



Esmond Bradley Martin

*Rhino horn handles develop a fine patina with age. Antique jambias with rhino horn handles are the most valuable, but their owners seldom sell them.*

# The North Yemen government and the rhino horn trade

by Lucy Vigne and Esmond Bradley Martin

During the 1970s, North Yemen was importing 40 per cent of Africa's rhino horn, leading to the near obliteration of the animal in many countries. Despite a ban on all rhino horn imports by the government of North Yemen in 1982, trading still continued. During the mid-1980s the last major countries in eastern Asia still importing and exporting rhino products for medicinal purposes effectively banned the legal trades. Thus, by late 1986, one of the most serious remaining threats to the survival of the rhino was the market in North Yemen. Curtailing this rhino horn trade was essential in order to save the last rhino populations in tropical Africa. In December 1986, Esmond Bradley Martin and Lucy Vigne visited Sana'a, the capital of North Yemen, in order to investigate this trade and to intercede with government officials to terminate the illegal commerce immediately.

North Yemen has been isolated from the world throughout history. Its high craggy mountains have provided excellent defence against invasion, and only parts of the country have been colonised for brief periods by the Turks. Hence, the people have maintained many of their traditional ways of life and dress. Today, the dagger or 'jambia' is an important part of the dress for many Yemenis. It is

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***In a move that could be crucial in halting the extinction of rhinos in the wild, the North Yemen government has agreed to take major steps to close down their country's illegal trade in rhino horn.***

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positioned forbiddingly at the centre of a man's waist and is worn daily with much panache. However, young men are gradually becoming more westernised and the country displays a fascinating mixture of old and new values.

Economic changes have been dramatic in North Yemen, affecting most aspects of daily life. The feudal system of the ruling Imam was overthrown in 1962 and was followed by civil war until 1970. When this ended, the poverty-stricken people suddenly discovered new wealth. One million Yemeni men went to work in the Gulf States due to the oil boom and brought back to the country US\$1,000 million each year. Overnight, ordinary people could afford jambias with the prestigious rhino horn (instead of water buffalo horn) handles, which before had been the preserve of the

wealthy elite. Jambia craftsmen greatly increased their output of carved rhino horn dagger handles as the demand grew.

World prices for rhino horn rose from \$35 per kilo wholesale in 1970 to \$500 in 1979. This new Yemeni market for rhino horn was first noticed by international conservation bodies in 1979. Desperate attempts to save rhinos from poachers were failing dismally. More attention needed to be focused on the cause of the poaching — the trade in rhino horn. Campaigns and international media pressure upon North Yemen were started, which led to the ban on rhino horn imports in 1982. But horn continued to get into the country. Smuggling was rife.

From the beginning of 1984, however, to the end of 1986, the official value of the Yemeni rial fell from 4.7 to 11.9 to the US dollar. The economy of the country still continues to slide, due to the lack of convertible foreign exchange, and it is necessary to look briefly at the present economic circumstances of North Yemen in order to understand the rhino horn trade. Previously, the rial had been propped up by remittances from abroad and by donor aid. Official remittances from Saudi Arabia peaked in 1980 at US\$1.4 billion and in 1986 had sunk to \$600 million, a



## ... rhino horn

40 per cent reduction. This was due to the fact that Saudi Arabia had decreased its Yemeni labour because of the collapse in oil prices and because the Saudi government was putting large sums of money into the Iraqi war effort. Similarly, donor aid, much from Saudi Arabia and Iraq, peaked in 1982 at \$400 million and fell to \$100 million in 1986. North Yemen is to start its own oil exports, scheduled for 1988, however, and thus its economy should start to recover to some extent. Meanwhile there are plans to increase output of mineral resources and agricultural products.

One major problem of the country is the extensive cultivation of qat (*Catha edulis*), known as miraa in East Africa. This shrub is chewed as a stimulant by most workers daily. Much of the arable land is used to grow qat. The American Embassy estimates that qat production in North Yemen is worth one billion dollars a year, one hundred times more than the value of all the country's exports. Thus, most food has to be imported with scarce hard currency and the export sector of the economy is of minimal significance.

Another big problem for the government to contend with is smuggling and the consequent major loss of revenue from import duties. During the early 1980s, up to 70 per cent of consumer goods were being smuggled into the country. The government has now cut down on smuggling by positioning more border and road check-points. The bulk of smuggled items comes through the desert along the northern border, and smaller, more manoeuvrable vehicles are being used, to find roundabout routes into the country. The North Yemen government can, of course, never completely plug all the gaps in its large honeycomb frontier.

Due to the lack of convertible foreign exchange, the government has imposed severe import restrictions on all luxury goods. But the Sana'a streets are lined with pedlars selling a ceaseless supply of watches and clothes which have been mostly smuggled in. Bribery and corruption are far from contained. Salaries in public sectors have not gone up for four years, while the cost of living has more than doubled during this period. Some civil servants are consequently in a recalcitrant mood. During our visit, in an attempt to prevent the value of the rial from falling further, all the money changers were put out of business by the government and some had been jailed for profiteering; and 42 shops in Sana'a had been closed for over pricing.

All this affects the rhino horn trade. The

Lucy Vigne and Esmond Bradley Martin have had their project to close down the trade in rhino products extended through 1987 by WWF International. Vigne, an Oxford graduate in zoology, is the Co-ordinator of the project. Martin, a geographer holding a Ph.D. from the University of Liverpool, is the Director. Together, they went to North Yemen to urge the government to take stringent action against illegal imports of rhino horn, following up trade statistics gleaned from their monitoring of rhino horn exports from East and Central Africa. Thanks to their efforts and those of other conservationists world-wide, almost all the rhino horn consuming countries have now banned rhino horn imports. However, illegal trade remains a problem in several Asian cities; Martin and Vigne are trying to decrease the amount of rhino horn being made available and are also encouraging the use of substitutes for it.

### Quantities and values of rhino horn purchased by the main trader who handles two-thirds of North Yemen's imports.

Year	Total kg	Wholesale price for rhino horn in Sana'a per kg:		Where horn is shipped from
		rials	US\$	
1980	1,050	3,500	764	Tanzania, Kenya, Ethiopia, Somalia
1981	1,320	3,500	764	India, Tanzania, Ethiopia, Sudan
1982	1,585	3,600	786	Tanzania, Ethiopia, Sudan
1983	1,120	4,100	891	India, Kenya, Sudan
1984	1,058	4,300	796	Tanzania, Somalia, India
1985	475	8,300	1,150	Ethiopia, Sudan
1986	100	10,000	1,032	Sudan

wholesale price of rhino horn in rials has risen by 150 per cent during the last two years, although in dollars the price has remained roughly the same. With a contraction of the economy, increasing westernisation and a reduction of smuggling, one would expect to see fewer rhino horn jambias being carved, and this is a good time to apply firm pressure to stop it altogether.

We visited the Sana'a souk many times. This market is where all Yemeni carvers of rhino horn dagger handles work. On our first investigation, we saw three such dagger handles being carved. The craftsman filed each one with care, then fitted the handles onto red-hot shiny steel blades, engulfing us in clouds of smoke, with the stifling smell of burnt horn, repeating the action until he had a good fit. He showed us his safely kept bag of horn shavings, which he said he could sell for US \$168 per kilo. Our interpreter distinguished these muffled words, as he chewed a great wad of qat, bulging in his cheek, the size of a tennis ball. In Arabic, the rhino is called 'al-kerkedan' and the carver pointed to two imaginary horns on his head to verify the animal. Rhino horn was obviously still in common use.

We gleaned our most rewarding information from one old man who has handled about 65 to 75 per cent of North Yemen's rhino horn over the years. His sons and grandsons continue in his business. The old man pointed at two people beside him and said that they were the other two main dealers in the souk, but because they do not have reliable exporters abroad, they buy most of the horn from him. The old man owns seven manufacturing places in the souk and nine retail shops.

We were allowed to climb down a ladder under one shop to see a store of roughly carved water buffalo horns. It takes six stages to produce a finished water buffalo horn handle, and each craftsman specialises in one stage. There were some wooden handles in the store and also plastic ones, which are a new variety. We could find no rhino horn.

From one kilo of rhino horn usually three dagger handles can be carved but sometimes only two expensive handles will be produced. The old man, carried away by the conversation, boasted 'Fifty years ago, in my youth, I was the best jambia maker in Yemen, able to complete two daggers a day using old fashioned tools - not like the young carvers of today with their modern tools'.

In the early 1970s he said there was no demand for water buffalo horn handles. All his craftsmen worked on rhino horn, and they would produce 500 jambias with rhino horn handles per month. Today, his craftsmen are

producing over 2,000 jambias with water buffalo horn handles and fewer than 200 jambias with rhino horn handles each month. We were told, however that due to recent rhino horn shortages, the carvers were using up old stocks and they had only a few hundred kilos of horn left.

Good rhino horn is purchased by the main trader in Sana'a for US \$900 per kilo. Water buffalo horn from India's abundant domestic animals sells for only US\$400 a tonne, but, during our visit, it was under a temporary ban as a luxury item.

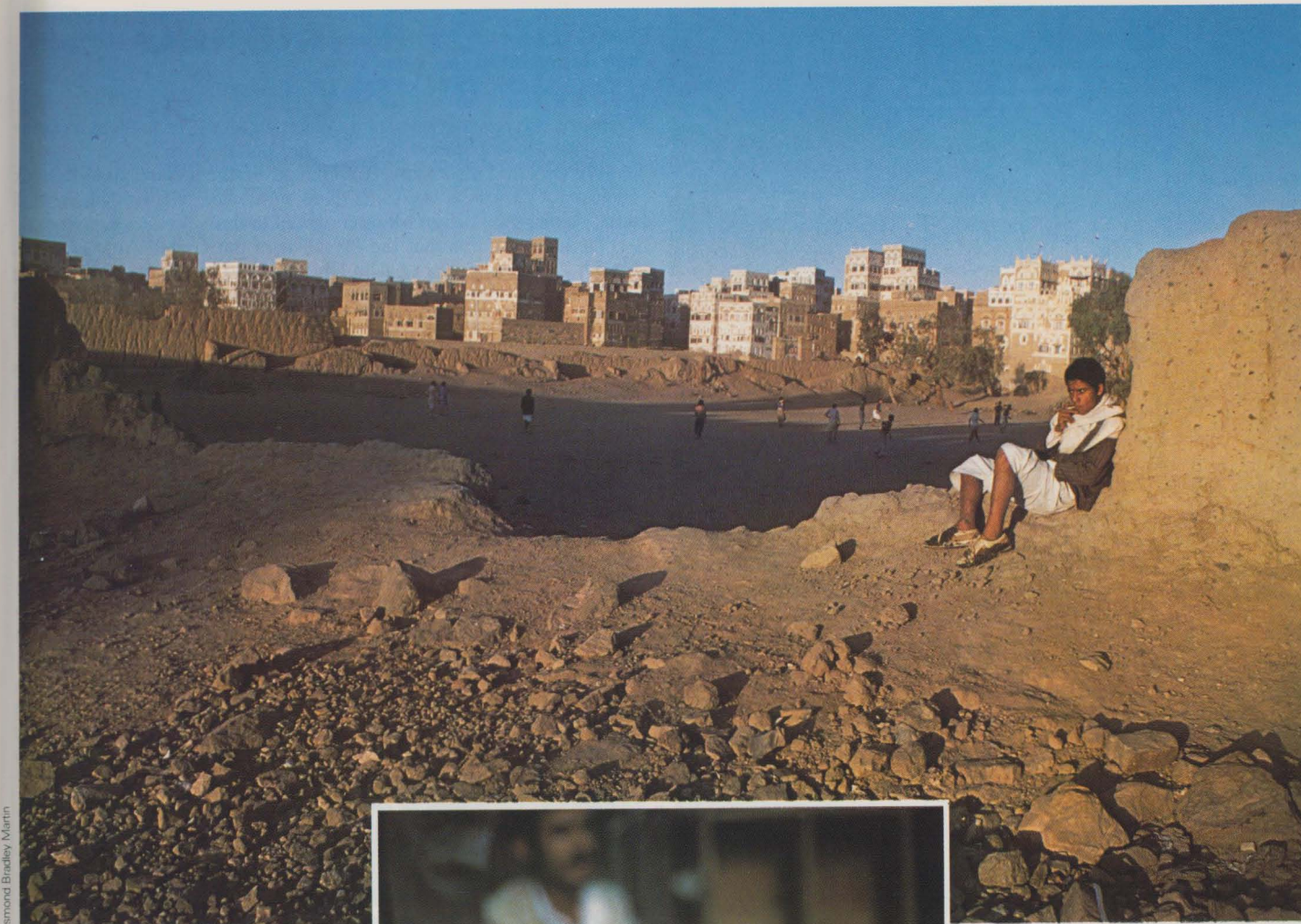
It is the amber-like translucency of the rhino horn handle that is supposed to distinguish it. We sometimes found it difficult to recognise a rhino horn handle from a water buffalo horn one. This is because the water buffalo horn handles are impregnated with a yellow dye which seals the voids and gives the handle its colour and shine in order to look like rhino horn.

The most valuable data collected during our visit to Sana'a were the old man's accurate figures, which he gave voluntarily, for the quantities of rhino horn imports, their prices and where the horn was coming from. The old man produced specific figures for the 1980s from a blue book of his trade records. But his 1970s figures were not available as the paper had worn out. He told us what he could remember: that he imported an average of 3,000 kilos of rhino horn each year, two thirds of it coming from Kenya (Mombasa), and the rest from Somalia, Ethiopia and Sudan.

Like other traders, the old man told us that rhino horn imports had fallen after 1979 due to the scarcity of the animals. The total imports for rhino horn into North Yemen in 1985 were about one tonne, and in 1986, less than 500 kilos. Most horn today comes from the Sudan, often exported by men of Yemeni origin. During the last year, this horn has become harder to purchase in North Yemen. This is because importing the horn has become more difficult except when 'helped' through by airport friends. Because its entry into North Yemen is now forbidden, horn is sometimes disguised in skins to avoid attention from the increasingly astute Sana'a airport customs officials. At other times, the horn is placed in bags of rice or flour which travel from Jeddah to Hodeidah on the North Yemen coast. Some horn leaves Kenya by dhow, travels to India, then circles back to the United Arab Emirates and finally to North Yemen. Thus, rhino horn is smuggled in by land, sea and air.

After three long interviews, the old man decided he had released enough information and would not talk any more. He had, how-





*The walls surrounding the Sana'a souk, the oldest part of the capital city of North Yemen, are very impressive.*



Lucy Vigne

*This is a set of dagger handles, showing the six different stages of handle-making.*

ever, given invaluable statistics, which correspond with figures Esmond Bradley Martin had obtained in previous years.

The most important two hours of our time in Sana'a were those spent first with the Minister of Foreign Affairs, who is also the Deputy Prime Minister, Dr Abdul Karim al-Iryani, and secondly with the Minister of Economy, Supply and Trade, Mr Mohamed al-Khadam al-Wajih. These two meetings had been arranged for us by the United States Ambassador to Sana'a, William Rugh. He, too, attended the meetings with the United States Economic Officer, Brian Goldbeck, and the British Ambassador, David Tatham. This was the first time the two ambassadors had been together during a ministerial meeting and it gave weight and importance to the occasion for which we were most grateful. Considering the government's overriding economic difficulties, it was, in the words of one embassy official 'downright amazing' that they were giving us their time.

Dr Iryani started the first meeting by saying that this was the first biological matter he had

ever discussed in the ministry, and, as a biologist (he has a PhD from Yale University), he would be more than happy to see the trade stopped. He said that the government had sufficient understanding of the issue to listen to our suggestions and were ready to co-operate. We described the rhino catastrophe and North Yemen's central role in it. We stated that we did not want jambias to be banned, since they were a Yemeni heritage and tradition, but that substitutes should be encouraged in place of all rhino horn. We expressed our concern that if North Yemen did not enforce their law against imports of rhino horn, there would be an international media campaign about it. The American Ambassador warned that the United States Congress is opposed to countries taking an anti-environmental stance, and in order to avoid congressional support for cutting back aid to North Yemen (which Congressmen have already considered), something had to be done immediately.

Together, we discussed several action plans, and all of them the Foreign Minister was willing and keen to implement as soon as

possible. First, we named the one trader in the souk who is responsible for the largest imports of rhino horn (whose information had been made available to us quite openly). We asked if the man could be approached. Minister Iryani agreed to call him to the Prime Minister's office that week and the Prime Minister and he would 'appeal to his conscience' to stop trading in rhino horn. We stressed that over 95 per cent of the man's work is now with water buffalo horn, so he would not be put out of business or even suffer financially.

Minister Iryani then said, 'In the Muslim religion, if a man is causing a species to be in danger of extinction, he is acting against the will of God'. Minister Iryani suggested that he would have a meeting with the Grand Mufti to ask him if he could make a 'fatwa' (religious edict) about it, and perhaps produce a press statement pronouncing such a trade to be against Islam.

We asked if import duty could be eliminated from water buffalo horn in order to make it cheaper and thus even more competitive for rhino horn. Dr Iryani said 'For the





*Lining the dusty, narrow alleyways of the Sana'a souk is a cluster of small, dark workshops in which carvers sit cross-legged to make the only jambias with rhino horn handles today.*

Treasury, this revenue is peanuts. When we lift the restrictions on luxury items, we will stop import duty on water buffalo horn'.

We enquired if someone from the government could go to the souk and ask the carvers to stop using rhino horn, which is carved in one small area. Again, the Foreign Minister agreed to this.

Dr Iryani told us that the President of the United Arab Emirates, Sheikh Zayid, and ruler of Abu Dhabi, would be arriving the following week and that he would ask him if more restrictions could be imposed on rhino horn in his country. The United Arab Emirates acts as a major entrepot for rhino horn.

We finally asked Minister Iryani if exports of rhino horn shavings could be prohibited and he agreed to this. His positive responses and his own suggestions as to how to curtail the trade were most welcome.

At our meeting with the Minister of Economy, Supply and Trade, Mr Mohamed al-Khadam al-Wajih, we again discussed the rhino crisis and reiterated that if North Yemen were to continue as a rhino horn importer, the country's international reputation would suffer and due to the United States Congress's concern, there could be cut-backs in American aid as well. We outlined the action plans agreed with Minister Iryani, and the Minister of Economy was equally enthusiastic about enforcing the measures, though he was unsure whether the Mufti could be persuaded to create a 'fatwa'. Minister Wajih reassured us that he could give direct instructions to ban exports of all rhino horn by-products (the shavings). His most encouraging suggestion was to stop the souk craftsmen from using rhino horn. 'Every year the jambia craftsmen must come to the ministry to get a new permit entitling them to operate their business. We can hold back their licences until they have agreed to stop using rhino horn. Furthermore, we have the authority to check for rhino horn in the souk.'

We left the meetings in jubilation. The ministers had been extremely helpful and had agreed to implement all the measures by the end of December 1987. The two ambassadors discussed whether we would be in any personal danger during the next few days, but they felt that the risk was reduced by the certainty that if anything happened, the traders would clearly be implicated. To be assured, however, we asked the Foreign Minister to delay his meeting with the old man, our main informant in the souk, until after our departure.

That evening at 9 o'clock we had a telephone call at our hotel from Minister Iryani himself. He had been discussing the action plans with Minister Wajih and they agreed that the last measure suggested in our earlier meeting could be the most successful way of curtailing the trade: the ministers had decided that every craftsman would have to sign an affidavit stating that he would not use rhino horn, on pain of losing his licence. We were most encouraged that the two ministers had already been discussing the problem and thinking about it late into the evening, and that Minister Iryani had even rung us personally. It convinced us of their sincere intentions to do their best in hindering the illegal trade in rhino horn.

We left Sana'a with high hopes after our ten-day visit. The American Embassy is assisting in the necessary follow-up to check that the seven action plans are successfully implemented. We keenly await the outcome.

Our understanding of the trade has grown, and we have discussed ways to combat it with the Minister of Foreign Affairs and the Minister of Economy, Supply and Trade, receiving also invaluable backing from the United States and British Embassies. Although rhino horn imports into North Yemen dropped sharply last year, we suspect that supplies are blocked in Burundi, Khartoum, the United Arab Emirates, Singapore and Macao, while middlemen are waiting to find new routes to get them into North Yemen. Despite this, if the government implements its strategy, we believe that North Yemen's illegal trade in rhino horn will in the near future come under control. Middlemen and dealers will have to start turning their attention to other products, at last halting the threatened extinction of the rhino in the wild.

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