

12 From Southern Africa to Southeast Asia

Annette Hübschle

The Role of Vietnamese Criminal Networks in the Rhino Horn Trade

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Introduction

The global rhino horn economy has undergone significant transformation over the past two decades, marked by the emergence of new market entrants and segments, shifting consumer preferences and demand patterns. South Africa, which is home to the majority of the world's white and black rhinoceroses, has seen a dramatic increase in illegal rhino hunting, driven largely by demand from Asian markets, particularly Vietnam and China. This relentless poaching crisis together with drought impacts has reduced rhino population numbers in Southern Africa, with over 10,000 rhinos poached between 2008 and 2024 in South Africa alone (Knight et al., 2023; Department of Forestry, Fisheries and the Environment [DFFE], 2024).

Vietnam has emerged as a key player in this illicit trade, both as a major consumer and transit hub for rhino horn. The demand in Vietnam is driven by various factors, including its use in traditional medicine and social settings, its status as a luxury item and investment tool, and its perceived value as a cure for serious illnesses, including cancer (Hübschle, 2016a). Deeply entrenched cultural beliefs about the medicinal and symbolic properties of rhino horn have made it a highly coveted commodity (Dang Vu and Nielsen, 2018).

Vietnamese-organised crime overseas (VOCO) networks are central actors in the rhino horn trade, facilitating the movement of horns from poaching sites in Southern Africa to consumers in Southeast Asia. Although VOCO is also involved in rhino horn trafficking originating from locations in Eastern Europe (e.g., the Czech Republic), the focus of this chapter is an analysis of the role of VOCO in trafficking rhinoceros horn from Southern Africa to Asian markets. These sophisticated networks exploit legal loopholes, corrupt officials, and innovative smuggling techniques to sustain their operations. The role of these VOCO networks has been key to bridging cleavages based on language, geography, nationality, and social status

between horn suppliers and consumers that ensure the seamless flow of rhino horn across borders and into the hands of consumers (Hübschle, 2016a; Rademeyer, 2016).

This chapter delves into the historical context and current trends of rhino horn use, the specific dynamics of Vietnamese *VQC* involvement in rhino horn trafficking from Southern Africa to Southeast Asia and beyond. By examining both historical and contemporary perspectives, it aims to provide a comprehensive understanding of the factors driving the illicit trade and the multifaceted measures required to combat it.

While some contributors in this volume adopt Smith's *enterprise model* of organised crime—emphasising firm-like coordination, market entry, and profit-maximising conduct (Smith, 1980)—this chapter deliberately pairs that lens with an *illegal-markets* perspective that centres contested illegality, i.e., how actors construct and navigate blurred boundaries between legal/illegal and legitimate/illegitimate practice. The enterprise model helps explain certain Vietnamese network behaviours (e.g., supply-chain coordination, product quality control, risk pricing). Yet the rhino horn economy is equally shaped by cultural and status-laden consumer demand in Vietnam, evolving regulatory interfaces, and the routine laundering of horns across legal/grey/illegal channels. Bringing the two perspectives together clarifies that *VQC* operates not as an isolated firm, but as a node embedded in legitimacy struggles, regulatory loopholes, and consumer-side valuation practices that ultimately drive the trade.

History of the Trade

The global rhino horn trade has ancient roots, particularly within traditional Chinese and Vietnamese medicine, where it has been believed to possess various healing properties. These properties include fever reduction, detoxification, and treatment for a range of ailments from gout to food poisoning (Cheung et al., 2018). In Vietnamese culture, rhino horn has long been considered a powerful medicine, deeply embedded in traditional pharmacopoeia and used for millennia to treat a variety of health issues. The belief in its efficacy is so strong that it has even been reputed to cure cancer, a myth that has significantly driven demand in recent years (Hübschle, 2016a; Dang Vu and Nielsen, 2018).

In addition to its medicinal uses, rhino horn has been valued for its supposed mystical and sacral properties. The historical demand for rhino horn spans several millennia and is intertwined with cultural beliefs and medicinal practices across Africa, Asia, and even Europe. In European mythology, for instance, the unicorn—a creature often depicted with a single horn—was believed to possess extraordinary curative powers similar to those attributed to rhino horn. This belief in the mystical

and healing properties of rhino horn has transcended cultures and centuries, contributing to its high value and desirability (Hübschle, 2016a). In the 2000s–2010s, Vietnam's urban, affluent consumers—especially within business and political milieus—reframed horn as a status commodity and quasi-asset, intensifying demand beyond strictly medicinal use (Hübschle, 2016a).

The physical properties of rhino horn have also contributed to its high valuation. Unlike the tusks of elephants, which are composed of ivory, rhino horns are made of keratin, the same substance found in human hair and nails. Rhino horns grow continuously throughout the animal's life, at a rate of 6 to 10 cm or 0.6 to 1 kg annually in females and 0.8 to 1.5 kg in males (Pienaar et al., 1991). This regenerative capability has historically made rhino horns highly desirable for crafting ceremonial and decorative items (Vigne and Martin, 2013). In Yemen, for example, rhino horn has been traditionally used to make the hilts of *jambiya* daggers, a cultural artefact of significant importance.

The trade in rhino horn has evolved significantly over centuries. In traditional Chinese medicine (TCM), rhino horn has been used for over 4,800 years. Ancient texts describe its use in treating various ailments, and it has been a critical component of TCM despite scientific evidence suggesting it lacks medicinal properties (Hübschle, 2016a). The continuity of these ancient practices into modern times reflects the deeply entrenched cultural beliefs that sustain the demand for rhino horn.

The historical trade routes for rhino horn primarily spanned across Asia and parts of the Middle East, facilitated by established caravan and maritime routes. Over time, these routes have modernised, and the trade has expanded globally, incorporating more sophisticated methods and networks. Globalisation and technological developments in transportation, banking and communication have transformed the traditional trade routes, making the illegal trade more challenging to combat.

Despite international efforts to regulate the trade, such as the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora (CITES), the illicit market for rhino horn continues to thrive. The regulatory framework under CITES is intended to curb the illegal trade in wildlife products, but it faces several significant challenges. Trade in rhino horn was banned in 1977. In recognition of South Africa's success with rhino conservation and management, CITES moved white rhino populations in South Africa to Appendix II in 1994. Instead of an outright trade ban, an annotation confined permissible trade to live rhinos to 'acceptable and appropriate destinations and hunting trophies only' (CITES). While CITES deals with international trade and trade bans, individual states have to domesticate

CITES stipulations at the local level and regulate the domestic trade of endangered species. Domestic trade of rhino horn was permissible in South Africa until 2009 and presented a regulatory loophole, which was temporarily plugged until private rhino owners won a court case on technical grounds. Rhino horn can thus be traded locally in South Africa with the required paperwork. South Africa has been actively working to tighten regulations and improve enforcement to combat the illegal rhino horn trade. Recent measures include amendments to the TOPS regulations and the Draft Biodiversity Management Plan (BMP) for black and white rhinos released by the DFFE. This plan emphasises international cooperation with range states and destination countries to support stricter regulations and enforcement mechanisms. The revised BMP aims to consolidate previous efforts into a comprehensive strategy to protect both black and white rhinos, addressing their conservation needs through a unified and strategic approach.

The concept of contested illegality developed by Hübschle during the course of her doctoral fieldwork on the illegal rhino horn economy (Hübschle, 2016a; 2017b; 2025) highlights the complexities and ambiguities inherent in the regulatory frameworks governing the rhino horn trade. While interviewing people who were engaging in illegal economic activities linked to the illegal wildlife trade, it became clear that many did not accept the label of illegality imposed upon their activities. Rural hunters legitimised bushmeat poaching in protected areas by putting forth cultural and economic justice reasons for their offences. In their eyes hunting was as much a rite of passage as it was an expression of cultural conventions, practices, and traditions. Others contested the label of illegality, arguing that hunting was not an illegal activity as they were hunting on land that used to belong to local people but had been taken away by colonial settlers, the state or private investors. Game farmers and wildlife professionals legitimised breaking the law or exploiting regulatory loopholes by criticising the rule-makers who were seen as illegitimate rulers who were overreaching. They also critiqued the rules per se in terms of fairness and impact on conservation and their own economic objectives. Meanwhile traders and consumers of illegally harvested wildlife were often aware of the illegality attaching to their activities, but the prohibition lacked legitimacy and it was thus socially acceptable to break the rules.

Scholars have long looked at the interface between legality and illegality and the blurred boundaries between what is considered legal or illegal, licit or illicit, and legitimate or illegitimate (Mackenzie and Yates, 2017; Magliocca et al., 2021; Mackenzie et al 2024). The blurring of legality and illegality is of particular interest in studies that explore transnational flows of things. What is deemed legal and socially acceptable in one jurisdiction, might not be legal and socially sanctioned in another jurisdiction. Legal status may also change over time. Social, moral, and

cultural norms may diverge from legal rules, thus delegitimising or legitimising them. Criminal actors exploit these ambiguities to manipulate the interface between legal and illegal markets. The existence of legal, grey, and illegal flows out of South Africa illustrates how shrewd market actors navigate and exploit regulatory loopholes.

Grey flows are largely linked to the harvesting of rhino horns on private land. The process may be consumptive (lethal) through trophy hunting or illegal killing of a rhino, or non-consumptive by way of dehorning a rhino above the growth point (Hübschle, 2017). Horn growth of up to 1.5 kg per annum is contingent on gender, sex, age, population type (i.e., free-range vs. captive-bred), and species. Rhino horn is thus a renewable resource, which is highly profitable on illegal markets. The dehorning of rhinos has been employed as an anti-poaching strategy. The process is regulated through a permitting process, which includes the registering of rhino horn stockpiles with nature conservation officials in South Africa. Currently, the international trade of rhino horn is banned through the Threatened or Protected Species (TOPS) regulations and the CITES prohibition while domestic trade is allowed if the seller and buyer abide by the regulations (Hübschle, 2016a).

Actors capitalise on the room to manoeuvre between legal and illegal forms of rhino horn trade. Bolstered by sentiments of contested illegality and legality, criminal actors have no qualms to exploit or manipulate regulatory loopholes. Beyond poachers that trespass and shoot rhinos on public and private land, wildlife industry professionals with intimate knowledge of the product (rhino horn) and of the institutional and legislative framework governing the international trade of rhino horn are also involved. Rhino owners, professional hunters, wildlife veterinarians, taxidermists, helicopter pilots, corrupt government officials, and other categories of wildlife professionals are key players that frequently engage and are members of international crime networks including close links to UCCO. These actors belong to influential and transnational networks with links to political and economic elites in supply, transit, and consumer countries. Actors from the formal wildlife sector did not only orchestrate illegal rhino hunts in private and public conservation areas and thefts from rhino horn stockpiles, but they were also involved in complex schemes that bypass existing conservation regulations, exploit regulatory loopholes, and use legal trade channels to export illegally obtained rhino horn (Hübschle, 2016a).

The manipulation of legal trade routes and the failure of relevant CITES management authorities to scrutinise trophy and rhino horn exports and imports have allowed the laundering of horn that was ostensibly legally acquired, into illegal markets in Vietnam. This contested legality is particularly significant in the context of pseudo-hunting, where hunters from countries without a tradition of

trophy hunting were recruited to exploit legal loopholes. This practice allowed criminal networks to convert illegally obtained rhino horns into seemingly legal products, which were then smuggled into Asian markets (see next section).

The regulatory efforts to curb the illegal trade of rhino horn have faced significant limitations due to corruption, inadequate enforcement, and the adaptability of criminal networks. South Africa's regulatory framework has undergone various changes to address these issues. For instance, the 2009 national moratorium on the trade of individual rhinoceros horns and any derivatives or products of the horns within South Africa aimed to close a regulatory loophole being exploited by criminal actors. However, the moratorium faced legal challenges and was lifted by the North Gauteng Division of the High Court in 2015. The resilience of criminal actors was further displayed during the Corona Disease of 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic when illegal actors adapted quickly and innovatively to the 'new normal' while actors in legal sectors often lagged behind (Hübschle and Gore, 2024).

The persistence of grey and illegal flows highlights the challenges in regulating the rhino horn trade effectively. As long as there are legal ambiguities and loopholes in the regulatory frameworks, criminal networks will continue to exploit them to sustain the illicit trade. The need for more robust and transparent regulatory measures, combined with international cooperation and stronger enforcement, is crucial to address the complexities of the rhino horn trade and combat the involvement of transnational organised crime networks.

Pseudo-hunting and Il/legal Interfaces

A particularly creative way of supplying Asian consumer markets with 'legally' attained rhino horn involved the recruitment of hunters originating from consumer countries that have no tradition and culture of sports hunting. For example, young Vietnamese nationals with no or a limited (sometimes falsified) track record of trophy hunting booked white rhino hunts with South African hunting outfitters. Under CITES stipulations and domestic laws in South Africa, hunters are allowed to shoot one white rhino per calendar year, while the annual quota for black rhinos is restricted to ten animals. These hunting trophies may be exported as hunting memorabilia for non-commercial use. Vietnamese IQC together with their local intermediaries recruited Vietnamese citizens as stand-in trophy hunters to bypass the rule of 'one white rhino, per person, per annum'. Their role was hence to pose as trophy hunters for the purposes of compliance with permit regulations, while a South African professional hunter would shoot the rhino on their behalf. This practice became known as 'pseudo-hunting'. The role of the stand-in trophy hunters was to pose as trophy hunters for the purposes of compliance with permit

regulations while a South African professional hunter would shoot the rhino on their behalf. It is mandatory under South African law that a South African professional hunter and an official from nature conservation accompany each rhino hunting party. The professional hunter is only supposed to dispatch the so-called 'kill shot' if the hunter, as per the hunting permit, fails to kill the rhino with his or her first shot and the animal is wounded. CITES regulations ban the commercial exploitation of rhino horn; rhino trophies have to stay intact when exported (as opposed to the export of the horns only, pieces of horn, or powdered horn), and they may not be traded commercially. The only permissible use of a rhino trophy is as hunting memorabilia in the hunter's private collection, a constraint routinely undermined once trophies enter Vietnamese consumer markets and are commodified for status display or medicinal value.

Vietnamese horn importers were using CITES export permits to import multiple rhino horns on the same single-use export permit to Vietnam until its expiration date was reached after six months. Official records show that the export of 'legally' attained rhino trophies from South Africa to Vietnam was prevalent throughout the 2000s. Pseudo-hunting contributed 20% of all rhino horns leaving Africa until the South African government closed down regulatory loopholes and instituted a national database that tracked actual trophy hunts taking place. According to annual export and import data provided to CITES, the Southeast Asian country acknowledged receipt of about 25% of the legally imported rhino horn trophies between 2003 and 2010. This suggests that approximately 487 of 657 'legal' rhino horns entered the illegal market in Vietnam (Hübschle, 2016b).

By the time the legal loophole had been plugged and a temporary ban had been imposed on Vietnamese trophy hunters in 2012, a new type of 'non-traditional' hunters had slipped into the region. Czech trophy hunters were now posing as 'proxy' hunters for criminal networks. In this case, the export permits were forged and the horns redirected to Vietnam. The modus operandi changed again in response to law enforcement disruptions, and the horns were first flown to the hunters' home country before getting smuggled into Vietnam. Slovakian and Polish nationals were also implicated in the scheme. More recently, there have been suspicions that 'traditional' Big 5 hunters (notably American, Ukrainian, and Russian nationals) were also hunting on behalf of Vietnamese groups. Discrepancies in the CITES trade data continue to provide cause for concern with South Africa's reported exports being far greater than the declared imports by receiving countries.

What renders grey flows particularly efficient and safe is the early stage conversion of an essentially illegal good to legal status (the laundering of illegally harvested horn into legal trade flows), and contrariwise, the conversion of a legal product

(hunting trophy) into an illegally traded good once it arrives in consumer markets. The early conversion curtails opportunity costs and risks further down the supply chain. From an illegal market actor's perspective, this mode of obtaining horn is not only the safest and most expedient method, but it also minimises the number of intermediaries required from the bush to the consumer market. It allows a largely unhindered passage of the horn with minimal exposure to social control agents (e.g., law enforcement) and measures aimed at disrupting the illegal market. Moreover, the horn stays in its original state, meaning that it is not processed into smaller pieces or powder form before reaching the consumer market. This is significant when it comes to quality control, valuation, and pricing of the horn on the consumer market (Hübschle, 2016a, 2019).

Laundering illegally harvested rhino horns into legal flows constitutes a clever and innovative method of transporting horn from the source to the market. Several court cases heard in South African courts between 2012 and 2015 and since 2022 showcase the involvement of various actors from the formal or 'legal' sector in the illicit 'production' and trafficking of rhino horn. These actors orchestrated poaching in conservation areas and thefts from rhino horn stockpiles and were also involved in complex schemes that bypass existing conservation regulations, exploit regulatory loopholes, and use legal trade channels to export illegally obtained rhino horn.

The Transfer from the Bush to the Market

YOQO networks have become key players in the illicit rhino horn trade, efficiently bridging the gap between poachers, crooked game industry players and traffickers in Southern Africa and consumers in Vietnam and China. These networks operate with a high degree of sophistication, exploiting legal loopholes and employing a variety of smuggling techniques to ensure the continuous flow of rhino horn from the bush to the market. The process often begins with the illegal hunting of rhinos in South Africa's Kruger National Park, provincial parks, and private reserves or the previously discussed and now plugged loophole of pseudo-hunting. Poachers are coordinated by mid-level operatives who arrange the logistics, finances, and the onward journey from the kill site to the local smuggling hub. These operatives manage the ground teams that carry out the actual poaching, ensuring they have the necessary equipment (hunting rifle, axe, and/or knife) and information to evade rangers and law enforcement (Hübschle, 2016a; Rademeyer, 2016). Downstream decisions in Vietnam and China—powder vs. carvings, whole-horn resale vs. fractional retail—feed back upstream, influence how horns are sourced, laundered and timed to meet consumer peaks (e.g., Tet).

Once the rhino horn is obtained, it is quickly moved to secure locations in smuggling hubs, often involving corrupt officials and complex logistics. These locations serve as staging points where the horns are prepared for international transport. The smuggling routes sometimes involve multiple transit countries to obscure the horns' origin and make detection more difficult. Mozambique is one common transit country, where porous borders and weak law enforcement provide a facilitating environment for smuggling operations. Past confiscation data and interviews with organised crime investigators revealed that criminal networks usually choose direct flights from Southern African airports to Asian countries. However, since the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic, there has been a significant shift from air travel to the increasing use of ships and container vessels to ferry rhino horn and other wildlife contraband from Southern Africa to overseas markets (Hübschle and Gore, 2024; Hübschle and Margulies, 2024).

YQQQ networks have extended their operations beyond South Africa, utilising several transit countries to facilitate the smuggling of rhino horn. Mozambique is a prominent transit country, where porous borders and limited law enforcement capacity provide a facilitating environment for smuggling operations. Additionally, other countries such as Zimbabwe and Namibia have been utilised as transit points due to similar vulnerabilities in border security and law enforcement capabilities. These networks often exploit legal loopholes and corrupt officials to move rhino horns from poaching sites in Southern Africa to major consumer markets in Asia, further complicating efforts to combat the illicit trade (Hübschle, 2016a).

In Mozambique, the horns may be stored temporarily before being smuggled out, often using corrupt officials to facilitate their movement through airports, small harbours, and seaports. The latter two modes of smuggling increased since the COVID-19 pandemic. From Mozambique, the horns are typically flown to transit hubs in Southeast Asia, with Vietnam being a primary destination. High-ranking members of YQQQ networks in Vietnam coordinate the import of these horns, often using front companies and false documentation to disguise the illegal nature of the cargo (Rademeyer, 2016).

Other transit countries apart from Mozambique frequently used by Vietnamese networks include Kenya and Tanzania. These countries offer alternative routes to bypass more heavily monitored areas. The networks exploit logistical vulnerabilities and corrupt officials in these regions to ensure the safe passage of rhino horn shipments (Wildlife Justice Commission, 2022). Qatar and the United Arab Emirates have emerged as significant transit countries for illegal rhino horn trade between Africa and Asia (CITES, 2022).

Vietnamese students have been implicated in smuggling rhino horn, particularly around the time of the Chinese New Year. These students, often enrolled at South African universities and colleges, are recruited by wildlife trafficking networks to act as couriers. Upon returning home for the Tet celebrations, which coincide with the Chinese New Year, they transport sealed packages, often unaware of the contents. This method exploits their travel patterns and minimises suspicion from authorities. For example, in one notable case, two Vietnamese students were caught smuggling rhino horns, each carrying ten horns. They claimed in court that they were unaware of the contents of the packages and were merely hired to transport it. Their immediate payment of a substantial monetary fine highlighted the strong organisational backing they had, suggesting the involvement of well-resourced and coordinated networks (Hübschle, 2016b).

Vietnamese criminal syndicates leverage their extensive networks to distribute rhino horn to end consumers in Vietnam and China. The horn is either sold directly in Vietnam or smuggled overland into China. This secondary phase of smuggling often involves complex routes that pass through various Southeast Asian countries, utilising land, air and maritime transport to evade detection. The use of legitimate-looking shipping documents and the concealment of horn within legal goods are common tactics employed to deceive customs officials (Wildlife Justice Commission, 2022).

In Vietnam, rhino horn is processed and sold in various forms, catering to different segments of the market. While some of it is ground into powder for traditional medicine, a significant portion is carved into luxury items such as bracelets and statues. These items are highly sought after not only for their perceived medicinal value but also as status symbols and investments. The rapid turnover of rhino horn in the market underscores the efficiency of these criminal networks in managing their supply chains (Wildlife Justice Commission, 2022; Hübschle, 2016a).

The Wildlife Justice Commission (2022) highlights the increasing use of online platforms for the illegal trade in rhino horn. Vietnamese networks have adapted to technological advancements, leveraging social media and encrypted messaging applications to facilitate transactions. These platforms allow traffickers to reach a wider audience, conduct negotiations in real-time, and evade traditional law enforcement methods. Artificial intelligence (AI)-supported platforms have eased communications and translations between criminal partners who do not speak the same language and quietly expanded the reach into new Vietnamese consumer communities, where encrypted small-group sales and influencer-style endorsements accelerate turnover.

The involvement of well-connected individuals, including businesspeople and politicians, provides these networks with the protection and resources needed to sustain their operations. Despite international efforts to clamp down on the trade, the adaptability and resilience of VOCCQ and other transnational networks continue to pose significant challenges to law enforcement and conservation efforts (Rademeyer, 2016; Wildlife Justice Commission, 2022).

Vietnam remains a major player in the illegal rhino horn trade, ranking third in terms of weight and number of rhino horn detected from 2018 to 2020 (CITES, 2022). Efforts by Vietnamese authorities have led to increased seizures and successful prosecutions. Vietnam's updated wildlife law and penal code, which took effect in 2018, have significantly strengthened penalties for wildlife trafficking, contributing to a rise in seizures and convictions. Additionally, Vietnam's collaboration with South Africa and Mozambique through formal agreements and mutual legal assistance treaties has shown promising results (Wildlife Justice Commission, 2022).

Conclusions

This chapter has highlighted the significant role that VOCCQ networks play in the rhino horn trade, illustrating their adaptability and sophistication in exploiting legal loopholes and employing innovative smuggling techniques. They have also managed to straddle communication deficits and cleavages based on nationality, ethnicity, culture and social strata effectively. AI and other technologies have played a major role in facilitating better communications. However, the notion that VOCCQ networks operate in isolation—often referred to as the alien conspiracy theory—is a misconception.

VOCCQ networks do not act alone; they are part of a broader and more intricate web of actors that includes local poachers, corrupt officials, and various intermediaries within the wildlife industry. The seamless operation of these networks relies on the cooperation and complicity of multiple stakeholders across different countries. This interconnectedness underscores the need for comprehensive and coordinated efforts to combat the illegal rhino horn trade. Ultimately, the durability of these networks rests on Vietnamese consumer legitimacy—social acceptance, status rewards, and therapeutic narratives—not merely on upstream supply or firm-like coordination. It is not enough to target VOCCQ networks alone; effective strategies must also address the systemic issues of corruption, legal ambiguities, exclusion of local communities from conservation benefits and the demand in consumer markets. Strengthening international cooperation, closing legal loopholes, enhancing forensic capabilities, and understanding consumer demand are crucial steps in this fight. The enterprise theory helps label certain coordination problems, but it does

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