Horns are much esteemed among the Mahometans, on account of their being considered a powerful antidote against poison.' Many people throughout Asia also believe in the curative powers of rhino horn. Chinese references to this attribute go back at least ten centuries.

The market in Sana'a is still the main place in North Yemen where daggers with rhino horn handles are made and sold. This medieval-looking market is surrounded by a high wall, entered by a gate called Bab al Yemen, which was locked every night prior to the Revolution. It is a very old market, and as early as the fifth century had caravanserais for travelling merchants. Artisans and merchants have traditionally worked side by side in the market, even though they have belonged to different caste-like guild groups. There have developed definite zones for the sale of *qat*, grapes and other agricultural products; for the sheep and donkey markets; for joiners, smiths and shoemakers. Separate from the shops in which daggers are for retail sale, there is an area called *Suq al-Janabi* where dagger handles are made and blades sharpened. I counted 41 workshops with 61 craftsmen working at one time, but there could well be 10 per cent more which were not actually carrying on business during my visit.

Blades for daggers are rarely made in the Sana'a market, but are instead either imported or made in such places as Dhamar, Marib and Harib. Yemeni blades are the most expensive because they are hand-forged out of scrap steel, and they cost between \$87 and \$435 each. Manufactured blades from Kenya and other countries are less popular because they have a greater tendency to split and cannot be filed so sharply; con-

sequently, they sell for anything between \$5 and \$22. Rhino horn handles are not put onto the cheaper blades. Instead, handles made out of water buffalo horns imported from India and Hong Kong or cow horns from North Yemen, Ethiopia and Saudi Arabia are used. These are often dyed yellow by the dagger-makers in the Sana'a souk in an attempt to make them resemble rhino horn, as are cheap wooden handles. In the old days, I was told, some people had daggers with handles made from camel hooves; these were the cheapest of all.

Only about one in ten daggers made in Sana'a today has a rhinoceros horn handle due to the shortage of the raw material and the high price it commands. There is a Yemeni dealer living in Sana'a who imports about half of all the rhino horn coming into North Yemen. At his house just outside the market, he has some employees whose job it is to cut up the horn into pieces roughly shaped into handles, weighing between 100 and 200 grams. They use an electric power saw to do this. Some of the handles are then taken to the souk and handed over to his craftsmen to complete the carving. Those remaining are sold to other craftsmen in the souk and to people in Taiz and Dhamar. The dealer can sell one of his roughly cut rhino horn handles weighing 150 grams for between \$540 and \$650. Since only two medium-sized handles on average can be made out of one kilo, this dealer is obtaining \$1,080 to \$1,300 per kilo for the horns, yet he retains the shavings from them and can make an additional income from re-exporting them. He sometimes sells raw rhino horn directly to carvers, and in 1982 his price ranged from \$545 to \$650 a kilo. In the latter half of 1983 it went up to between \$800 and \$870.

When craftsmen obtain the hewn handles, they use rasps, files and sandpaper to refine their shape by hand. This is laborious work and is carried out mostly in the afternoon after the men have started to chew *qat*. When a handle

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A Yemeni handle-maker heats up a piece of rhino horn to make it more malleable for carving.

is near the shape desired, it is put in front of a blow torch for a few seconds to burn off loose fibres and to turn the colour from grey to brownish yellow. This process is repeated several times over a period of an hour or so; some craftsmen told me that the flame also makes the horn softer and easier to work. It is at this stage when the blade is fitted to it and when an electric drill is used to produce shallow holes on the handles into which are added small silver pins for decoration.

In addition, two large holes are drilled completely through the handle for attaching two gold medallions or coins. They are held in place by a copper wire which runs through to the back of the handle and is fastened onto a small metal plate. It is traditional to have two gold ornaments on the front of the handle, not one or three. There is also usually a silver band around the dagger's hilt.

The final step in producing a dagger is the polishing of its blade. This is done when the dagger is tied down on a wooden board. The blade is rubbed with

a round steel tool covered in cloth. Then gypsum powder is sprinkled onto it and the cloth, now dampened with oil and tightly held over the steel tool, is used to scour the blade. Although only one or two handles can be made by a single craftsman in one day, four to six blades can be polished.

The craftsmen who make daggers either sell them retail themselves or supply them to other merchants. Newly-made daggers without rhino horn handles may be as cheap as \$17 for a poor quality type, and \$100 for a mediocre one. Daggers with rhino horn handles which have recently been made sell for a minimum of \$270 (with a tiny handle) and up to \$1,780 for one of good quality and size. The average prices for a rhino horn handled dagger range from \$435 to \$875.

Since silver scabbards are no longer made in North Yemen (this was only done by the Jews), almost all new *jam-bias* are kept in wooden sheaths covered in cloth and decorated with leather strips. The daggers in their sheaths are attached

to a man's waist with a plain leather belt or a velvet covered one with embroidery on it. The former type is available for around \$10; the latter sells for \$65.

While there are still vast numbers of rhino horn handles being made in the Sana'a market, the Taiz market now only has three workshops with a total of five men regularly carving them. There are, however, another three workshops in which the main activity consists of attaching newly-made rhino horn handles from Sana'a to blades. One merchant in Taiz told me that until 1981 he imported rhino horn from Kenya, but when the Kenyan authorities cracked down on this illegal trade his sources dried up. Now nobody from Taiz directly imports rhino horn, and the small amount available there now came from the main dealer in Sana'a. In the last year, though, no Taiz businessman has bought any from him. Merchants said that the Sana'a dealer's price of \$825 now is too expensive, especially in consideration of the fact that in 1970 they paid only \$30 a kilo for rhino horn.

From 1972 to 1978 approximately three tonnes of rhino horn per year were imported into North Yemen. As mentioned earlier, this was about 40 per cent of the world's total. From 1979 to 1982 the amount decreased due to the sharp decline in the number of rhinos in Africa (the black rhino decreased from about 65,000 in 1970 to 13,500 in 1983), and the greater difficulty for poachers to locate those remaining in remote areas. Official statistics relating to North Yemen's rhino horn imports from 1979 to 1982 are unreliable, but in the course of interviewing traders I was able to estimate that an annual average of just over one and a half tonnes came into the country, but with a sharp decline in the amounts imported in 1981 and 1982.

A member of the biggest trader's family told me that in 1983 they had imported between 30 and 50 kilos of rhino horn most months, and that they had over a hundred horns in store at the time



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of my visit to Sana'a. Another important trader confirmed to me that during the past two years all the rhino horn arriving in North Yemen is sent by air from Khartoum, but in 1980 and 1981 some came from Tanzania, Kenya and Djibouti as well. Now, Sudanese from the northern part of the country collect the rhino horn in Khartoum, purchasing it from Sudanese middlemen who obtain it from the southern Sudan and Tanzania. Certain traders take regular scheduled flights from Khartoum to Sana'a with over a hundred kilos of rhino horn in their personal luggage. Although various taxes which amount to 23.5 per cent of the value are supposed to be paid on all types of imported horn in North Yemen, these traders are able to pass through Customs at the Sana'a airport without even having their luggage opened.

In 1982 the Sudanese merchants in Khartoum paid the equivalent of \$500 a kilo for rhino horn and sold it to traders in Sana'a for \$700. A particular trader said to me that when he arranged for someone to bring rhino horn to him by air from Khartoum, he insisted that there should be a minimum of 100 kilos in the consignment so that he would be able to make a reasonable profit above the cost of the air ticket, excess weight charges and other expenses.

A total of only one tonne of rhino horn seems to have been available to dealers in Sana'a during 1982. Because this was not enough to meet the demand, in mid-1983 some Yemeni merchants went to Khartoum to see if they could find more. They were working independently of one another, in effect forcing up the price for themselves to \$700 per kilo, a 40 per cent increase from the previous year. They found it difficult, once they were back in Sana'a, to sell it with a substantial mark-up to the carvers; they would pay no more than \$800 to \$870 a kilo. Consequently, one of the traders told me that he has temporarily withdrawn from this business as the profit margin is too small.

Sana'a's Customs Department officials disclaim any knowledge of the Economy and Industry Ministerial Order No. 193 which reads: 'The importation of Rhinoceros Horn in any form is strictly forbidden'. I questioned several senior officers in Customs and they emphatically replied that there was no ban on the imports of any kind of horn.

In my opinion, the North Yemeni authorities are not particularly interested in stopping rhino horn imports. Even if they were, I doubt they could eliminate them. Their efforts in 1983 to curtail the massive smuggling of vehicles have met with little success, and illegal imports of whisky and consumer goods are losing the government much needed revenue from duties. There is simply not enough

manpower nor co-operation from Yemeni citizens to stop smuggling.

What, therefore, can be done to decrease the rhino horn imports? First, it should be made clear to the Customs Department that rhino horn is an illegal import, and the Customs officers, particularly at the Sana'a airport, should inspect the luggage of their 'friends' visitors' to North Yemen. When I arrived at the Sana'a airport, every handbag of mine and my two suitcases were checked; but those belonging to some people on the same flight were allowed to pass freely through the Customs barrier when met by local businessmen who spoke to the Customs officers. Second, the export of rhino horn shavings should also be declared illegal. At the moment, the main trader in rhino horn collects the chippings from craftsmen making dagger handles and exports these legally to eastern Asia where they are made into medicines. Some Chinese from Hong Kong, Singapore and Taiwan have come to Sana'a themselves to purchase the shavings. They exist in huge quantities, since up to 70 per cent of a raw horn is wasted when carved into dagger handles. By making rhino horn shavings illegal exports, the government could pose a few more problems for the dealers. Third, the import duties on cow and water buffalo horn should probably be eliminated as an encouragement to use these instead for dagger handles.

Ideally, of course, the demand for



Daggers are for sale all over North Yemen; however, the main retail market for them is in Sana'a, where display stands like this are numerous.

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rhino horn handles should be reduced. But, bearing in mind their long tradition and their high status value, this is extremely difficult and perhaps impossible to eliminate entirely. The population of North Yemen is increasing by 2.7 per cent a year now, and per capita income, even using official statistics, has jumped tremendously since 1970 when it was just \$75. By the age of 12, most boys in North Yemen have obtained a dagger. If 70 per cent of them require a new one (some will inherit one as a family heirloom and a few will not want one), 52,000 new daggers will be made in a year. Of these, about 7.75 per cent (according to the craftsmen), will have rhino horn handles, creating a demand for two tonnes of rhino horn annually. In addition, of course, there will be older men whose income will increase enough to allow them to invest in a rhino horn handle for their daggers. And, to compound the problem even further, there are now 24,000 western tourists visiting North Yemen a year, some of whom find the traditional daggers with rhino horn handles very appealing and buy them to take home.

Because most Yemenis are generally strict Moslems, following my first visit to North Yemen I had been wondering whether it might be possible to discourage purchasing of daggers with rhino horn handles on religious grounds. In October I discussed this idea with many administrators and officials in Sana'a, who thought it impractical. Even

if the Grand Mufti (the spiritual leader of the Shia sect of Islam in North Yemen, whose followers are the predominant dagger-wearers in the northern part of the country) could be persuaded to make a pronouncement against the killing of rhinos for their horns to be made into dagger handles, this would probably not be effective. Imams in the mosques would be unlikely to follow it up in their own Friday sermons, as they are independent. Moreover, of all the major imports into North Yemen today, only one is deemed immoral by the Imams. Yet their constant reminders to the Faithful that the consumption of alcohol is forbidden in Islam seem to fall on deaf ears.

I still think, however, that some tactic could be devised to discourage, at least partially, the demand for rhino horn in North Yemen. While the government now may not be willing to put much pressure on the rhino horn trade for fear of losing popularity, it might be possible to win the support of the media in North Yemen to help. Many people affluent enough to buy rhino horn handled daggers already have radios and televisions, and if the fact that rhinos are being decimated in Africa to supply their horns to North Yemen were widely broadcast in a startling manner, perhaps this would make some people realise the rarity of rhino horn. A consequence might be that the illegal traders would demand even higher prices for it on the local market, putting it out of reach for

many more customers.

The most promising solution to the problem is, however, more basic, and that is to initiate stricter controls on rhino horn exports from source countries, especially the Sudan. In the past two years almost all the rhino horn in North Yemen has come from the Sudan, even though that country is a signatory to the C.I.T.E.S. Convention which prohibits such trade. The Sudanese officials are capable of preventing most of these exports when they wish to do so. A trader in Sana'a told me that in early 1983 the Sudanese blocked for three months the export of the horn he bought in Khartoum, due to some dispute at the airport. (Eventually, he did succeed in getting it out, however.) More pressure needs to be put on the Sudanese Customs officials to make them do their job, particularly at the Khartoum airport, where it is relatively easy to inspect all luggage for the illicit export of animal products.

From 1979 to 1982 the percentage of the world's rhino horn imported into North Yemen went up again. Now dealers in North Yemen are buying over 50 per cent of the total annually on the international market, and in raising their prices for it by 40 per cent last year, they have encouraged poachers and middlemen to redouble their efforts in supplying rhino horn. Conservationists will, therefore, have to work in a more concerted manner to stop the 'Khartoum Connection' and to prevent any other entrepot from developing for the rhino horn trade. ♣

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NST 216	5 days	Treehotel/Samburu/Meru/Mt. Kenya Safari Club	Day 2,5	10.00hrs	400
NST 217	4 days	Amboseli/Salt Lick/Tsavo West & East	Day 2,3,5.6	11.00hrs	350
NST 217M	4 days	Above Safari Terminating in Mombasa	Day 2,3,5.6	11.00hrs	370
NST 218	6 days	Amboseli/Salt Lick/Tsavo and Kenya Coast	Day 2,3,5.6	11.00hrs	475
NST 219	6 days	Treehotel/Samburu/Meru/Mt. Kenya Safari Club	Day 7,3	10.00hrs	525
NST 220	6 days	Masai Mara/Rift Valley/Treehotel/Samburu/Meru/Lunch Mt. Kenya Safari Club	Day 7,3	11.00hrs	500
NST 223	6 days	Mara Mara/L. Navasha/Amboseli/Tsavo/Salt Lick	Day 2,3,6.7	11.00hrs	500
NST 223M	6 days	Above Safari Terminating in Mombasa	Day 2,3,6.7	11.00hrs	520
NST 224	7 days	Treehotel/Mt. Kenya/Nairobi/Amboseli/Salt Lick/Tsavo	Day 2,3,6.7	11.00hrs	575
NST 224M	7 days	Above Safari Terminating in Mombasa	Day 2,3,6.7	11.00hrs	595
NST 225	7 days	Amboseli/Tsavo-Salt Lick/Mombasa/Malindi/Lamu	Day 2,6	11.00hrs	600
NST 226	8 days	Masai Mara/Masai Mara/Rift Valley/L. Baringo/Samburu Samburu/Treehotel/Lunch/Mt. Kenya Safari Club	Day 2,6	11.00hrs	750
NST 227	8 days	Masai Mara/Rift Valley/Treehotel/Samburu/Meru/Mt. Kenya Safari Club	Day 2,6	11.00hrs	800
NST 228	9 days	Masai Mara/Masai Mara/Rift Valley L. Baringo/Samburu/Samburu/Treehotel/Mt. Kenya Safari Club	Day 3,7	11.00hrs	850
NST 229	9 days	Masai Mara/Kericho Tea Country/Lake Victoria/Mt. Elgon/Lake Turkana/Kenya Highlands/Lake Nakuru	Day 3	09.00hrs	850
NST 229A	9 days	Above Safari including excursion to Koobi Fora	Day 3	09.00hrs	950

NILESTAR SAFARI CENTRE AT NAIROBI HILTON • TEL: 337392

SCS Legendary Turkana Bus Departure every Saturday