

# THE PLIGHT FOR THE RHINO



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Since 1972 a vast quantity of rhino horn has been used for making the handles of traditional Yemeni daggers, called *jambias*. We do not know for how many years or even centuries rhino horn has been in demand in the Yemen for dagger handles, but there is strong evidence that it has been only recently that there has been a large demand. Prior to the North Yemen Civil War which erupted in 1962, the country was one of the poorest in the world and was almost completely cut off from all outside influences; in fact, in 1962, North Yemen was essentially a medieval state under the absolute rule of a traditional Iman and completely lacking in almost all forms of modernization. Thus it was most likely that only the Iman's family and a few other relatively wealthy people could afford rhino horn; 99 per cent of the population was barely surviving at an extremely low standard of living. Of course, most men possessed traditional daggers, but the handles of these were generally made out of cow horn.

After the Civil War in North Yemen ended in 1970, North Yemen replaced South Yemen (then a socialist state) as the major importer in the world of rhino horn. According to official North Yemen statistics from 1969 to 1977, 22,645 kilos of rhino horn were imported. In other words, an annual average of 2831 kilos of rhino horn came into the country, representing for this eight-year period the death of approximately 8 000 rhinos, which is almost the same figure as the one based on the total legal exports from East Africa at this time.

This huge amount of rhino horn imported into North Yemen in the 1970s was used to make handles for daggers. Since the per capita income of the country has increased fivefold in the past ten years, there is now enough money for many people to purchase the horn. The expensive daggers, which vary in price from US\$300 to US\$13 000, have a very special place in the life of Yemen men. Almost all males over the age of 14 possess one of these traditional weapons, and most Yemen men wear them daily. To some extent, the dagger represents status and is a symbol of a man's sexual maturity. A dagger with a beautifully carved rhino handle encrusted with gold or silver coins is a personal adornment and is often attached to a very elaborate belt. The traditional role of the dagger as a weapon is still portentous. A Yemeni will make use of his dagger as an offensive weapon and also as a deterrent to personal attack. In present day North Yemen the central government does not have control of the whole country and, especially in the eastern parts, there are rebels and bandits. Also, in the northern part of the country it is common to see men in the streets armed with, in addition to their daggers, modern rifles and hand grenades. In the town of Saada in the main market are several merchants who openly display for sale machine guns, automatic rifles, pistols, etc. While I was visiting there, one of the nurses who worked in the hospital told me that a man had recently been admitted who had been stabbed in the back by a fellow Yemeni wielding a *jambia*, and she had also, that very morning, assisted in an operation to mend another man's hand which had almost been severed by a dagger in the course of an argument among neighbours. Such illustrations indicate the continuing importance of the dagger as a weapon.

Most of the *jambias* which are offered for sale in North Yemen are made in the main market of the capital of Sanaa, within a short distance of the Bab al Yemen. In October 1978 at least five merchants were buying rhino horn from one main wholesaler in Sanaa. Each of these merchants employed several craftsmen to carve the horn into handles

for the *jambias*; other craftsmen made the blades for them. One kilo of rhino horn will usually provide enough material for three handles, and thus between 1969 and 1977 approximately 8 500 *jambias* with rhino horn handles were made each year. Now that the North Yemenis are able to afford more rhino horn handles, these are more in demand than daggers with cow horn handles, which are very considerably cheaper. There is a feeling that rhino horn handles are superior to others, as there is also a certain mystique about the rhino as an aggressive, potent animal.

Curiously, the preference for rhino horn handles on daggers is not apparent in other Arab countries. Neither the Arabs of Oman nor of the United Arab Emirates, who also carry daggers, import rhino horn for them.

Although North Yemen is the country which imports the greatest amount of rhino horn, the making of rhino horn handles for daggers is secondary to the use of rhino horn in traditional Chinese medicine. However, it is not in demand in Southeast Asia as an aphrodisiac. Only in India, and in particular in Gujerat and Bengal, have I come across reports of rhino horn used as an aphrodisiac.

In my field research in Singapore, Hong Kong, Macao, Taiwan and Thailand no one suggested any possibility of aphrodisiac qualities pertaining to rhino horn. Moreover, traditional medicine practitioners denied that it is used in China as an aphrodisiac. It is possible that rhino horn may be used as an aphrodisiac in one or two remote places in Asia (other than in India), but its use as such is definitely only of minor significance. I understand, also, that neither the South Koreans nor the Japanese, both of whom are major importers of rhino horn, use it as a sexual stimulant. The popular belief among westerners that the major use of rhino horn is by the Chinese as a "love potion" is unfounded.

In the *Pen Ts'ao Kang Mu*, from which much of today's Chinese traditional medicine is derived, several uses are given for rhino horn, but not as an aphrodisiac. In John Keys' book, *Chinese Herbs*, the main uses of the rhino horn are listed as cardiotoxic, antipyretic and antidotal. H. Wallnofer and A. von Rottauscher in *Chinese Folk Medicine* state that: "Rhinoceros horn (*Hsi chio*) is highly effective when applied to pus boils (*furuncles*). It is also prescribed as an antitoxin for snake bites. In *Tibetan Medicine* Jampal Kunzang adds that rhino horn is also used to purify the blood. In Singapore I visited the Chinese Physicians Association and talked with one of their foremost research officers in traditional Chinese medicine, Stephen Lau Kiew Teck. He confirmed to me that the Chinese never use rhino horn as an aphrodisiac and illustrated the point by kindly translating for me all the passages pertaining to rhino in the *Chinese Medical Dictionary*, one of the most complete Chinese reference books on traditional medicine. It contains a full description, covering several pages, of each of the five species of rhino and the various medicinal purposes to which are put the horn, meat (for snake and animal bites and headaches), and skin (for rheumatism). From all the rhinos horn is taken primarily for the treatment of high fevers. The *Chinese Medical Dictionary* purports that Indian rhino horn is the strongest. Dr Lau himself claimed that he would be willing to prescribe substitutes for rhino horn, such as saiga antelope or even buffalo horn. He also thought that young, inexperienced doctors would hesitate about prescribing rhino horn as it is also believed that improper use of it can cause dangerous side-effects.

Today most rhino horn in Southeast Asia and the Far East is used as a fever-depressing drug; it is also occasionally

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used to relieve headache, for heart trouble, to "cleanse" the liver and pancreas, and, when made into an ointment, to cure skin diseases. Rhino horn is available in all the large cities there and in many smaller ones as well. Of the 76 traditional medicine shops in which I held interviews with the pharmacists, 50 had rhino products for sale (90 per cent consisting of rhino horn). All of the shops I examined closely in Taipei had rhino products, but only 52 per cent of the ones in Bangkok sold any.

The traditional medicine shops in Southeast Asia are almost exclusively owned and managed by Chinese. Hundreds of traditional medicine shops are spread throughout the commercial areas of Singapore and Hong Kong. And even in Thailand, it is the Chinese, not Thai, medicine shops which dominate the market. Traditional medicine shops are not tucked away in remote back streets, but are instead major places of business, to be found in upper-middle class shopping areas as well as in poorer neighbourhoods. Many have modern showcases, lighted with fluorescent bulbs to display traditional herbs and animal products. Quite often on shelves opposite, or above, modern western antibiotics, vitamins, etc. are displayed for sale. Some shops have separate consultation rooms, and most of the premises are exceptionally clean and neat; moreover, they are blessedly free from jarring recorded music so prevalent in other types of shops in this part of the world, although in Taiwan there is usually a television turned on softly to entertain customers and employees alike. The hours of business are long: in Singapore and Hong Kong the day begins around 9.00 a.m. and does not finish until 10.00 p.m. The employees and managers rarely leave during this 13-hour period, taking their meals, reading the newspapers, playing cards, etc. when they are not preoccupied by their work. The atmosphere is pleasant, and the sales people are more genuinely helpful and concerned for their customers than in ordinary shops. Hot tea is made available in many of these commercial establishments; traditional hospitality is offered even in the most humble ones. Most of the customers are women, the majority of whom are probably over 40 years of age, and who usually patronize such shops early in the morning on their way to buy food, or at night after 8.00 p.m.

Rhino horn can be purchased without a prescription. Chinese medical shops operate somewhat along the lines of western pharmacies prior to the enforcement of drug laws, which is to say that someone with a complaint would be just as likely to consult a pharmacist as a doctor for a cure. In traditional Chinese medicine shops, you will find patients handing over prescriptions written in Mandarin to the pharmacist (almost always a man), and you will also see customers explaining their problems in detail and afterwards being given mixtures of herbs and animal products as remedies. In so far as rhino horn is concerned, a customer will not usually purchase a powder that has already been made from it. A customer prefers to examine closely the horn from which scrapings will be made. Ground-up rhino horn powder is very pale grey in colour and may easily be faked by other horn, such as wafer buffalo or antelope. Since it is one of the more expensive animal products, it is natural that the customer wants to be certain of getting what he/she is paying for!

The dispenser of rhino horn, knowing well that his customer will be interested in seeing the object, produces it from a display cabinet or a little drawer (where it is often kept carefully wrapped in cotton wool); upon agreement that it is of good quality, he will take a sharp knife and scrape a small amount from the edge of the horn; the

resultant shavings are next weighed on a scale. In Singapore, Macao and Hong Kong an old-fashioned hand scale is often used, the top bar of which may be of ivory or bone. In these places the tael is the weight by which the horn is priced, and the tael corresponds to roughly 37.8 grams. Individual purchases amount to a twentieth or a tenth of a tael. In Taiwan the *chien*, one-tenth of a tael, is the more common weight for pricing, obviously a more convenient measurement of rhino horn for retail sales. In Thailand, even though the merchants in traditional medicine are mostly Chinese, the metric system prevails, and rhino horn is usually retailed by the gram, but occasionally also by the tael.

When the rhino horn purchaser returns home, he removes the shavings from the paper package in which the dispenser has invariably wrapped the drug, and places the contents into a glass and adds boiling water. When cool enough to swallow, the brew is given to the patient. If the fever has not come down within a few hours, the procedure is repeated.

From the early years of this century up to 1975, there was a gradual increase, except for the Depression years, in the wholesale price of African rhinoceros horn. Since 1975 there has been a dramatic 21-fold rise, one of the greatest increases in the world for any product over so short a period of time! And this leap is not due to an acute shortage of horn; the quantities of horn involved in international trade actually increased in the 1970s.

Before 1900 there are few statistics on the price of rhino horn, but from the beginning of the twentieth century, accurate figures do become available. A major distinction must be made between the wholesale price, that is the price paid by dealers and large pharmacy shops, and the retail price which is what is charged to the consumer. Since the average customer buys only a few grams of rhino products at a time, the mark up seems to be very high, if calculated on a kilogram basis. But we must remember that the average traditional chemist sells relatively little rhino horn in a year, as compared with other medicines, and he is also selling to his customer his medical skill and long time experience in dealing with animal drugs.

Beginning in 1976 the wholesale price of rhino horn began to "rocket". By using a wide variety of sources, including the official East African export and import figures for North Yemen and several countries in Southeast Asia, we can calculate that the wholesale price of African rhino horn went up more than threefold in that year to US\$105 a kilo. The following year the price almost doubled to US\$190 and in 1978 reached US\$300. By September 1979 in Southeast Asia the minimum wholesale price was an astonishing US\$675 a kilo, some 2 000 per cent increase in only four years.

What factors were responsible for the fantastic rise in prices? To reiterate, supplies of rhino horn did not drop in the 1970s; quite the opposite happened; supplies from East Africa and from the African continent in general reached a peak in the 1970s, so we must look elsewhere for an explanation. Immediately after the Yemeni Civil War in 1969, many thousands of Yemenis migrated to Saudi Arabia and the Gulf States to earn high salaries as unskilled labour. Since the Yemenis are Muslim, speak Arabic and are very hard workers, they are especially welcomed by their Arab neighbours. When oil prices tripled in 1973-4 Saudi Arabia began an unprecedented building boom. The Kingdom needed tremendous numbers of workers for massive development projects, and men from North Yemen were eager to go there because of the fortunes they could

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make, and although North Yemen has no oil, since the Revolution it had become an avid consumer society. In 1978, out of a total population of 6 000 000 almost 1 000 000 Yemenis were working in Saudi Arabia, and they brought back home in that year \$1 500 000 000. On account of the remittances from abroad, the per capita income of North Yemen climbed from \$80 in 1970 to \$500 in 1979. With such wealth available, many Yemenis who had not been able to have rhino horn daggers suddenly began asking for them on the market. As it was, despite the increase of supply, there was not enough horn available to meet the demand. Consequently, the wholesale price of rhino horn in Sanaa rose to \$675 a kilo by 1978, higher than the price in Hong Kong. Dealers in Hong Kong soon found that they were being out-bid; for the first time Arabs were able to break the monopoly of the Chinese traders.

Unless immediate measures are taken against the import of rhino horn in North Yemen, the demand is going to continue, with an additional 50 000 young men coming of age each year. Should the supply continue as it has for the 1969-1977 period, it will satisfy only 17 per cent of the potential demand for rhino horn, if every teenage boy were to want a new *jambias* made with a rhino horn handle. Granted not everyone would be in a position to buy one and, obviously, some of the daggers belonging to fathers and grandfathers would also possibly be at the disposal of the youngsters. Nevertheless, with only approximately 8 492 rhino horn *jambias* coming onto the market annually (from just under a thousand rhinos), the price for rhino horn will inevitably become higher, and the threat to the remaining rhinos in the wild will be proportionately that much greater.

Another reason for the rise in the price in rhino horn

resulted from political changes in Kenya and Tanzania. From the nineteenth century until a few years after independence, it was the Indians in these countries who bought from government auctions ivory and rhino horn for export to Hong Kong. Gradually, in the 1970s, new buyers, mostly Africans, entered the market, and the "bonhomie" among the dealers turned into real competition; in other words, the Indians had kept the prices reasonable among themselves, hoping that the low East African selling price would realise greater profit for themselves when they sold the trophies abroad. When competition started in earnest, they had to bid more just to stay in business. Officialdom also began to play a role in the auctions: nationalistic policies worked against the Indians, and those with direct access to licensing authorities found that there were ways of displacing the former monopolists in the ivory and rhino trade. Once the prices began to soar in East Africa, it was up to the people in Singapore, Macao, Hong Kong, South Korea, Taiwan and Japan (then gradually North Yemen) to raise their own offers — and this they willingly did in the mid-1970s.

Concern about the price increases began to manifest itself in 1977 in a typical fashion; the Asian dealers bought more rhino horn, actually stockpiling it, believing that the price would continue to go up and that they, in turn, would be able to make more profit from it. They also had their eyes open to conservationists' reports of a widespread decline in rhino numbers. It seemed a good idea to them to obtain as much as possible. Moreover, the world economy showed unhealthy signs of high inflation and economic instability, generating the feeling that a wise investor should move out of cash, stocks and bonds and into works of art and precious commodities — and rhino horn had indeed

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