

Ivory trafficking, transnational organized criminal networks in eastern and southern Africa, 2009–2020, and the emerging new threat

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Abstract

Beginning in 2008 the poaching rate of elephants and rhinos began to rise noticeably in eastern and southern Africa. The poaching intensified considerably 2010–2014. Along with the poaching increase, illegal exports of ivory and rhino horn also surged. Pangolin scales and parts of predator cats were often included with ivory and/or rhino horn exports. The great majority of these products were smuggled to Southeast Asia and China. To extract in the field or acquire illegally from government stockpiles and transport increasingly large quantities of ivory and rhino horn to exit ports in all four subregions of sub-Saharan Africa required considerable organization and logistical capabilities on the part of the traffickers. The transnational organized crime (TOC) networks became more organized and larger from about 2009 to late 2014, when significant arrests began of key actors. This review describes five of the main networks, key actors in each and their disruption.

These arrests and sometimes prosecutions disrupted the operations of the networks and even caused shifts in some cases of home bases and export ports. These disruptions have resulted in significant declines in poaching rates of both elephants and rhinos and product prices in recent years from the 2011–2015 peak years, although other factors were also at play. There is evidence that some members of the networks cooperated with more than one network in supplying products and enabling export and transport to destinations in eastern Asia, indicating that the networks are fluid and adaptable.

A new TOC network is emerging that operates in southern, Central and West Africa. Investigations are urgently needed to identify key members and disrupt it in order to avoid a renewed pachyderm holocaust.

Résumé

Depuis 2008, le taux de braconnage d'éléphants et de rhinocéros a ostensiblement augmenté dans les régions du sud et de l'est de l'Afrique. Il s'est considérablement intensifié entre 2010 et 2014 et s'est accompagné d'une hausse du commerce illicite d'ivoire et de cornes de rhinocéros. Des écailles de pangolin et diverses parties du corps de grands félins complétaient souvent les exportations d'ivoire et de cornes de rhinocéros. La majorité de ces produits étaient de la contrebande à destination de l'Asie du Sud et de la Chine.

Les extraire en quantités toujours plus grandes sur le terrain ou les acquérir illégalement dans les stocks gouvernementaux, puis les transporter vers les ports de sortie des quatre sous-régions d'Afrique subsaharienne nécessite une organisation et des capacités logistiques considérables de la part des trafiquants. Les réseaux du crime organisé transnational (COT) se sont beaucoup structurés et développés entre 2009 et fin 2014, date à laquelle ont eu lieu les arrestations de certains acteurs clef. Cet article décrit cinq des réseaux majeurs, ainsi que les principaux protagonistes de chacun d'entre eux et les perturbations qu'ils ont connues.

Les arrestations—et parfois les poursuites judiciaires—ont déstabilisé leurs activités jusqu'à, dans certains cas, causer le déplacement des bases d'opérations et des ports de sortie. Les résultats sont significatifs : le taux de braconnage d'éléphants et de rhinocéros a nettement baissé ces dernières années, ainsi que le prix des produits par rapport au pic atteint entre 2011 et 2015, bien que d'autres facteurs soient à prendre en

compte. Des preuves ont indiqué que certains membres de ces réseaux coopéraient avec plus d'un groupe pour fournir les marchandises et permettre l'exportation vers des destinations en Asie de l'Est, montrant la fluidité et l'adaptabilité de ces organisations.

Une nouvelle section de COT émerge actuellement dans les régions du sud, de l'ouest et du centre de l'Afrique. Il est urgent de lancer des investigations afin d'identifier les acteurs clefs et entraver le commerce pour éviter le retour des massacres de pachydermes.

Introduction

Ivory has been moving out of eastern Africa for many centuries. Ancient Egyptians, Greco-Romans, southern Arabians, south Asians and finally what have been called the 'Swahili', an East African coastal people of mixed indigenous African and Middle Eastern immigrants, have been trading natural product commodities transported from the hinterland to port towns along the 4,000 km-long coast from Somalia to Mozambique for more than two millennia (see Figs. 1–3) (Stiles 1992).

During most of this > 2,000-year history of ivory trade there were no legal restrictions, except for local laws that may have applied to commerce in this commodity. With the advent of CITES in 1975 and the listing of the Asian elephant on Appendix I and the African elephant on Appendix II, the first trade restrictions were applied the same year. In addition, some African countries such as Kenya, one of the largest ivory exporters at the time, prohibited trade in all wildlife products in 1978.

Increasing ivory trade restrictions in the 1970s up to 1989 and the almost total ban on all international ivory trade by CITES resulted in the old trading networks undergoing a profound transformation. Up to 1989 there was a mixture of 'legal' ivory, which was acquired by governments and licensed traders from natural mortality, problem animal control and culling, plus illegal ivory pouring into the trade chain from escalating poaching (Parker and Graham 2020).

As with rhino horn, with increasing trade restrictions in the 1970s came price rises. The average raw ivory export price in 1970 was only USD 7.5/kg, jumping ten-fold to USD 74/kg in 1978 after Kenya banned the ivory trade. Just as demand was rising in eastern Asia with their fast growing economies, the supply spigot was being turned off. The traders saw the writing on the wall

and began to stockpile, especially in Hong Kong and Japan, at the time the two largest ivory markets in the world.

The skyrocketing prices attracted new players and even influential African political and business interests began muscling in exploiting their elephants. Political elites and even presidents and their families began dealing in large quantities of ivory and other wildlife products (Hornsby 2011). Kenya's elephants plummeted from 167,000 in 1970 to 16,000 in 1989. Investigative journalists revealed that the President's family was deeply involved, even using government vehicles to ferry the ivory to the Mombasa port (Hoyt 1994).

The legal ivory in eastern Africa was being supplied through government-authorized auctions in Mombasa, Dar es-Salaam and Zanzibar from ivory provided by game departments, national park services and other authorized sources (Parker and Graham 2020).

It is quite possible that some of these same legal dealers purchased the poached illegal ivory from the Kenyatta family and politicians. After all, it was the Mombasa dealers who had the knowledge of the Kilindini Port operations in Mombasa and network of buyers in Asia. Perhaps the Mombasa families that were involved in the legal trade carried on with the illegal trade. The traders knew that even if legal trade stopped, the black market would react to future consumer demand. They were prepared to respond to the 1989 CITES ban on international ivory trade.

According to informants in the ivory industry 1999–2003 in the respective countries surveyed in Africa and Asia, ivory trade activity and prices dropped for a few years after the 1989 CITES trade ban, but in the late 1990s, after the new trafficking supply chains and trading networks were organized, trade—now largely illegal—was picking up again. The pre-1989 raw ivory stockpiles in Hong Kong, Japan and elsewhere were also running low, so needed to be replenished (Stiles and Martin 2001, 2002, 2003).

Methodology

The information and data presented here were selected and analysed from published reports, research and press articles and monograph reports that are cited in the references. In addition, the results of twenty years of research by the author with TRAFFIC, the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP), International Union for Conservation of Nature and Natural Resources (IUCN), the UN Office of Drugs and Crime (UNODC), the Freeland Foundation and the Global Initiative Against Transnational Organized Crime (GI–TOC) allowed the author to interview many knowledgeable informants in the ivory industry, UN and government agencies and NGOs concerning trafficking networks and their organization and operations.

Results and Discussion

In the 1990s and 2000s the criminal elements who were running poaching networks throughout eastern and southern Africa—continued to be the politically connected people, consisting of trade chains from poachers to exporters, and operating in most of the elephant-rich habitats (EIA 2014). Tusks flowed into the main cities with strategic international airports or seaports imitating a water drainage system, beginning with rivulets running into streams, which joined into rivers and eventually entering into the sea. The ivory was then prepared for export using various camouflaging materials and packing methods in collusion with bribed shipping and customs agents, and were dispatched on their way by sea or air.

In Africa, it was common to have corrupt units within the military, police and even the wildlife protection authorities involved in elephant poaching and other illegal wildlife trafficking businesses. They either worked for protected elites or became rogue entrepreneurs.

Different networks displayed varied degrees of vertical integration through the trade chain from the field poachers through brokers and transporters to the exporters and on to the importers and their facilitators. The relationships of all were fluid and based on opportunism, a perception of where the most profit with lowest risk were to be found.

The identities and operational details up to 2014 were shrouded in mystery, because no arrests and successful prosecutions were made of the “big fish” or “kingpins”, as the media like to call network heads (Kahumbu 2016). The triggermen and their accomplices in the bush collecting tusks were killed or caught in the thousands, and hundreds of wildlife rangers were unfortunate casualties as well, with no apparent effect on poaching rates (Global Conservation 2018).

In the 1990s, with economic growth and freedom of movement increasing in China along with globalization, Chinese began emigrating in ever-larger numbers abroad seeking business opportunities. Families that had been involved in the fishing industry for generations in Shuidong, Guangdong Province, found good opportunities in Zanzibar for various seafood products, such as sea cucumbers, fish maws and shark fins, and established themselves. There was a nice little port with cooperative port officials and, more importantly, Zanzibar’s local laws regarding wildlife applied only to native species. Elephants were not native to Zanzibar.

The infamous “Ivory Queen”, Yang Fenglan, ran probably the biggest TOC enterprise trafficking ivory in Africa between 2006 and 2015 from Dar es-Salaam, Tanzania. There is evidence that Yang supplied the Chinese Shuidong Network that operated out of nearby Zanzibar (EIA 2014, 2017), cooperated with the Sheikh–Feisal group based in Mombasa and with the Moazu “Kampala Man” Kromah’s network based in Kampala, Uganda, which operated in Mozambique, Tanzania, Kenya, Guinea, Togo, Senegal and elsewhere.

Together, these three trafficking TOCs ran the trade chains that scooped up and shipped out hundreds of tonnes of poached tusks from a wide area from northern Zambia, eastern Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), north and west Mozambique, Tanzania, Uganda and Kenya between 2006 and about 2016, with some shifting of activity depending on arrests and court cases. The tusk origins of 49 ivory seizures determined by DNA analysis supports this scenario (Wasser et al. 2022).

Yang Fenglan depended on field operatives such as Tanzanian Mateso “Chupi” Kasian, who ran poaching gangs in the Selous–Mikumi area of southern Tanzania and Niassa National Park (NP) in northern Mozambique, and Burundian Boniface “Shetani” Malyango, who operated more widely, running at least 15 poaching gangs to the west and north of Chupi’s operations in Mozambique, Tanzania and southern

Kenya, and also getting tusks from Zambia and DRC via Burundi. Two lieutenants of Yang, Salivius Matembo and Manase Philemon, would travel from Dar es Salaam to pick up tusk aggregations from Mateso and Malyango, and other suppliers, pay them off, and return to Dar es-Salaam to turn the tusks over to Yang.

It is not clear where the Kromah network was getting its ivory and rhino horn and where they fit in with the Mombasa, Dar es-Salaam and Zanzibar based networks, but seizure DNA shows his exports contained large quantities of ivory from Tanzania and Mozambique, and four ivory seizures contained leaked Burundi old government stockpiled ivory (Stiles 2022). Chris Morris, who was tracking the Kromah and Shuidong networks told the author in an email in June 2019, “Kromah has been supplying the Sheikh’s, Feisal and Abdinoor Ibrahim Ali with ivory/rhino horn. This case dwarfs Feisal or the Sheikh’s as this West African cartel has been supplying Keosavang¹, the Vietnamese, the Chinese Shuidong connection and others over the years.”

None of these networks were operating in 2022. The key players of each have either been arrested and prosecuted or have fled the sub-region. Fig. 1 shows their approximate areas of operations. Two other Chinese TOCs also operated during this period, one based in Malawi and one in Nigeria, described below.

The networks

The Sheikhs—Not a network in isolation, but rather a large group of facilitators to other TOC networks. The key players currently known who were involved in transporting at least some of the poached ivory to Mombasa, aggregating and storing it, packing it into containers, getting it through port security undetected, loaded on board a freighter and preparing the “road” to get it safely to Asia are Kenyans Abdulrahman Sheikh, Sheikh Abdulrahman, Mahmoud Abdulrahman Sheikh (aka Said Juma Said, of Tanzanian nationality). The Sheikhs were working mainly with Kromah, but also with the Shuidong network for at least

one confirmed seized 3.7-tonne ivory shipment from Mombasa to Singapore in 2015 (Chris Morris, pers. comm.). Other important players connected with the network acting as fixers were Samuel and Nicholas Jefwa. Jefwa and his brother Nicholas are still on the run six years after two large ivory seizures totaling 7.8 tonnes were made in Singapore and Thailand in 2015 (Business Daily Africa 2015a and 2015b).

Feisal Mohammed Ali was also probably working with this group, acting as liaison between Mombasa and Dar es-Salaam and transporting ivory from Tanzania to Mombasa. Feisal was arrested in 2014 in connection with a 2.1-tonne ivory seizure in Mombasa— of Tanzanian and Kenyan ivory originating in Kampala, Kromah’s base. He was sentenced to 20 years imprisonment in 2016, but was later freed on appeal (Karani 2018).

This network is linked with the Akasha narcotic drug trafficking syndicate, which was also based in Mombasa. Although the exact relationship has never been made clear,² the Akashas most likely assisted the ivory traffickers through their connections with politicians and police for protection and port officials to ensure that proper inspections of the cargo were not made and bribing judges when prosecutions started.

The Akasha ring was arrested and extradited to the USA in 2017 and are now in prison there (ECF 2018).

Tommy Cindric, a former U.S. Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA) Special Agent, told the author in emails in December, 2018, that “We have no knowledge of the Akashas ever shipping ivory. We do know from undercover meetings that they could get us ivory... I do firmly believe it [ivory and rhino horn] is a facet of their overarching family business like drugs, guns, extortion, bribery. I believe they probably take a cut and provide protection for the people in their organization engaged in ivory trafficking”.

No large ivory seizure has been made in Mombasa since 2016, indicating that the arrests of Feisal, the Sheikhs and the Akashas disrupted the trafficking operations of this major export port.

The Shuidong network and Yang “Ivory Queen” Fenglan networks—These notorious linked networks operated from Dar es-Salaam and Zanzibar up to 2015. Yang ran her own operation from a two-story building

¹Vixay Keosavang was trafficking wildlife up to 2014 with no known links to Kromah. Morris probably meant Vannaseng Trading, also operating out of Laos. They sent USD 190,000 to Kromah in Kampala (The Monitor 2017).

²At the time of the Feisal ivory seizure and arrest, Feisal was in close communication (supported in phone data) with Mohamed Tenge, half-brother to one of the Akasha’s.

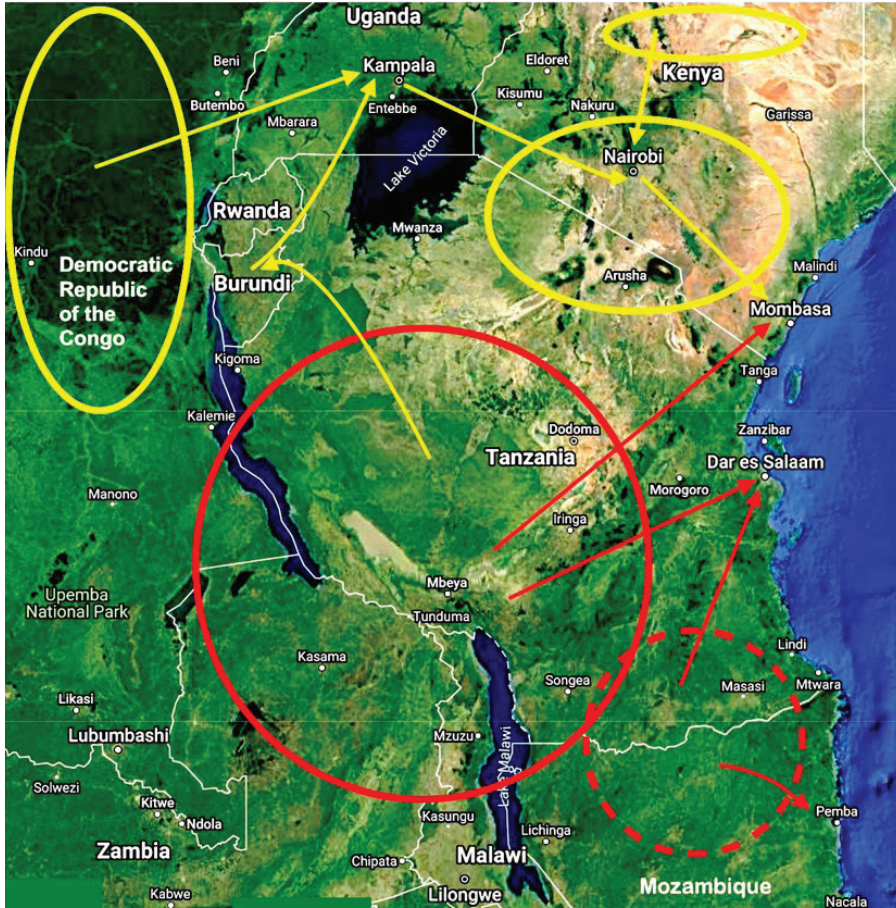


Figure 1. The elephant poaching areas feeding the three main ivory trafficking networks operating in eastern Africa during the 2006–2016 period. (The dashed red oval in the figure above shows the approximate area where Chupi Mateso operated and the solid red oval shows Shetani Malyango’s approximate area of operations. The yellow oval is the main Kenya supply area and exiting the port of Mombasa which was Kromah’s network, along with the Burundi stockpile). Red ovals and arrows = Yang-Shuidong, yellow = Kromah. See more explanations in the text “The networks” below).



Figure 2. Thai customs officers inspect confiscated elephant tusks during a press conference at the Customs Bureau in Bangkok on 27 April, 2015. The haul was traced back to the Sheikhs and their facilitators. (© Pornchai Kittiwongsakul AFP).

in Dar with her Chinese restaurant on the ground floor and Beijing Great Wall Investment company on the floor above, where she also stored her tusks on occasion in a small apartment (Linah Clifford, TRAFFIC, pers. comm. 18 July 2018). The Shuidong group in Zanzibar was one of her main customers for ivory. She first came to Tanzania in 1975 to act as a Kiswahili–Chinese translator during the building of the TAZARA rail line from Dar es-Salaam to Zambia, returning to Beijing afterwards. In 1997, she went back to Tanzania and set up her two businesses. She also served as vice-chairwoman and secretary-general of the China-Africa Business Council of Tanzania, where she met and cultivated important business and political personalities. Yang and her Beijing restaurant became active in bringing together Tanzanian and Chinese business interests.

In November 2013 three Chinese nationals were arrested in Mikocheni, Dar es-Salaam—near Yang's Beijing restaurant—packing 1.9 tonnes of ivory into a container. The Chinese worked for the Shuidong Network, who had bought the ivory from Yang. Shortly afterwards, investigators seized a container belonging to Shuidong traffickers in Zanzibar linked to the Mikocheni bust with almost 3 tonnes of ivory.

The three Chinese were tried and two were sentenced to long prison terms (EIA 2014).

In 2014 the Protected Area Management Solutions (PAMS) Foundation teamed up with the Tanzanian National and Transnational Serious Crimes Investigation Unit (NTSCIU) to investigate Yang. They gathered enough information to charge her and two accomplices, Salivius Matembo and Manase Philemon, in October 2015 with specific cases of ivory trafficking, including some involving Shuidong Network members. Following a dramatic car chase through the streets of Dar es-Salaam, Yang was apprehended. She and her two accomplices were eventually convicted and sentenced in February 2019 to 15 years' imprisonment for "leading an organized criminal gang" by the Tanzanian court (AFP 2019).

From 2009 to 2014, 22.6 tonnes of ivory were seized inside Tanzania while 40.7 tonnes of ivory linked to Tanzania were intercepted outside the country, indicating that corruption in Tanzania's ports was allowing most of the ivory to be shipped out (EIA 2014). In 2014 a Zanzibar-based sea cucumber trader called Wei Ronglu, from Shuidong, told Environmental Investigation Agency (EIA) undercover investigators that 20 containers with ivory hidden inside were shipped to the Chinese mainland, usually via Hong Kong, in 2013. Wei claimed that

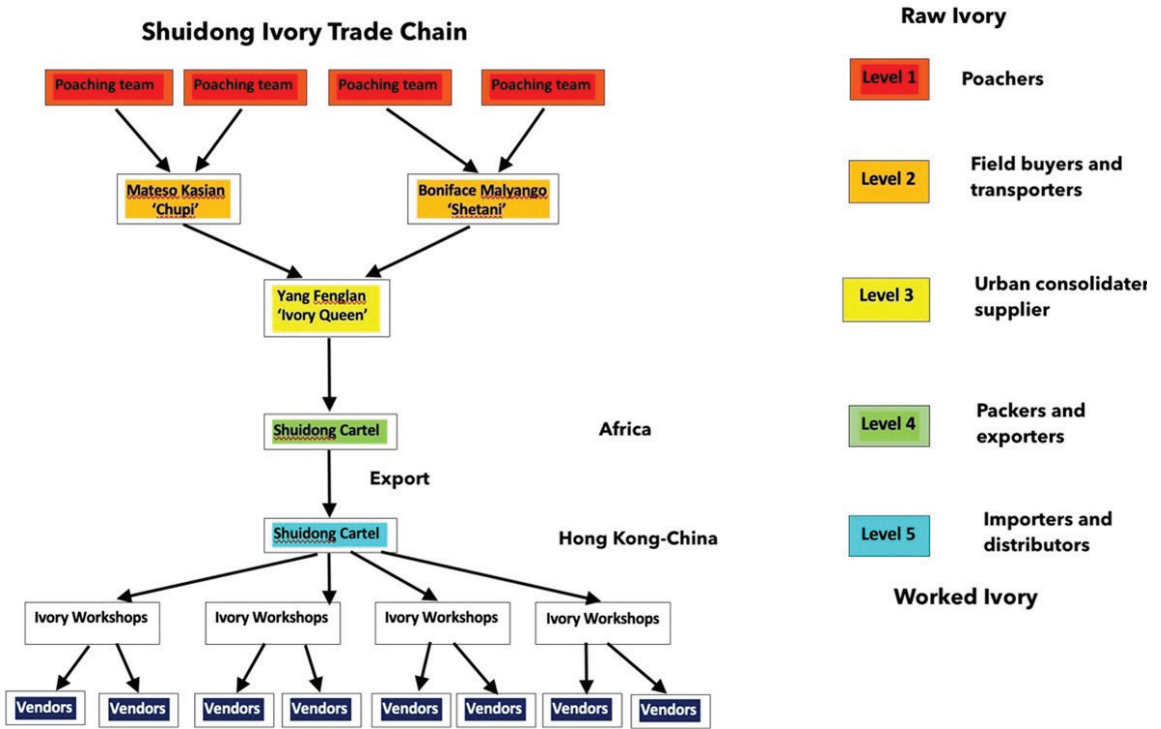


Figure 3. A simplified Shuidong trade chain in 2014, at the peak of the elephant poaching crisis, before Yang Fenglan was removed. By 2017 the operations of Chupi and Shetani were severely disrupted, leading to Shuidong moving to Lagos.³

on average, one out of 20 containers of ivory is seized. Each container usually holds between 2 and 3 tonnes of ivory inside, packed with low value goods such as shells and dried fish used for concealment (EIA 2014). In 2013 alone, some 40 to 60 tonnes of ivory were shipped to China by the Shuidong syndicate.

Soon after Yang’s arrest, the NTSCIU arrested Boniface Matthew Malyango, aka Shetani (Satan), on 29 October, 2015, on the outskirts of Dar es-Salaam. In March 2017 he, his brother and his traditional doctor were sentenced to 12 years imprisonment (BBC 2017). Malyango, like Feisal, got off on appeal and is now free (Stiles 2021b).

Following previous arrests and convictions in Mozambique in 2013 and 2014, Mateso Kasian was arrested again in July 2017 in northern

Mozambique. Mozambique’s National Administration of Conservation Areas (ANAC) and the NTSCIU, with the support of the PAMS Foundation as well as the Wildlife Conservation Society, have been cooperating since 2014 to track Mateso’s movements. He managed as many as seven armed poaching gangs in southern Tanzania in 2013, hitting Selous NP, Mikumi and others, and moved his operations to northern Mozambique in 2013–14 where his poaching gangs decimated elephants in Niassa National Reserve (GI–TOC 2020). He was extradited to Dar es-Salaam in 2018 and convicted in 2019. His sentence, including jail time and the forfeiture of two houses, was quashed on appeal and he was let go after paying a fine equivalent of USD 215 (GI–TOC 2021).

Figure 3 shows a schematic diagram of the Shuidong trade chain before the arrests of Yang, Malyango and Kasian.

With PAMS and the NTSCIU on the job, things were getting too dangerous for the Shuidong people in Zanzibar, and there was no Ivory Queen to supply them, so they shifted operations to Pemba in northern Mozambique during 2014 and 2015. Here was a

³The situation was more dynamic and complex than this schematic diagram presents it. For instance, there was a connection between Yang and the Kromah network (~2012–2015) and earlier to Hsieh-Wang and later to Lin-Zhang.

small port with cooperative officials not unlike Zanzibar and initially they had Mateso Kasian to supply them directly. They made several ivory shipments from Pemba before the Mozambique authorities, with international pressure, made the ivory business unprofitable. After Mateso's arrest and the disruption of the poaching gangs' supply chains, the Shuidong Network moved their ivory operations to Lagos, Nigeria, in 2017 and added pangolin scales to their trafficking ventures (EIA 2017). Several seizures of ivory and pangolin scales have been made there, although not all linked to the Shuidong syndicate.

China began taking an interest in the well-publicized ivory trafficking activities of its citizens abroad, and with its own domestic ivory market about to close at the end of 2017, they took action. Chinese law enforcement raided the syndicate's operations in Shuidong and arrested 27 suspects, charging 16 of them. Of the three main players running the Shuidong syndicate, one was arrested during the raid and a second was located in Tanzania, from where he voluntarily returned to face justice. The third was eventually found in Nigeria and repatriated for trial in 2019. They were sentenced to several years in prison in 2019, unlike the Feisal, Shetani and Chupi cases, which fell apart in African courts. Oddly, the Ivory Queen lost her appeal and still has a 15-year prison sentence. This might be because of Chinese government pressure (Chen 2019).

Kromah network—Moazu Kromah operated from Kampala in Uganda. Kromah ran a crew assisted by Amara Cherif, from Guinea, Kromah's two sons of Guinean nationality and two Kenyans from Mombasa named Mansur Mohamed Surur and Abdi Hussein Ahmed. Kromah was arrested in Uganda on 12 June 2019 and "expelled" to New York City the next day where he was charged with smuggling at least 190 kg of rhino horn and 10 tonnes of ivory between 2012 and May 2019 from Eastern Africa, a massive underestimate (SeeJ Africa 2022a). Amara Cherif had been arrested five days previously in Senegal and later extradited to New York, while Surur fled to Yemen and was only arrested in July 2019 in Mombasa, when returning on a charter flight. He was extradited to New York in January 2021 and pleaded guilty.

Abi Hussein Ahmed was arrested in Kenya in 2022 and was also extradited to New York. In addition, Kromah, Cherif and Surur were charged with conspiracy to commit money laundering, and Surur and Ahmed were charged with participating in a conspiracy to distribute and possess with intent to distribute more than 10 kilograms of heroin (Morris 2019, 2020). All three have pleaded guilty. So far, Kromah has been sentenced to 63 months (Department of Justice 2022) and Surur to 54 months in prison (Bruce Ohr, pers. comm., 28 October 2022).

Little is known about where and from whom they purchased their ivory and rhino horn. Amara Cherif had been on Interpol's Red Notice list for wildlife offenses in Tanzania, so that is a logical source, plus Tanzania was the biggest poaching hotspot 2009–2014 (Stiles 2021a). The New York indictment also mentions Uganda, the DRC, Guinea, Kenya, Mozambique and Senegal as the Kromah Network's area of operations, but no details are given.

Sam Wasser's DNA work shows the great majority of tusks seized exiting Kampala, Uganda, which is assumed to be ivory obtained by the Kromah Network, originated from elephants poached in Tanzania and Kenya with a few from northern Mozambique, northeastern DRC, Zambia and Uganda (Wasser et al. 2022). The Tanzania and Mozambique ivory would suggest links with Yang, until her arrest, and Shuidong after that.

The Kromah Network extended to West Africa, Kromah's original home, with numerous ivory seizures made between 2012 and 2022 in, originating from or in transit from Togo, Côte d'Ivoire, Nigeria and the DRC. There are links to Vietnamese in these seizures (Morris 2019). Fig. 4 shows the Kromah "social" network analysis reconstructed from seized mobile phone dumps (Costa 2021). Reconstructing a trade chain for this network, which obtained its ivory from a variety of sources throughout Africa, and employed a number of export ports including Mombasa, Pemba (Mozambique), Abidjan (Côte d'Ivoire), Lome (Togo) and Lagos (Nigeria), poses certain challenges. Kromah appears to have worked with Southeast Asian buyers and import facilitators while the others described here involved mainly Chinese buyers and import facilitators.

Other operators

Hsieh-Wang /Lin-Zhang syndicate in Lilongwe, Malawi—In June 2002 over 6 tonnes of raw ivory

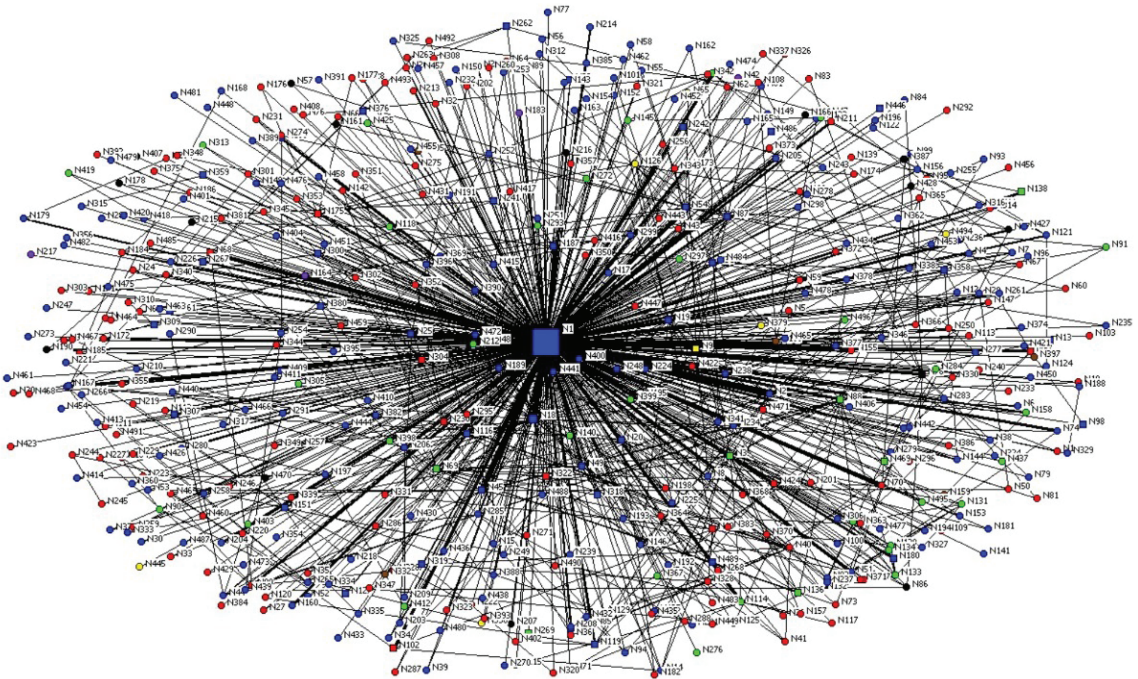


Figure 4. The members of the Kromah network range throughout much of Africa, south-east Asia and elsewhere. The blue square at the centre is Moazu Kromah. (Source: The Basel Institute for Governance)

and 40,000 seal blanks (*hankos*) were seized in Singapore, the first seizure anywhere near that weight size since the CITES ivory trade ban came into effect in 1990 (EIA 2002). EIA investigations established that the ivory originating in Zambia, had been handled by a Chinese trafficking ring based in Lilongwe, Malawi, and smuggled from there by road to the Mozambican port of Beira and on to Durban, South Africa by feeder ship, where it was exported in a freighter bound for Japan via Singapore. The *hankos* had probably been manufactured in Allena Handicrafts, an ivory workshop in Lilongwe, run by the Gwedeza family, who were the exporters of the shipment. Before the CITES ban, Allena Handicrafts were working with a Taiwanese named Fong Ken Hsieh to sell and export legal worked ivory to Chinese buyers. After the ban in the 1990s a Malaysian Chinese named Wang Yong Sai, more commonly called Peter Wang, began working with Hsieh and the Gwedezas to smuggle mainly raw ivory in large shipments to China and Japan (Newman 2022).

EIA established that since 1994, the syndicate had made at least 19 previous ivory shipments

(EIA 2002). Even if the average weight of the 20 shipments had been half that of the 2002 seizure, 60 tonnes of ivory would have been shipped out in the eight years, a massive amount equalling the deaths of up to 6,000 elephants. Global ivory seizures known from the years 2000 to 2002 totalled only 5.9 tonnes, which included the largest of 1,255 tusks from a house in Dar es-Salaam (Astill 2002). The 5.9 tonne seizures were before the 6.2 tonnes Singapore seizure, so at least 12.1 tonnes were seized from 2000 to mid-2002. No one was ever charged in either the Singapore or Dar es-Salaam seizure.

Nothing further was detected from this syndicate until May 2013 when a random inspection of a truck by a customs unit in northern Malawi was to show the resiliency of the Hsieh-Wang syndicate. The truck was transporting 2.6 tonnes of ivory tusks found hidden by cement bags coming from Dar es-Salaam. Brothers Charles and Patrick Kaunda in the truck were arrested, tried and convicted in 2015, but only received a fine equivalent to about USD 5,400 at the time, far below the state prosecutor’s requested penalty of 18 years in jail and a fine of approximately USD 9,800. On appeal by the State, they were sentenced to eight years in jail. Unfortunately, the authorities had not detained

the brothers and they promptly absconded and remain at large to this day (Newman 2022).

Shipping records analysed by EIA also showed that Charles Kaunda had shipped 14 containers along the Lilongwe–Beira route to East Asia between 2010–15, using the same freight agent, a relative, each time. The containers were either declared as sawn wood or semi-precious stones and the destinations were Singapore, Malaysia and Indonesia (Newman 2022). No seizures of these earlier shipments are known. Therefore, in addition to the roughly 60 tonnes shipped 1994–2002, another perhaps 45 tonnes of ivory of unknown origin was smuggled 2010–2015, the peak of the elephant poaching crisis years, totalling possibly 105 tonnes of ivory for the Hsieh-Wang syndicate, although the margin of potential error is great.

Peter Wang disappeared, thought now to be deceased, and Hsieh brought in Lin Yunhua and his wife Zhang Quinhua around 2014 to take over operations, launching the Lin–Zhang syndicate. Hsieh died soon after. It is not known how much ivory was successfully exported, but they also smuggled out poached rhino horns, pangolin scales and hippo teeth (EIA 2021). They also engaged in illicit mining and money laundering (Matonga 2022). The syndicate was broken up in 2019–2020 and 10 Chinese and four Malawians were sentenced to long terms in prison (EIA 2021).

The Chen family in Lagos, Nigeria—The Chen family from Shanting Town in Putian, Fujian province founded this TOC. It was led by the father, Chen Jiancheng, and his two sons, Chen Chengguang and Chen Chengzong. The family created a TOC network consisting of members working along the entire Africa–China supply chain, with contacts inside and outside China, and in Customs (WJC 2022a), which was typical of all of the syndicates described here. They operated out of Lagos, Nigeria, and exported to Hong Kong via Singapore in 2013 and thereafter up to 2018 to Yantai port in northeast China via Busan, South Korea.

The Chen TOC network operated from at least 2013 until their eventual arrests in March 2019. The Wildlife Justice Commission (WJC) found that South Korea “appears to be increasingly

popular among wildlife smuggling networks as a transit location”, where 26 seizures of shipments destined for China have been recorded since 2013, involving more than 23 tonnes of ivory and 10 tonnes of pangolin scales (Chik 2022).

In November 2018 Chen Chengzong was found and arrested in China and four months later, on 30 March 2019, police followed up by arresting 20 suspects and seizing 2,748 pieces of ivory weighing 7.48 tonnes at the Changfeng Cable Factory in Anhui province. The arrests included network members along the whole supply chain. Chen Jiancheng and Hu Juqiang, a senior ivory buyer in Nigeria, evaded arrest and were wanted persons, both becoming subjects of an INTERPOL Red Notice. They were both later arrested and escorted back to China through collaboration with Ghanaian and Malaysian law enforcement partners (WJC 2022a).

In December 2020, the Chen family TOC network in China ended with 17 people jailed, including Chen Jiancheng and Chen Chengzong—for life.

Conclusions

The arrests and prosecutions of key members of the Sheikhs group, Yang, Shuidong, Kromah, Lin-Zhang and Chen networks had a profound effect on ivory and rhino horn trafficking out of Africa. The arrest and extradition in 2022 of Teo Boon Ching from Thailand to New York for prosecution disrupted even more ivory, pangolin scale and rhino horn trafficking (Al Jazeera News 2022). Ching handled large numbers of shipments from Mombasa, Lagos and elsewhere in Malaysia, Laos and Thailand for onward transport to Vietnam and China (SeeJ–Africa 2022b).

After continued drops in African elephant and rhino poaching from 2016 to 2020 thanks in large part to the TOC network disruptions, 2021 showed an uptick in the poaching of both types of pachyderms (CITES 2022a and b).

Large seizures of ivory and pangolin scales in or exported from Lagos in West Africa, seizures in the DRC and Cameroon destined for Lagos, and DNA evidence point to an emerging TOC network that is trafficking southern and central African ivory and pangolin scales out of Nigeria. It could be remnants of the Kromah network, as Vietnamese and Guineans have been implicated, or an entirely new one. The large number of seizures and arrests in Lagos indicates

that the operations have been penetrated by law enforcement and it is likely that a new export port will be found (WJC 2022b).

With restrictions to transport coming to an apparent end with the increasing control of the Covid-19 pandemic, and if the emerging TOC network becomes established throughout the trade chain from origin to destination, a new wave of poaching and trafficking could be just on the horizon. Investigations are urgently needed to identify the members and operations of this or these network(s) so that they can be disrupted before tens of thousands of pachyderms are poached, and not disrupted after the poaching spree as it was in the 2009–2015 period.

In addition, an analysis of the broader political, economic, social and institutional contexts in which these networks were created is needed to advance a deeper understanding of how best to prevent the creation of TOC trafficking networks in the first place. This could begin with an analysis of the causes behind the high level of elephant poaching in the 1980s that led to the CITES 1989 international ivory trade ban, followed by the renewed poaching crisis that began in 2008. In addition, a detailed description of how these TOC networks operated from poachers to foreign importers and distributors and the intelligence-led investigations and subsequent law enforcement actions that disrupted them is needed to gain a complete understanding. I hope to present these in a second article in *Pachyderm*.

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