

Agate and Rhino Horn in

Yemen

Story and photographs by Lucy Vigne and Esmond Martin

Yemen was recently the largest market for African rhino horn but attitudes are changing.



RAMADAN IN EARLY 1995 WAS THE time of our most recent visit to Sanaa, Yemen's capital. Ramadan is also a time when Yemeni men most commonly buy, sell or repair their daggers, called *jambiyyas*, in the bustling Sanaa souk, in order to wear the best they can afford for the end-of-Ramadan celebrations. Since our investigations started in 1978, this was the first occasion that we saw no new rhino horn being made into dagger handles, especially encouraging since it was the busy month of Ramadan. This is good news for the survival of East Africa's rhinos, the source of most of Yemen's rhino horn in the past.

What can be the reasons for this decline? It is not that *jambiyya* production is a dying industry. On the contrary: numbers of craftsmen and workshops in the Sanaa souk have remained stable for years; we counted 88 workers in 55 open workshops on this visit. The souk remains the hub of activity for this craft, unlike other traditional crafts such as blacksmith-work and window-making, which have been replaced by factories outside the souk. Men from all over the country will come to Sanaa in order to buy a good *jambiyya*. Little has

changed in the *jambiyya* industry over time, largely because Yemenis are proud of their culture and the dagger epitomizes their Yemeni tradition.

Neither has the rhino horn trade been reduced recently due to any government efforts. Since our last visit to Yemen in May 1994, when civil war broke out and we had to be evacuated before completing some important meetings, officials have done little to stop the trade. The government is burdened with the far greater problems of a collapsing economy: a large foreign debt, a chronic budget deficit, an inefficient revenue collecting system, excessive government expenditure, heavy government subsidies on basic foods and petrol, the suspension of Saudi and other Gulf aid, low oil prices and the high costs of the civil war. Since December 1994, Yemen has also had border disputes with Saudi Arabia causing a further devaluation of the Yemeni rial.

At a meeting we had held just before the civil war, with the Deputy Minister of Supply and Trade, Mr al-Haymi, we organized penalties against those still using or in the possession of new, raw rhino horn, and arranged regular inspections of the

Above; The famous 16th century gateway to Sanaa's old town and souk is called Bab al Yemen.

CREDIT: Lucy Vigne.

souk. Regrettably the Ministry had not yet implemented either strategy. This was mainly because a new government had been formed in October 1994, and the Deputy Minister had been replaced. We had a long meeting with the new Vice Minister, Dr Mekhlafi, at which he explained that the relevant files had been mislaid within the Ministry, but was emphatic that when they were found he would handle the issue. An official was instructed to look for the files urgently.

One important measure had been taken just before our visit, however. The cabinet had re-approved the joining of CITES; the Minister of Supply and Trade had signed the CITES document and had passed it on for the Prime Minister's signature. The process seemed almost complete after years of procrastination. Then we were told that it was still necessary for Parliament to ratify the Convention before Yemen could join, but this could take a year as Parliament had so many issues to deal with. We expressed our concern that the US Government might apply the Pelly Amendment on Yemen, as it had done with economic sanctions against Taiwan in 1994, and this would mean trade in wildlife products (notably fish) would be prohibited from Yemen to the United States. Yemen, although faced with mounting political and economic difficulties, is worried about its public image. Yemeni officials then pointed out that the CITES document could be signed by the President instead of Parliament. Twice a year, Parliament goes into recess for a month: during Ramadan and during the Haj pilgrimage. The President then has the authority to sign documents and pass laws on Parliament's behalf. Certain officials to whom we spoke agreed to try to get the CITES document to the President during Ramadan.

Yemen's declining economy has also caused smuggling to be depressed, and this has obviously helped to reduce the rhino horn trade. Most goods for sale in the shops are smuggled into the country across the long, empty borders with the United Arab Emirates, Oman and Saudi Arabia, or from boats landing on the extensive coastline. People have not been able to afford so many consumer goods in recent months. Rhino horn is also a luxury item and fewer people can now afford jambiyyas with rhino horn handles. This must help to explain the fact that we saw no new rhino horn handles being made in the souk. There is, nevertheless, still enough demand for jambiyyas with new rhino horn handles that craftsmen are prepared to buy good quality rhino horns for \$1,000 a kilo and a little more for larger horns, if the horns are brought to the souk.

Despite the falling economy, we learned of several consignments of rhino horn that had been smuggled into Sanaa in 1994, totalling an estimated 70 kilos. Several craftsmen admitted obtaining some rhino horn supplies just after the civil war in July 1994. Three consignments had been sent via Djibouti and transported by boat to Yemen. A fourth con-

signment in September 1994 had come overland from Oman. Craftsmen said that there are many ways to smuggle rhino horn into Yemen and to Sanaa and that it is not difficult, although the airports are usually avoided.

A mystery surrounds the origin of the 70 or so kilos of rhino horn imported in 1994. This figure represents the deaths of at least 24 animals. If these imports came from recently killed rhinos, from which part of Africa have they come? According to research carried out in Yemen and southern Africa by the authors, there is no evidence of horn being traded to Yemen from southern Africa. The only significant population of rhinos remaining in eastern Africa are those in Tanzania (an estimated 132 black rhinos) and Kenya (105 white and 420 black rhinos), but government officials are unaware of any recent poaching in either country. It is possible, however, that a few rhinos may have been killed without the authorities' knowledge. There may also have been some recent killings in other parts of eastern Africa where rhinos still exist, notably southern Sudan, south-west Ethiopia and Rwanda. Two other possible sources for rhino horns for the Yemen market are from stockpiles in eastern Africa held by government departments, and from private individuals. There have been thefts from certain government-controlled supplies since 1989, and private traders may have decided to sell some of their old stocks as the price in US dollars in Sanaa has remained steady since 1985, although in Yemeni rials it increases weekly with the severe devaluation.

There will always be demand by the very rich Yemenis for the oldest and most expensive jambiyyas with rhino horn handles; owning such a jambiyya brings huge publicity and prestige. Tribal leaders like to have a better quality jambiyya than the others, so competition for the oldest and best jambiyyas will remain. It is only the demand for the new (much cheaper) rhino horn handles that threatens the rhino's survival.

In the longer term, the best ways to reduce demand for rhino horn are firstly to educate people that they are causing a species to go extinct, and secondly to find and encourage the use of valuable alternatives to rhino horn. On this visit we brought with us a video in Arabic on the rhinos to be shown on Yemeni television which will have a wide circulation throughout the country. The Yemenis are largely ignorant of the plight of the rhinoceros, and are hardly even aware of what the animal looks like.

'In 1993, the richest merchant in Sanaa reportedly sold his jambiyya for \$1 million to the Sheikh of a prominent tribe. This was a famous jambiyya, said to be over 200 years old. It has a long history of owners, including Imam Yahya (ruler of Yemen from 1904 to 1948).'

Something special has been made to replace rhino horn as the best quality handles - red-brown agate.

Furthermore, at last the production of a valuable alternative to rhino horn has been developed. Other jambiyya handles - wood, plastic, camel nail and water buffalo horn - have not been valuable enough to replace rhino horn as the material for the best-quality jambiyyas. Now, something special has been made. It started with one Yemeni man, Ahmed al-Wazir, who heard in 1990 that the President, on a visit that year to the United States, apparently had to leave behind his jambiyya with a rhino horn handle and bring one with a silver handle for reasons of diplomacy. This man, a librarian by profession, but who carves as a hobby, started thinking about alternatives to rhino horn and experimenting with different materials. Then, during Ramadan in early 1994, he presented a jambiyya he had made with a handle of red-brown agate as a gift to the President. The President showed it to other senior officials and it was immediately popular. The President thanked its maker and was grateful that he had produced a handle that could replace rhino horn and would thus be suitable as presents for dignitaries. He gave one to King Hussein of Jordan and then ordered 20 more, several of which he gave to VIPs on his visit to Europe in early 1995. According to Mr al-Wazir, the Foreign Minister has ordered 30 more as gifts for ambassadors in Yemen.

Mr al-Wazir made 35 jambiyyas with handles of agate or jasper in 1994. So far, his output is small and he cannot yet meet the growing demand. He has about 20 people looking for the semi-precious stones in the mountains south of Sanaa, and he employs a carver to produce the handles using a diamond blade cutter, along with a silversmith to decorate the handles. Mr al-Wazir himself and a member of his family finish the handles using a grinder and polishing machine. He obtains all the best materials for his blades, sheaths and belts, along with 24 carat gold coins to decorate the handles. He can sell a complete and finished jambiyya for \$1,700. At present, it takes two or three days to produce a complete one, but he

intends to buy more efficient machines and employ five stone cutters in order to produce four stone-handled jambiyyas a day, or 1,000 a year.

Agate is a beautiful substance somewhat similar to amber, but stronger.

It has been part of Yemen's tradition and culture, being mined in Yemen, for hundreds of years. As well as valuing their heritage, Yemenis enjoy modern things, and these new jambiyyas with agate or jasper handles are a promising link between a traditional substance and a modern usage. The new jambiyyas have been accepted at the highest level of society and gradually, it is hoped, with the right publicity other Yemenis will emulate the President and his ministers.

We also had an important meeting with the main jambiyya-making family in Yemen. This time,

contrary to our previous experience, family members told us not to help them find a good quality plastic alternative to rhino horn. They probably think that Mr al-Wazir's semi-precious stone handles may fill this need. For the first time, their main request was for conservation organizations or the United Nations to raise money for the family to change its business by setting up factories for washing machines, fridges and paper bags for cement, as compensation for not being able to import legally new rhino horn supplies. The family also asked us, as before, to provide money to buy its 1,500 kilos of rhino horn shavings which are now banned from



being exported. (Small amounts, however, are still sold in the souk, mostly to eastern Asians, for \$300 to \$600 a kilo depending on purity.) Members of the family are aware that their years of making large amounts of money in the rhino horn trade are over, and they are now disillusioned about this business.

We visited the craftsmen in Taiz, a city in central Yemen, where Esmond Martin had counted six workshops in 1983 inside the souk, half of which were producing jambiyyas with rhino horn handles. This was the year after Yemen banned rhino horn imports, but the ban was to prove ineffective. Today, more people were wearing jambiyyas in Taiz than in 1983, but according to the oldest craftsman, men can now usually afford to buy only cheap jambiyyas and business is no longer so profitable. This confirmed the feelings of the main jambiyya-making family in Sanaa. The Taiz souk today has nine workshops and we counted 17 craftsmen; we saw no new rhino horn handles. As in 1983, they buy roughly shaped water buffalo horn handles from Sanaa; a bag of 100 costs \$18. Each piece, weighing 250 grammes, is imported from Hyderabad in India for 16 cents, obtained from the domestic water buffalo. A craftsman can make 10 to 20 of these jambiyyas a day, selling them for \$4 to \$30 each. Some craftsmen in Taiz use camel nail for handles. We were shown a bag of camel feet, dried in salt, which had been imported from Saudi Arabia for less than a dollar per foot. One foot makes two handles; prices for these finished jambiyyas are similar to those with water

'Reduce demand for rhino horn by educating people about extinction of a species and encouraging the use of alternatives'

Above right: A craftsman in the Dhamar souk polishes a steel blade.

CREDIT: Esmond Martin.

buffalo horn handles. Poorer people buy those with wooden handles. The wood is obtained from a local tree, *Cordia abyssinica*, and 10 to 20 can be made by a craftsman each day. They sell for about \$3 each or half that for a small child's one.

On average, the Taiz craftsmen produce eight jambiyyas a day, earning \$4 to \$7 per day, which is similar to Sanaa craftsmen. But they spend around \$2 a day on the mild stimulant, qat (*Catha edulis*), claiming they need to chew it in order to make a good handle. Jambiyas and qat together are a dominant part of a traditional Yemeni's lifestyle. Both expanded greatly in use at the end of the Revolution in 1970 when the general public could suddenly afford them. They remain symbols of Yemen's tribal culture.

The old craftsman to whom we spoke said he was the only person in Taiz making jambiyyas 40 years ago. As a young man he had used predominantly camel nails, and until three years ago he claimed he was still using rhino horn which his brother smuggled out of Kenya. He showed us a small elephant ivory tusk, saying the last time he had made an ivory handle had been for a South Yemeni about five years ago for around \$340. The

jambiyya blades are not made in Taiz. Instead, machine-made blades are brought from Sanaa for less than 50 cents each. Hand-made blades come from Dhamar, a town half way between Sanaa and Taiz.

Dhamar is famous for its blade production, so we visited Dhamar's souk where we counted 11 workshops with 20 craftsmen working mostly on blades. This was double our count in 1990. In one of these workshops were three blacksmiths who make the first rough stage of the blade. For this work, they buy scrap metal rods obtained from old vehicles. The number of finished blades produced per day and the prices vary greatly according to the amount of hand work, the quality of the metal (that from army tanks is the best) and the blade's weight (double blades are superior to single blades). A good hand-made blade will sell for \$10 to \$30.

Although the jambiyya industry flourishes in the main centres of Sanaa, Taiz and Dhamar, it is noticeable that craftsmen no longer have access to enough rhino horn for such a lucrative business. Nevertheless, demand for the cheaper jambiyyas grows, and the craftsmen have plenty of work to do. The main trading family in Sanaa, however, wants to move into other more profitable businesses, as the small quantities of horn being smuggled into Sanaa today bring only a few craftsmen a minor bonus income. Stone carvers are entirely different artisans from those in the souk filing horn, nail and wood handles. The souk craftsmen will continue their traditional work, leaving the new, expensive handles made of semi-precious stones to be worked by a few stone experts outside the old walled city. The new stone handles have great potential in replacing demand for expensive jambiyyas with new rhino horn handles, and must be encouraged.

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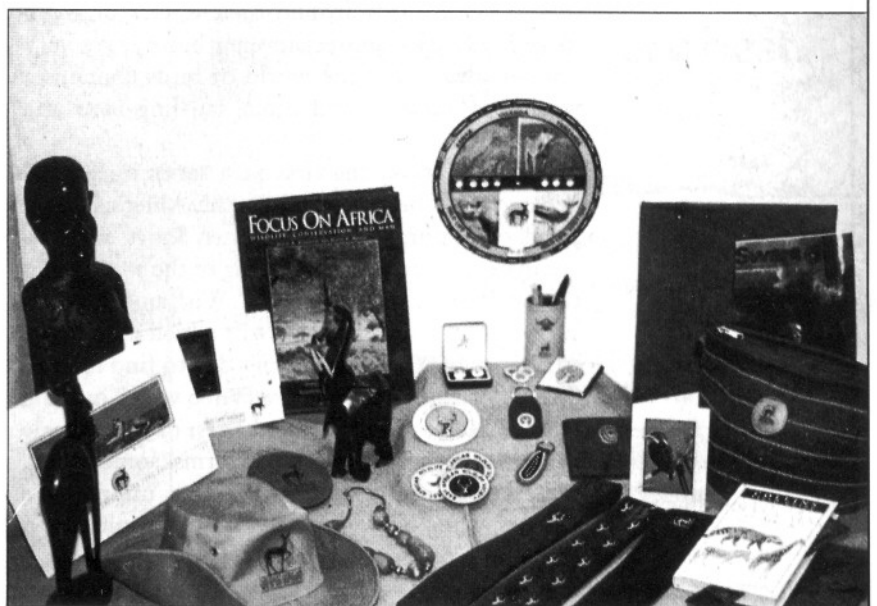
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