



Amid conflict, Yemen's demand for rhino horn daggers continues

TOP: Jambiyas, sheaths and belts are seen together for sale in this jambiya retail shop in Sanaa.



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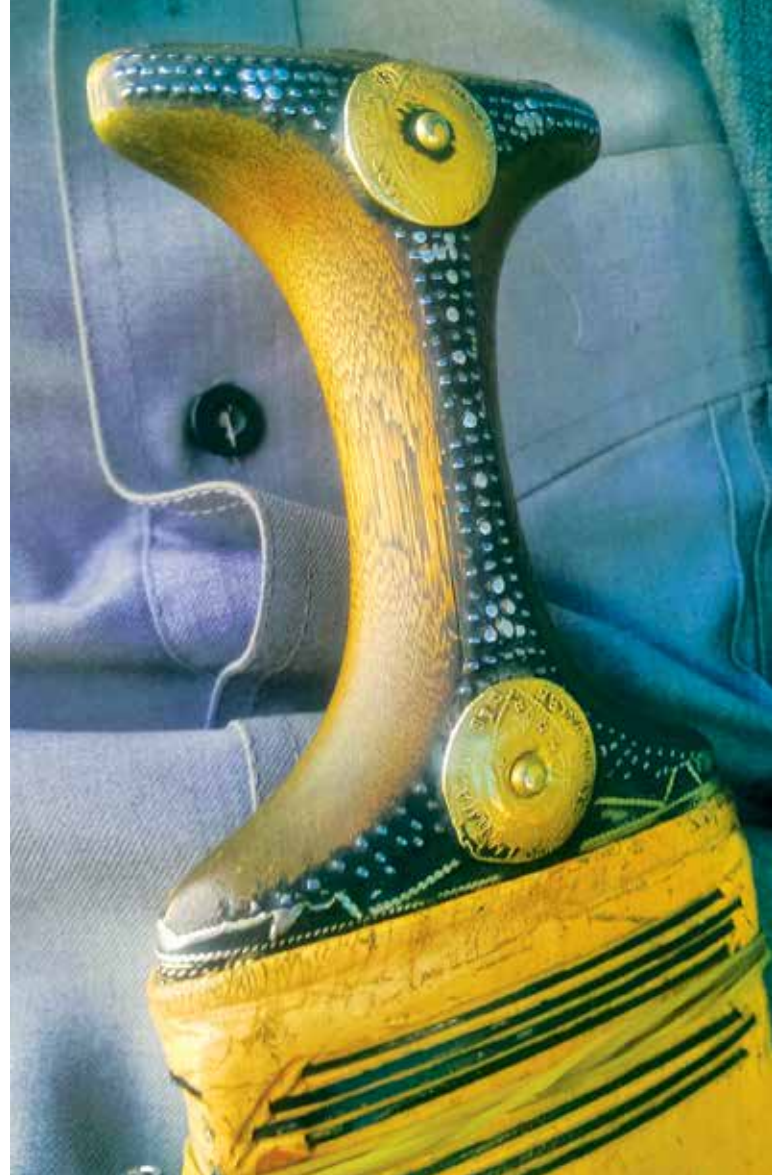
In the 1970s and 1980s, most of East Africa's rhinos were killed to meet the growing demand for rhino horn in what was then North Yemen. As a result of the Saudi Arabian oil boom starting in the early 1970s, many Yemenis went to work in Saudi Arabia and could afford rhino horn handles for their traditional daggers, called jambiyas.

Until then, jambiyas with rhino horn handles had been worn only by a few elite. Rhino horn flooded into the country and jambiya workshops mushroomed, mostly in the old souk of Sanaa - the capital. When North Yemen was recognized as the cause of this rhino crisis across much of eastern and central Africa, the North Yemen government prohibited rhino horn imports in 1982. In 1987, the government banned the export of left-over rhino horn chips and shavings to China (for use in traditional Chinese medicines).

From the 1980s we were working closely on legislation and enforcement with the then Foreign Minister (later Prime Minister), Dr

Abdul Karim al-Iryani, a man of action who was highly supportive and influential. As jambiyas were entrenched in the culture, worn daily by most men in North Yemen, we also held regular meetings amongst those involved in the trade to spread awareness about the plight of the rhino.

Experiments increased amongst the jambiya makers on materials other than rhino horn, from special new yellow and orange plastics to different, valuable agates. Plastic did not prove to be a successful substitute as it would melt if hot cigarette ash fell on it; agate could break if dropped. So rhino horn handles, especially old ones, remained the most sought after. We continued to help the government with monitoring, law enforcement, and encouraging the use of substitutes. In 1990, North and South Yemen became one country, the Republic of Yemen. Gradually with influence from the south - where jambiyas had been banned from 1967 to 1990 under the Marxist regime - more people in Sanaa started to wear western dress. In 1997,



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after much persuasion from us, Yemen finally agreed to join the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora (CITES).

The country was modernizing. With increasing prosperity and stability, Yemen attracted more foreign tourists who came to marvel at the country's unusual and beautiful architecture, and the friendliness and traditions of the people. This stability was not to last, and Yemen started slipping backwards economically due to increasing political unrest. Around 2007, this coincided with an economic boom in eastern Asia, notably China and Vietnam, where there was a surge in demand for rhino horn.

Most rhino horn smuggled from Africa was finding its way to the East to be sold on the black

TOP LEFT: This jambiya with a very good Chinese handle resembling rhino horn was selling for 5,000 Yemeni rials or \$13 in October 2017 in Sanaa.

TOP RIGHT: This very good quality jambiya with a rhino horn handle was priced at a million Yemeni rials or \$2,667 in October 2017.

market for traditional medicine, gifts for officials or owned as status symbols by the newly rich. Later it was even promoted as a cancer cure in Vietnam, and also made into bangles, beaded bracelets and other mass-produced trinkets, primarily to meet the increasing Chinese demand.

Our visit to Sanaa, Yemen, in 2008 found the wholesale price for rhino horn had remained at about \$1,500/kg since 2006, while in East Asia, prices had reached ten times this. In Sanaa, left-over shavings were selling for \$940/kg to foreigners for illegal export to East Asia. Meanwhile, Yemenis had found a popular resin substitute, ironically made in China. These handles have a grainy appearance resembling rhino horn, but sold at a fraction of the price.

In early 2011 began a year-long revolution in Yemen to oust the regime of Ali Abdullah Saleh, who had been president for 33 years. In early 2012, Abdrabbuh Mansour al-Hadhi became Yemen's first elected President. Protestors, both pro- and anti-Saleh, continued their sporadic violence. Few foreigners were going to the country then. In late 2012 we visited Dr al-Iryani once again while, with his input, working on the

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rhino horn trade and an education campaign.

But unrest worsened in Yemen. Ex President Saleh formed an alliance with Houthi militia who captured Sanaa in September 2014. This resulted in a Saudi-led coalition government in Aden against the Houthis, but endless tensions caused yet more violence and misery. Today the news from Yemen seems only to worsen.

So what is happening in Yemen now regarding the rhino horn trade? Certain Yemeni friends of ours who remained in Sanaa during these troubled years were brave enough to spend several days investigating in the old souk in September and October 2017. They recorded their findings to us:

It's jungle law or worse, with shoot outs and kidnappings and robberies on a daily basis; Sanaa is drowning in weapons and of course new rhino horn still comes into Sanaa. The Houthis have ransacked the country and are buying up land, gold, cattle, farms, villas, weapons and currency. The expensive jambiyas with rhino horn handles are made for the rich

BOTTOM: In Sanaa's old town souk there are several alleyways where jambiyas are made and sold, but today the souk is quiet with a lack of ready cash for the average customer due to the continuing war.

Houthis. They are strict Shiites from the North and have forbidden trousers to be worn in schools – gowns and jambiyas are trending again. Jambiyas once again can be worn anywhere, even at the Sanaa airport. And in Sanaa it is trending back to carry an AK47 in public as well. The chewing of qat is also more widely seen again, being part of traditional Yemeni culture that the Houthis support.

Since 2014 thousands of people, the majority civilians, have been killed. Most Yemenis want peace. Sanaa wasn't wiped out like Taiz and Aden and other cities because the factions in Sanaa were, until recently, working as allies. Now they are going to face each other. Everyone is bracing themselves. Government salaries have not been paid for months. There is often no electrical power and prices for essentials have shot up. Cholera is killing so many people. The Houthis rob and destroy everything they want, even religious monuments. Museums have been looted with the excuse that they are infidel work. Sanaa is now totally militarized with roadblocks everywhere, even in the old city.



The overall look in the jambiya market in the old souk is not as full as before, but strangely some new jambiya shops have opened up, including those of the children and grandchildren of the main jambiya trader in Sanaa. They have sprung up all over the city. The most expensive jambiyas I saw for sale in the market were 1.2 million rials (\$3,200) and 1.4 million rials (\$3,730); these are older ones [preferred for their patina that develops with age]. The main rhino horn jambiya trader is alive and well! Although business is down at the moment as people lack money, demand for jambiyas will probably rise after the war, and when the sea embargo is lifted, so this trader and his big family are confident in the future of their business.

Any goods to Yemen from abroad now pass through very tight security; ships and airlines must get searched in Jordan and Djibouti, then reloaded, and arrive at the government-controlled airports and are taxed heavily in southern Yemen. Importers are harassed to pay indemnity or blood money for the families of the



TOP: Three handles can be made from a rhino horn of 1.5kg while five handles can be made from a 2-kg rhino horn, with 60 per cent left over as chips and powder often smuggled abroad for Chinese traditional medicine.

'martyrs' and also war taxes. From southern Yemen there are many government check points northwards, and half way start the Houthi checkpoints and harassments; the goods are taxed yet again on arrival in Sanaa.

I visited the old souk when it is most active, around 5pm. I counted 13 active workshops and 43 retail shops that were open, with others closed as the artisans were sick or away at weddings, or because they work at different times depending on the availability of electricity.

I went on my motorbike to see the big trader several times with my friend. I sometimes waited at the Great Mosque in the old city for my friend to come back with information. The big trader said that because of Yemen's political situation, with all the road blocks, rhino horn is difficult to smuggle. But if a special order were made, it can come in. He mentioned Namibia and South Africa, believing soon South Africa will sell in bulk. The rhino horn, the main trader said, can be smuggled into Aden and through the desert region of Mareb, north to Sanaa, but it costs a lot now. One year some may come in, he said, and then another year the prices are too high so we wait for prices to cool down; the eastern Asian

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countries are paying far more for it, more than \$25,000 a kg wholesale in East Asia.

The main trader showed my friend some rhino horn jambiyas for sale and also said he had some old raw rhino horn and could make a handle out of it in 5-10 days costing 400,000 rials with another 50,000 for labour (a total of \$1,200 for the jambiya). He said there are also poor quality 'second-class' rhino horn jambiyas for sale in the souk with cracked or damaged 'hair-paths'; such handles will not age into beautiful colours so they sell cheaply, sometimes a tenth of the price of a good rhino horn one. The main trader doesn't have much left-over chips and shavings remaining as they have been sold. Foreigners request these and they sell today for around \$3,500/kg, he said.

I heard from other traders some of the rhino horn shavings were bought by a Chinese guy who speaks good Arabic. The shavings are simple to smuggle out by road to the south and then by plane as they can easily pass as herbs, unlike full rhino horn lumps that may be spotted at roadblocks or by customs. I also heard that a Vietnamese-Yemeni half cast guy roams around

BOTTOM: In the workshop area of Sanaa's old town souk, this was the only workshop where jambiya handles made of plastic were being crafted.

asking for rhino horn to buy in Sanaa. There is a large Vietnamese community in Yemen.

In the past tourists were careful not to buy rhino horn jambiyas because they could be confiscated on arrival in their countries. Some Chinese and other nationalities, especially diplomats, still live in Sanaa. I haven't seen any Chinese or other foreigners in the souk in the last few days, but they do pop into the souk occasionally, I heard. I was told that a Bulgarian or Romanian diplomat bought from a single shop three newish rhino horn jambiyas for nearly \$2,000 each around June or July 2017. A rhino horn handle is worth much more than the jambiya itself, meaning he probably removes the horn part and sells that off abroad.

With the land and sea embargo it is difficult to get new materials for jambiya handles. Most jambiya craftsmen especially need water buffalo horn from India's domestic water buffalo. Resin handles I hear must be imported ready-made from China. I saw one workshop in the old souk resorting to plastic handles again. Most of the good jambiya workshops are still together in the old souk; and opposite the old souk main





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gateway are still other workshops making cheap jambiyas from wood and other materials. I saw two craftsmen assembling and decorating Chinese handles onto blades here. These Chinese synthetic handles flooded the market especially from 2009 to 2012. But the trend died down and fewer retailers sell them nowadays, not helped by the embargo.

The jambiya shops sell a variety of jambiyas, old and new. In the cheaper shops are jambiya sets (jambiya, sheath and belt combined), such as in the long alley opposite the old souk main gateway. These usually have water buffalo horn or Chinese resin handles. People of course prefer jambiyas with rhino horn handles for prestige. But, on the other hand, there are lots of robberies of jambiyas made of this valuable horn - more lately than ever - making people prefer Chinese look-alike ones in case they get robbed'.

Overall, it is clear that fewer people are making, selling and buying jambiyas in Sanaa than in recent years. Jambiyas with handles of

TOP LEFT: In Sanaa's old town souk is a new lane of jambiya shops; the Houthis are encouraging the wearing of traditional dress and jambiyas.

TOP RIGHT: Jambiyas (as seen here) with handles made from water buffalo horn imported from India have been the most common in Sanaa for many years for those who cannot afford rhino horn, with Chinese replicas becoming a relatively recent alternative.

less expensive materials are cheaper today than in 2012. This is due to a general lack of ready cash for the average person because of the war and with the sharp devaluation of the Yemeni rial compared to the US dollar, from 214 rials in November 2012 to 375 rials in October 2017. For example, we found that in 2012, jambiyas with medium-sized handles of water buffalo horn cost \$28 and in 2017 \$12; camel nail in 2012 cost \$28 and in 2017 \$19; and Chinese resin handles cost in 2012 \$12 compared to \$8 in 2017. A good quality rhino horn jambiya today is priced in US dollars about the same as it was in 2012, as these can be paid for by the wealthy. Prices in Sanaa's old souk in October 2017 for a standard good quality rhino horn jambiya ranged from 200,000 rials (\$533) to 900,000 rials (\$2,400). For eight such jambiyas priced with a typical 150g rhino horn handle, the average was \$1,270.

Yemenis cannot compete with newly rich rhino horn buyers in eastern Asia who have taken over this illegal market. Yemen no longer is the main threat to rhinos as in the past. While some Yemenis have been forced to sell their jambiyas out of desperation for money, others are determined to keep their valuable rhino horn jambiyas that symbolize their culture and tradition, encouraged more than ever by the Houthis in Sanaa. ●

OVERALL, IT IS CLEAR THAT FEWER PEOPLE ARE MAKING, SELLING AND BUYING JAMBIYAS IN SANAA THAN IN RECENT YEARS.