

Yemen's attitudes towards rhino horn and jambiyas

Lucy Vigne, Esmond Martin

PO Box 15510 – 00503, Nairobi, Kenya; email: rhino@wananchi.com

Abstract

In 1990 the Marxist government of the south that had banned civilians from possessing weapons, including the jambiya dagger, was ousted. South Yemen united with North Yemen to form one country. Were more people in the south going to emulate the northerners and buy jambiyas once again? Having not been in the southern region since 1993, we surveyed five main southern towns in early 2008 to see if influences from the north had encouraged the southerners to wear jambiyas in recent years. In many ways the southerners are emulating the northerners: they have shed Marxism in favour of capitalism and there has been an increase in traditional Islamic practices, but they still look down on jambiyas. However, the dagger is still a proud sign of being a northern tribesman, and Sanaa remains the centre of the jambiya industry - with rhino horn most favoured for handles; Taiz trails a distant second in importance. We learned more about the attitudes of Yemenis, especially from the younger more prosperous men in Sanaa who are likely to buy a rhino horn jambiya. And we increased public awareness on the plight of the rhino, distributing DVDs on Yemen's rhino horn trade and supplying other educational materials to Yemenis in Sanaa and Taiz.

Résumé

En 1990 le gouvernement marxiste du sud qui avait interdit aux civils de posséder des armes, y compris le poignard jambiya, a été évincé. Le Yémen Sud s'est uni avec le Yémen Nord pour former un seul pays. Davantage de gens du sud allaient-ils imiter les nordistes et acheter encore une fois les jambiyas? N'ayant pas visité la région du sud depuis 1993, nous avons inspecté cinq villes principales du sud au début de 2008 pour voir si les influences du nord avaient encouragé les gens du sud à porter les jambiyas ces dernières années. À bien des égards, les gens du sud imitent les nordistes: ils ont mis de côté le Marxisme en faveur du capitalisme et il y a eu une augmentation dans les pratiques islamiques traditionnelles, mais ils méprisent encore les jambiyas. Cependant, le poignard est encore un signe de fierté pour un membre d'une tribu du nord, et Sanaa reste le centre de l'industrie du jambiya - avec la corne du rhinocéros étant le plus souvent favorisée pour les manches; Taiz suit de loin en importance. Nous avons appris davantage sur les attitudes des Yéménites, surtout celles des jeunes hommes les plus prospères à Sanaa qui pourraient acheter un jambiya en corne de rhinocéros. Et nous avons renforcé la sensibilisation publique sur la situation critique du rhinocéros, en distribuant des DVD sur le commerce de la corne du rhinocéros au Yémen et en fournissant d'autres matériels pédagogiques aux Yéménites à Sanaa et à Taiz.

Introduction

Historical background

For hundreds of years until 1962, northern Yemen had been ruled by imams. After an eight year civil war the Imamate collapsed in favour of a republic in 1970. Historically, southern Yemen consisted mostly of sheikhdoms and small fishing villages. Then, from 1839 to 1967 the British controlled parts of southern Yemen;

Aden became a British Colony in 1937. The British were forced to withdraw from southern Yemen in 1967 by Yemeni Marxists who formed a new state. Most Yemenis hated a divided country and after the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1990 a reunified Republic of Yemen was proclaimed under President Ali Saleh. There were tensions and in 1994 a civil war broke out, but it was quickly quelled. Three political parties now dominate,

especially the President's party called the General People's Congress, and President Saleh remains in power. A tribesman himself, he sometimes wears a jambiya with a rhino horn handle. Foremost to a Yemeni is his tribe, and defending his clan is paramount. Most Yemenis are poor and many are illiterate. Most are traditional and conservative. Apart from satellite dishes, tarmac roads, new mansions and plastic water bottles, Yemen has hardly changed in appearance for many years and is proud of its heritage. In the north, many spend a great deal of their money on the mild stimulant plant that they like to chew called qat (*Catha edulis*), but also on jambiyas which have been part of their culture for centuries. However, there is a problem regarding jambiya wearing. The country's population has tripled from 1981 to 2007 with nearly half its population now being under 15 years old, and most young men will soon to be acquiring adult jambiyas.

Objectives

Our objectives, in order to help save eastern Africa's rhinos, were:

- To assess trends in the use of rhino horn for jambiyas.
- To investigate if the culture of wearing jambiyas that had been banned in the south had been re-adopted in this region.
- To increase public awareness on the plight of rhinos.

Methodology

We carried out nearly four weeks of fieldwork in various towns in Yemen in early 2008 (see fig. 1). In Sanaa and Taiz in the northern part of the country (or what used to be North Yemen) we surveyed the souks within the old towns where nearly all Yemen's jambiyas are made and many sold. In the souks we investigated rhino horn sales, counted jambiya shops and craftsmen, and surveyed the types of handles for sale and their prices. In southern Yemen (or what used to be South Yemen), we visited the coastal towns of Aden and Mukalla to see if new jambiya shops had appeared since our last visit in 1993 and to find out

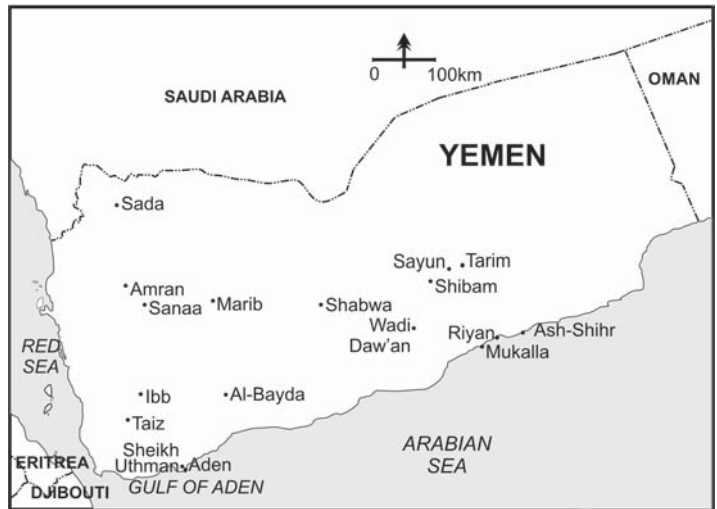


Figure 1. Map of Yemen.

if demand for jambiyas had grown. We then drove inland and surveyed the three most famous towns of the Wadi Hadramut region: Sayun, Shibam and Tarim - again to see if the sales of jambiyas had increased and to learn about people's attitudes towards them. A week was then spent in Sanaa. We had meetings with high level officials to bring attention to the continuing rhino horn problem. And we produced and distributed educational materials for circulation in Sanaa and Taiz - as much as we could with limited time and funding - to keep the rhino awareness ball in motion.

Results

Jambiya craftsmen

Sanaa is where nearly all jambiyas are made, the majority with water buffalo horn handles, with around 100 craftsmen making and repairing jambiyas in the old town souk. In Taiz we counted only 15. There are also some families scattered in villages around the country making jambiyas of particular designs. We learned that some are trying out new substitutes combining reconstituted powdered horns, as some traders in Sanaa are realizing that rhino horn is running out and are thus looking for alternatives. These handles have the appearance of rhino horn, but are still being refined so they do not crack. In the south, we learned that some craftsmen continue to make a few jambiyas with the smaller handle bought mostly by the southern Bedu in the interior, but it is a very small and specialized trade.

Northern versus southern views on jambiyas

In the north, jambiyas have been worn for generations by the majority of men who are committed tribesmen, or who wish to emulate the tribesmen. The northern Bedu (around Sada, Amran and Marib) traditionally wear smaller jambiyas compared to the larger ones worn in Sanaa and other northern cities. In the south, before Marxism, jambiyas were worn by the Bedus in the interior rather than the townspeople or fishing people. Marxist rule forbade jambiyas. In 1972 there was a massive campaign to rid the south of jambiyas and many of the more influential families were targeted. They had to get rid of their jambiyas quickly, selling them for low prices to be traded in North Yemen and Saudi Arabia (Vigne and Martin 1993).

The older generation is no longer interested in wearing their jambiyas, even if some do own them, and the younger people are not bothering with them, considering them dangerous and a sign of the more aggressive and less westernized northerners. Most southerners do not even wear them for festivals or weddings which is unheard of in the north by the vast majority of Yemeni men.

Yet in many other ways, the south is growing in similarity to the north of the country. The Islamic traditionalists have had a growing influence in the south. Women have gone back to wearing the full black veil that covers their faces. Unlike our visit in 1993 when women's faces were seen, there is now only a narrow slit for their eyes as in the north, and often, despite the heat in the south, they wear black gloves. Other northern cultural traits, such as the banning of alcohol, the wearing of pistols, and more qat chewing have taken place. In the north, at least 75% of men and 35% of women chew qat, while in the south it is still the minority, but numbers are rising. Also, capitalism has brought with it a greater variety of goods in the shops, flashy cars, new and ostentatious villas, and a general wish to make money.

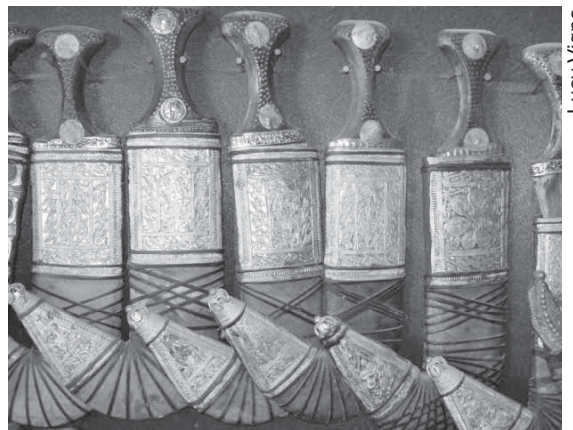
Jambiyas for sale in the south

Shops in the south display for sale mostly the larger northern-town style of jambiya as northerners all over Yemen are the main buyers. The southern style of jambiya traditionally made for Bedus in the Mukalla and Hadramut regions has a smaller head that is

rounded at the top, but these southern Bedu jambiyas are rare nowadays. The style of jambiya is similar to the northern Bedu jambiya style.

Most jambiyas for sale in the south are brought from Sanaa. Although there are far fewer such shops in the south than the north and thus competition is less fierce, sales are slow by comparison with Sanaa, as most Yemenis prefer to go to Sanaa for a jambiya where there is a wider choice. However, a northern Yemeni will buy one in the south if, for example, he has left his behind and needs one for a celebration such as a wedding. Or they are bought as presents. We saw a number of children's small jambiyas offered for this purpose. In Wadi Hadramut, a popular tourist destination, most jambiyas are sold to foreigners in jewellery shops. In Aden and Mukalla, apart from tourist shops, jambiyas were offered to Yemenis in outlets selling military equipment usually for northern military staff working in the south. In total in southern Yemen we counted for sale 1,712 jambiyas (see table 1).

Jambiyas in the shops can be old or new. The old ones are preferred by foreign tourists as souvenirs, as are some new ones with metal-filigreed sheaths. Most of these have water buffalo horn handles, and prices are slightly higher in the south than in Sanaa. In Sayun you can find the rarer Hadrami jambiya more cheaply than in Sanaa, however. These used to be worn by the Bedu of the Wadi Hadramut area before Marxism; they often have a Hadrami-crafted silver sheath. Old jambiyas in their sheaths are usually displayed on the shop walls, but the most expensive



Lucy Vigne

New jambiyas for sale to tourists.

silver ones are displayed under glass counters. Only a handful of old jambiyas with rhino horn handles were seen, and most had been brought down from Sanaa; these would be bought by northern Yemenis. In some outlets jambiyas are displayed without sheaths in racks on a stand, as in Sanaa, and these are on offer mainly to northern Yemenis.

Aden

Aden has remained run down with little economic development compared with Mukalla. Nearly everyone, including northerners working in Aden, wear a wrap-around piece of material called a futa which is the traditional dress of the south. The original fishermen of Aden were not jambiya wearers traditionally. Aden men would be ashamed to wear a jambiya as it is a weapon. Most northerners soon give up wearing a jambiya in Aden when they learn no one else wears one. We saw only a handful of men with jambiyas (northerners with Sanaa-style jambiyas) and one man from al-Bayda with a Bedu-style smaller jambiya. Compared with 1993 when we counted two shops selling jambiyas, we counted 11 on this survey. There were five shops or stalls selling military equipment, with jambiyas of a variety of styles on display mostly to northerners; all but one were in the souk area of the suburb of Sheikh Othman. In this area there was

one pavement seller with six jambiyas. There were two tourist jewellery shops selling jambiyas near the old harbour, and three souvenir shops in the Aden, Mercure and Sheraton Hotels also for foreign tourists. Thus in Aden, there was a small increase in the presence of jambiyas for sale compared with 1993, but it was still extremely rare to see them worn in 2008.

Table 1. Number of jambiyas, old and new, for sale in towns surveyed in southern Yemen in early 2008

Town	Number of outlets	Total number of jambiyas
Aden*	11	980
Mukalla*	4	132
Sayun	15	262
Shibam	16	281
Tarim	2	57
Total	48	1,712

*Six outlets in Aden and 1 in Mukalla were selling jambiyas to Yemenis only, numbering 292 and 18 jambiyas respectively; the rest were primarily for foreign tourists.

N.B. Only a handful of jambiyas had rhino horn handles and these were old ones.



Lucy Vigne

In Mukalla, a new shop for the military sells jambiyas with Sanaa-style and Bedu-style handles.

Mukalla

Similar to Aden we saw only six men wearing jambiyas in the couple of days we were in Mukalla, and they were almost all northerners. In 1993 we saw six Bedu wearing jambiyas, but not northerners as there were fewer working in Mukalla then. In 1993 we found two antique shops in Mukalla with an old Mukalla-style jambiya for sale in each, both with rhino horn handles. These shops have gone, but there was one shop that was two years old selling military clothing and accessories and 18 reasonably priced newish jambiyas for northerners living in Mukalla. The owners were from Ibb near Taiz. There were three hotels with tourist shops selling several antique or antique-style jambiyas, unlike 15 years ago when expensive hotels did not exist. Mukalla has been hugely developed; for example in the past few years two six-lane highways and many luxury villas have been constructed.

Wadi Hadramut region

Unlike the coastal towns of Aden and Mukalla, there were no jambiya outlets or military shops selling jambiyas specifically for the Yemeni market in Wadi Hadramut. All the places selling jambiyas were tourist and antique outlets which offered their jambiyas mostly to foreign tourists. The outlet with the largest number of jambiyas (nearly all from Sanaa) was in the al-Hawta Palace Hotel between Shibam and Sayun where most of the wealthier western foreign tourists stay. The number of such shops had increased since 1993 with the greater opening up of the south to tourism, but the number of southerners wearing jambiyas had not increased. The few people seen wearing jambiyas were nearly all northerners.

SAYUN

Although the Hadramut jambiya is still available for sale mainly in the Wadi's largest town, Sayun, they were traditionally made in Wadi Daw'an, Ash-Shihr (near Riyan on the coast), Shabwa and Orma. Some of them had silver sheaths made by Hadramis in Shabwa who learned the skill from Jewish silversmiths before they were evacuated from Yemen to Israel after World War II. The rhino horn Hadrami jambiyas seen for sale today would have been hidden by their owners during the Marxist regime and sold in later years; they are sometimes bought by Saudis. Most jambiyas for sale, however, are cheaper northern style ones for foreign tourists.

There were also some street stalls selling bric-a-brac and children's toys, including small jambiyas with wooden handles attached to a cheap belt for about 800 rials each (USD 4). We saw over 20 northerners wearing jambiyas each day in Sayun, many more than anywhere else in the Hadramut.

TARIM

Tarim, famous for its mud palaces, is crumbling into a state of disrepair. The most famous and beautiful mud brick houses belong to the al-Kafs; the buildings were expropriated by the Marxists, but recently have been theoretically returned to this family. But the al-Kafs are no longer there, all living abroad. There is no maintenance, and unlike the other wadi towns that have kept the style and charm of their traditional mud-brick houses, northern metal-work and cement are spreading in Tarim, in danger of ruining its appearance. Apart from the museum shop and one tourist street stall near the Al-Midhra mosque, there were no outlets selling jambiyas.

SHIBAM

In contrast to Tarim, Shibam has been rescued and renovated in recent years, having been made a World Heritage Site for its very old and tall mud-brick buildings. In 1993 we saw no jambiyas for sale in Shibam, and there were only three tourist shops. Now there are 16 tourist outlets offering jambiyas amongst other souvenirs, nearly all of the northern style. The prices for jambiyas in Shibam, as in the other Hadramut towns, tend to be lower, especially for better quality jambiyas, than in Aden and northern Yemen (see table 2).

Jambiyas for sale in the north

Nearly all jambiyas are made and sold in the capital, Sanaa, but some are also made and sold in Taiz. A very few are made elsewhere. The more expensive jambiyas (with rhino horn handles) are predominantly sold in Sanaa with cheaper ones (usually with water buffalo horn handles) available all over the north, but in much smaller quantities than in the capital.

Taiz

In February 2007 and February 2008 we visited the old Taiz souk which is famous for its old silver jewellery and where craftsmen still make jambiyas as well

Table 2. Jambiya prices in US dollars in southern Yemen in early 2008

Handle	Prices in Aden	Prices in Mukalla	Prices in Hadramut
Water buffalo horn, good	100	75	50
Water buffalo horn, cheap	25	12	25
Water buffalo horn with old silver sheath	350	-	200

N.B. These prices exclude belts and sheaths, except if specified.

Exchange rate: USD 1 = 200 Yemeni rials

as repair them. Most are located just inside the two old stone gateways into the souk (see table 3). According to the traders, they last bought raw rhino horn around 2000. They used to get it from Sudanese, Ethiopians and Yemenis. Now they do not know the trade routes and advise buyers and sellers of rhino horn to ask in Sanaa. They said that no one works with new rhino horn in Yemen anymore, except for one jambiya trading family that is well known in Sanaa. New rhino horn jambiyas in Taiz sell for USD 300-900, water buffalo horn with a silver sheath for USD 350, cheap water buffalo horn for USD 10-25, and wood for USD 5, similar to prices in Sanaa.

Sanaa

Within the Sanaa old souk were 104 jambiya craftsmen. Of these, 81 were jambiya makers and 23 were repairers and polishers in a total of 69 workshops. Most of these repairers and polishers were in the retail section where we counted 28 open outlets selling jambiyas. The best jambiyas are held in a stand to show clearly the handle and these are bought primarily by Yemenis: those with rhino horn handles are at the top and those with mostly good-quality water buffalo horn handles are lower down. For the first time, we saw no tables of rhino horn jambiyas for sale in the central area between the retail stalls. The number of jambiyas with rhino horn handles for sale is declining, both old (the majority) and new (generally only a handful nowadays). Several of the shops in this area have turned into men’s clothes shops over recent years, selling the long robe, jacket and head scarf typical of the north. Outside the main old town gate of Bab al-Yaman, shops with cheaper jambiyas have



Lucy Vigne

A jambiya workshop / retail shop in the old souk of Taiz.

Table 3. Numbers of workshops and craftsmen selling jambiyas in Taiz old souk in 2007 and 2008

Location	Workshops 2007/2008		Craftsmen 2007/2008	
Bab al-Kabir (Great Gate)	6	5	10	8
Halfway between gates	1	1	1	1
Bab al-Musa (Gate of Sheikh Musa)	4	3	4	6
Total	11	9	15	15

N.B. There were also several retail shops and pavement sellers outside the souk selling mostly water buffalo horn plus a few old rhino horn jambiyas, and repairing them.

grown in number over recent years. There were 27 outlets selling jambiyas, mostly with water buffalo horn handles, but sometimes rhino horn jambiyas are sold which are by far the most expensive.

Rhino horn trade routes and law enforcement

Most traders lament that ‘nowadays little raw rhino horn comes to us as the big guys get it’. In Sanaa, a smuggler in early 2008 will be offered USD 1,700 a kg (as in 2007) if the pieces of rhino horn are of good quality, ‘two-thirds the palm of your hand’ the buyer said, showing a box of such pieces as examples in his workshop in the old souk. He suggested they could be smuggled in from Addis Ababa on Ethiopian Airlines.

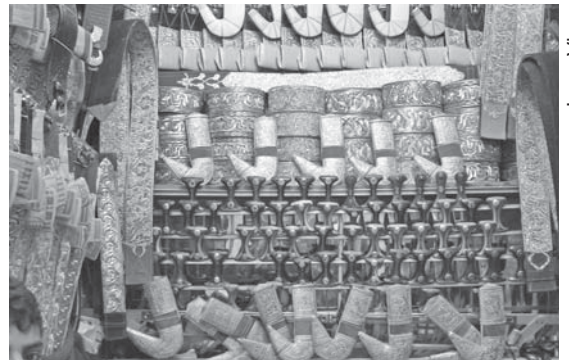
He was willing to buy any amount available, saying also that he could facilitate the movement of the horn pieces through Customs at Sanaa airport, and if the supplier had any difficulties, simply telephone him. Bribery and other forms of corruption are rife in Yemen, especially for smuggled goods, and rhino horn is no exception. Bringing the pieces into the country already cut into oblong chunks, as he advises, makes it even easier to smuggle as the horn is hard then to identify.

From 1995 to 2002 the quantity of rhino horn smuggled into Yemen was estimated at 30 kg a year. From 2003 to 2006 the amount doubled. Prices from 1995 to 2006 declined slightly in real dollar terms (Vigne et al. 2007). In 2007/08 prices rose in real dollar terms. In recent years, demand has remained roughly stable for rhino horn in Yemen.

To help officials recognize rhino horn at Customs, we gave several laminated rhino horn identification posters to the CITES Management Authority at Yemen's Environment Protection Authority (EPA) in Sanaa. We also had the poster put onto their computer so it can be distributed to Customs in various towns. The poster was based on one supplied by TRAFFIC East Africa and we had it translated into Arabic.

Rhino horn education campaign

We returned to Sanaa and Taiz zoos where in February 2007 we had given the zoo managers several banners showing pictures of wild animals (especially rhinos), jambiyas, and the religious edict that Yemen's Grand Mufti had written at our request in 1993 stating it was against the will of God to kill rhinos for their horns (Vigne et al. 2007; Martin and Vigne 2007). The banners had been placed in the most strategic positions, including at the entrances of the zoos and were still in good condition, seen by many people daily. Zoo staff said that visitors frequently ask to see the rhino mentioned on the banners which always brings up a discussion on endangered rhinos and the connection with jambiyas – an issue that only few Yemenis are aware. The staff are thus educating Yemenis on this issue on a daily basis in Sanaa and Taiz. We produced (at both zoos' requests) signs that stated this message for display around the zoos. We also gave the zoos some spare banners as replacements when the old ones fade. We provided Taiz zoo with copies of a Taiz zoo animal guide book that Mohamed Al-Shaury, the zoo's resident zoologist,



Lucy Vigne

This Sanaa outlet sells jambiyas with rhino horn and water buffalo horn handles to Yemenis.

had written. We also gave the zoo wildlife posters in Arabic, and zoo signs asking visitors to treat the animals kindly. We gave these to Sanaa zoo as well, plus framed pictures of rhinos and other wild animals for the blank walls of the Reptile House. Such pictures are not a common part of Yemeni culture, but they have been popular and attract visitors' attention.

Since our last visit to Sanaa zoo in early 2007, the Dutch Embassy staff have given a DVD projector and screen for the education room at Sanaa zoo, for which they require films on animals. We brought a DVD we had had made from an Arabic language film on rhinos. More Yemenis are now sensitized and ready to show such a film as environmental issues are now of growing importance in Yemen. The main stumbling blocks regarding Yemenis' concern for rhinos are that 'rhinos are not in Yemen', and that 'the survival of people must come first' to which we reply that we must not allow the extinction of one of God's species that is so important for the world. Animal conservation is a new concept in Yemen and even the rare Arabian leopard, which still survives in some mountainous regions of the country, is only just starting to be recognised as needing help. The rhino film (we made a number of copies on DVD) can reach a large audience, and we had the DVD circulated widely, including to jambiya dealers, school children and university students. We also showed the film at the Modern American Language Institute in Sanaa. The students spoke of the need for a huge campaign, with the film as a central part to explain the problem widely to Yemenis. The Institute manager kindly agreed to circulate the film to his students who could then copy it and spread it further.

We produced and distributed fact sheets, flyers and stickers with information on rhinos requesting Yemenis not to buy jambiyas with new rhino horn handles. We also put the fact sheets and flyers onto the computer at the Environment Protection Authority for them to circulate further. In addition, we gave stickers to taxi and tourist companies to stick on their vehicles, and to health clubs at the two leading hotels which are popular with many prominent Yemenis. We had another large banner made which was put up in the centre of the main park in Sanaa. And we wrote pieces on Yemen's rhino horn trade in English and Arabic for the press as well as giving translated versions of two articles we had written for International Zoo News on both zoos (Vigne and Martin 2007a; Vigne and Martin 2007b).

As most jambiyas are sold in the Sanaa old souk, we put a fact sheet, flyer and a conspicuous yellow poster of a rhino horn jambiya that asks for the trade to be stopped on a notice board in the famous cara-

vanserai. This building is in the centre of the souk which all Yemenis and visitors pass on their way to the jambiya areas.

Perhaps of greatest significance, Dr Abdul Karim al-Iryani, senior adviser to President Saleh, agreed to help us tackle the rhino horn problem. He would request the President to say perhaps in a television interview that the buying of new rhino horn (banned by Yemeni law) for jambiyas is bad for Yemen's reputation as it contributes to the extinction of an endangered species. Also on a government level Yemen's EPA agreed, at the written request of the Kenya Wildlife Service, to assist the Service by networking on ways to reduce rhino horn smuggling. Yemen's Ministry of Environment is aware of the need to try to implement the laws of the country by stopping the illegal rhino horn trade; this could be done by a government official posing as a seller of rhino horn and catching the big trader, who is well known in Sanaa, red-handed buying it.



Lucy Vigne

These men in Taiz wear their jambiyas daily, although they are less seen today than they used to be.

Conclusion

Yemen's government has not yet managed to stop the rhino horn trade, but it is reassuring to learn that although southern Yemenis are emulating the culture of the north in many ways, they have no wish to return to wearing jambiyas. Thus, there is no southern demand for jambiyas with new rhino horn handles.

The culture of wearing jambiyas in the north of the country, however, is not likely to change soon. More of the wealthier people are getting educated, some preferring to spend money on mobiles and cars than new rhino horn jambiyas. However, the country has one of the highest population growth rates in the world, which counterbalances any reduced demand for rhino horn from the educated elite. Thus, demand for new rhino horn jambiyas in the country as a whole has remained roughly the same in recent years. For cheaper jambiyas, demand is greater than ever. Nearly all jambiya handles are made of horn from the domestic water buffalo. Old rhino horn jambiyas are still the most valuable and the most sought after for those who can afford them.

It is essential that an alternative for new rhino horn is found. The most effective way forward in changing people's perception of rhino horn would be for President Saleh to speak about the problem perhaps on Yemeni television. Greater exposure through education and awareness is essential. If new rhino horn jambiyas would go out of fashion by becoming shameful for Yemenis to wear a jambiya with the horn of an animal threatened with extinction, Yemenis could indeed reverse the demand for new rhino horn and take away the main cause of poaching of this animal in eastern Africa.

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