

# CABINET OF CURIOSITIES

## JAMBIYA - A YEMEN DAGGER

MAH.R.1993.0743

Steel, iron, silver, horn, textile  
*circa* 1900, Yemen

The *Jambiya* has its roots in the Arabian Peninsula Southern territories, the actual Yemen (*al-Yaman*) and constitutes one of the more outstanding objects of the Yemeni culture, with a social meaning that transcends by far its nature as an edged weapon or dress outfit; at Yemen, for a male, young or adult, is unthinkable to be seen in public without his *Jambiya*. As a dagger, if mastered, it is a fearsome weapon. However, after the 1960's, its use, although widespread, was remitted to its social and symbolic dimensions.

The use of this kind of dagger, including some variations in the shape, decoration details and materials, extended through the East until the Indian subcontinent and to the West, through the Ottoman Empire and the whole Islamic North Africa.

Regardless of the wide diversity of shapes, materials and decorations, these daggers can be classified in two types, *Tumah* or *aseeb*, accordingly to the sheath and the way they are used. The *Jambiya Tumah* has an almost straight sheath and is used sideways, slightly oblique, while the *Jambiya aseeb*, with a pronouncedly curved sheath, is used vertically, over the belly.

The *Jambiya aseeb* is associated with the tribes of these Arabian Peninsula territories and are used by most men after 14, while the *Jambiya Tumah* is used by the religious or civilian power elite, teachers, or judges.

In any case, the decorations and materials used in its decoration reflect the socio-economic level of its owner, wherefore, the *Jambiya Tumah* uses mostly the noblest materials and the richest decorations. As the Islamic law will not allow jewelry in men, the wealth manifestations are transposed to their *Jambiyas* adornments, where the fist, the sheath and the belt are possible ostentation supports.

This dagger, from Yemen, undoubtedly of the *aseeb* type, as the blade – *nasla* – large, curve, with two edges, featuring a central ribbing, typical of this kind. The fist – *ra's* – is the most significant *Jambiya* part. Apparently made of rhino horn, the noblest material among all, it is largely covered by a work in silver filigree, where the geometric motifs are prevailing, in combination with plant-form inspired details. The sheath – *asib* – with a similar decoration in the outer side, hangs from the belt – *hizam* – weaved with cotton and silver thread, also following a geometric pattern.