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## A preliminary glossary of dagger-related terms

Information available on the *janbiya*, whether in written form or conveyed by Yemenis when asked, is always diffuse, unsystematic, and very often incongruous. One encounters multiple terms for seemingly the same thing or vice versa (i.e. one term for very different aspects of the Yemeni dagger), one meets inconsistent categorizations, incompatible rankings of importance, and infinite styles that defy any systematization. Explanations are offered in regard to why the *janbiya* has come to look the way it does (with its distinct bent shape) none of which are convincing if one looks a little more closely. Other Yemenis maintain that any type of dagger – bent or not – is a *janbiya* as long as it can be linked to “Yemeni civilization”. Against all odds, therefore, this glossary is an attempt to give an overview of terms in regard to the Yemeni dagger, the *janbiya*.

The expression *janbiya* for dagger (in all shapes and sizes) is most common in the Western parts of Arabia, mainly Yemen and Western Saudi Arabia, whereas *khanjar* (pl. *khanājir*) is the term used in Eastern Arabia such as Eastern Saudi Arabia (al-*Aḥsāʾ*), the Emirates, Oman, Muscat and parts of the Ḥaḍramawt in Eastern Yemen as well as in Syria and Iraq (Elgood 1994: 70-71). In Eastern Yemen and Western Oman both terms seem to be common as people have moved frequently within these regions and still do. Both terms are also used synonymously: in his encyclopedic entry, for example, the Yemeni scholar Barakāt (2003: 907) explains the term *janbiya* with *khanjar*. Elgood (1994: 70) claims that an interchangeable use of these two terms in Western literature is inaccurate, *janbiya* clearly being West Arabian and *khanjar* clearly being East Arabian. This statement is certainly correct in regard to commonness of the term, but most people in Yemen seem to consider the term *khanjar* standard Arabic, while *janbiya* is perceived to be “local”, i.e. a distinctly Yemeni term. This is also supported by the fact that we find the term *janbiya* in hardly any dictionary of standard Arabic, whereas the term *khanjar* is explained in most if not all.

In Northern Yemen, the term *janbiya* is pronounced *jambiya*, *janbiya* or *jambiye* with either a strong or soft *jīm* at the beginning. In Lower Yemen, especially in Taʿiz and aḍ-Ḍālī, where the *jīm* com-



The *ʿasīb* is worn in front of the body. The *ʿasīb* of this dagger fit-out is decorated with *tarsha*.

monly turns into a *g* in spoken language, the pronunciation is usually *gambiya*, *gambiye* or *gunbiya* (Behnstedt 1985: 42; Behnstedt 1992: 212; Scott 1975 [1942]: 34). In both the northern highlands as well as in Lower Yemen, the term is generally pronounced with an emphasis on the first syllable, whereas the literary form of the term, the emphasis of which lies on the second syllable, is rather seldom in spoken Yemeni Arabic. The plural in pronunciation is either *janābī* (strong or soft *jīm*) or *ganābī*.

The term *janbiya* has its roots in the word *janb* [side]. This could lead to the conclusion that this dagger is worn on the side. In this case, however, the word *janb* might also be used to point to the fact that the *janbiya* is worn on the waist, because it is usually carried in front of the lower belly on the front of the body, one exception being the *thūmah*, a type of dagger commonly worn on the right side. Today, the term *janbiya* is used to refer to the dagger as such, i.e. the hilt and blade, but also to the complete dagger fit-out meaning that when Yemenis speak of the importance of the *janbiya* as Yemen’s cultural heritage, for example, scabbard and belt are usually included in the concept. When classifying the dagger within the category of edged weapons,

the term *janbiya* will thus be used to differentiate the dagger from the sword, the *sikkīn*, and – by those who are aware of its existence in Yemen – from the *sabīkī*.

The following glossary is based on previous scholarly findings (particularly Dostal 1983; Gracie 2010; Social Fund for Development 2008; and Varisco 1987) as well as extensive research in the respective markets in the Old City of Ṣanʿāʾ – i.e. the Sūq al-*Aḥzama*, the Sūq al-*Fiḍḍa*, the Sūq al-*ʿIswab*, and the Sūq al-*Janābī* – as part of my dissertation project on the *janbiya*.<sup>1</sup> It is intended as a first overview while more detailed descriptions can be found in the sources named and will be made available once my thesis is published. Also, I have excluded certain terms from the glossary whose existence and/or exact meaning I have so far been unable to verify. Accordingly, this glossary ought to be considered as preliminary as I hope to add more terms and specifications in the future. Any feedback from readers is therefore highly welcome.

### ʿabdī

all-silver scabbard of a specific style produced in the Ḥaḍramawt; named after the family that first introduced this style

### ʿalaw

lit. on (the) top; here: the tip of a rhino horn from which usually only one hilt can be cut; such a hilt will then be referred to as *janbiya ʿalaw*

### ʿalāyiq

narrow leather belt used to hold dagger and *minqalah* in Khawlān b. ʿAmir

### asʿadī

hilt cut from the *qalb/zillāl* of a rhino horn

### ʿasīb, pl. ʿiswab/ʿaswāb/ʿiswāb

sheath of the upright dagger worn in front of the body; of leather, (noble) metal, or a combination of both; in the past associated with men of tribal origin, but now worn by almost everyone (in the North); also used to refer to the whole upright dagger fit-out (in contrast to the *thūmah*)

### baṣālī

from *baṣāl* [onion]; rhino horn hilts that are either fully translucent or translucent at the outer tips of the upper part of the pommel; unpopular in Yemen as they are believed not ‘to age’, but popular in Oman



Man working on an 'asīb in the Sūq al-'Iswab. Photos: Marie-Christine Heinze

**bayt, pl. buyūt**

lit. house; here: *janbiya* scabbard

**bint as-sūq**

lit. daughter of the market; here: used to refer to a dagger whose rhino horn hilt was *jadīd* when bought and is now no older than five years

**dabbūs, pl. dabābīs**

pins used to decorate the front of the hilt; form of a hilt

**dhahab ḥimyarī**

lit.: *ḥimyarī* gold, here: golden coins on the front of *ṣayfānī* hilts

**gdaymī**

almost semi-circular 'asīb common in the East of Yemen

**ghassīnī**

blade with more than one spine

**ghilāf**

'asīb, scabbard

**ghishā'**

'asīb, scabbard

**giblī/ jiblī**

lit. mountainous; here: type of scabbard common in the East of Yemen, particularly among the badu [Bedouins];

**gusbī**

dagger blade with thick midrib common in the Ḥaḍramawt

**ḥaḍramī**

of/ from the Ḥaḍramawt; some of the best and strongest blades come from there and are referred to as *ḥaḍramī*

**ḥarf, pl. ḥurūf**

coin on the front and back of dagger hilts

**ḥarf imāmī**

silver coin attached to the back and front of dagger hilts

**ḥilqa/ ḥilqe, pl. ḥilaq**

lit. ring; here: the little ring that hangs from a rosette ornament on a *thūmah* belt; also: belt buckle (= *shinjīl*)

**ḥilya, pl. ḥilyāt**

from *ḥilw* [sweet, beautiful]; (noble) metal jewelry or decorations on the dagger such as the *tūza*, the *ṣadr*, or the *ra's sikkīn*; sometimes also used to refer to the *sikkīn* or *shafra/ shibriyye*; Yemeni term that is now slowly being replaced by the standard Arabic term *zīna* [adornment, decoration]

**ḥirz, pl. ḥurūz**

a talisman, amulet, or charm, i.e. the piece of paper onto which a charm or incantation is written; a *kitāb* that contains such a paper is then referred to as *ḥirz*

**ḥizām, pl. aḥzama**

(dagger) belt; has replaced the older term *maḥzam*, pl. *maḥāzim*

**ḥunayshī**

lit. little snake; here: silver chain ornamentation to dagger hilt

**ibreh, pl. ibar**

long needle used to sew the leather or woolen bags used for transportation of goods

**ibzīm, pl. abāzīm**

false buckle on a *thūmah* belt

**'irsim**

deadly nightshade plant used to clean rhino horn hilts

**jabha**

lit. front; the outside (i.e. not the *qalb*) of the lower part of a rhino horn; hilts cut from here will be referred to as *janbiya jabha* = *janbiya zerrāf*

**jadīd**

lit. new; here: freshly cut hilt from rhino horn

**janbiya, pl. janābī**

dagger

**janbiya mabrūqa**

from *barq* [lightning]; *janbiya* whose blade has been struck by lightning and is accordingly believed to be particularly strong and/or to possess magnetic qualities

**janbiya musammara**

lit. nailed *janbiya*; dagger with a nail or respective mark in the blade; in the past meant to signify the heroic killing of an enemy or wild animal; today a legend turned into marketable design

**jayb al-ḥilya wa-'l-qalam**

a small leather pocket attached to the rear of the 'asīb in which a *sikkīn/ shafra/ shibriyye* as well as a pen (and an *ibreh* before the time of pens) can be held

**jifr**

scabbard

**jihāz**

lit. equipment; here: the complete dagger fit-out; term for 'asīb in Khawlān al-Ṭiyāl, Sanḥān, Banī Ḥushaysh

**jūbiyye**

name of blades made in al-Jawbah, a district in Ma'rib; considered to be among the best blades now made in Yemen; made from steel that "can cut through nails"

**jūkh, pl. jikhān**

end of *sirāja* covered by embroidered cloth

**julba, pl. julab**

Tihāmī term for 'asīb, i.e. a dagger worn in front of the body; also known in Ibb and Ta'iz before the revolution against the Imāmate; according to Ṣan'ānī categories a dagger that cannot be classified as *thūmah* or 'asīb



Julba – not as bent as an 'asīb



Julba – bigger than a thūmah

Photo: Marie-Christine Heinze

**kark**

water buffalo horn

**kark musawwaʿī**original *kark* that often comes in a melée of white and grey colors**kawthara, pl. kawāthir**little ball on the end of a *tūza*; from *kawthar*, the river in paradise; also sometimes referred to as *thūm***khanjar, pl. khanājir**

dagger

**khazzār**

(dagger) belt maker

**kitāb, pl. kutub**lit. book; here: type of *zahra* on a *thūmah* belt; for carrying notes, see also *ħirz***lisān**

lit. tongue; here: tongue of a belt

**maʿāliq/maʿāniq**wall hooks onto which *janābī* or rifles are hung (e.g. in the *mafrāj*)**mabsam, pl. mabāsīm**

lit. lips; here: ornamented metal band on the base of the hilt nearest the blade

**madd**

scabbard style common in Southern &amp; Eastern Yemen

**maħfaẓa, pl. maħāfiẓ**a purse as *zahra* on *thūmah* belts**maʿjar**

striped cloth wrapped around the waist as belt

**malbūs**lit. worn, used; here: rhino horn hilt that has been worn and is older than 5 years but not yet *ṣayfānī***markazī**

lit. central; here: belt made by prison-inmate

**mashraqī**

lit. eastern; here: style of silversmithery common in Ṣaʿda

**miħbas, pl. maħābis**leather strip/ribbon used to decorate the *ʿasīb***miṅqalah**

type of knife worn instead of the dagger among the Munabbih and some other tribes of the Khawlān b. ʿĀmir confederation on both sides of the Yemeni – Saudi Arabian border

**mukħala, pl. makāhil**kohl-pot as *zahra* on *thūmah* belts**musayfal**dyed red leather strips / ribbons that decorate the *ʿasīb***naṣla, pl. nuṣāl**

blade

**nijāra**

shavings and waste from the cutting and carving of hilts

**nuqum**

deadly nightshade plant used to clean rhino horn hilts

**qalb**lit. heart; here: the core of the rhino horn from which the most popular hilts in Ṣanʿāʿ are carved, then also referred to as *janbiya qalb*; generally of a darker/greenish color = *zillāl*, see also *asʿadī***qarn waħīd al-qarn**

rhino horn

**qurṭum**

sesame or sunflower seed oil used to treat rhino horn hilts

**raʿs, pl. ruʿūs**

lit. head; here: dagger hilt

**raʿs mazrūʿ**

dagger hilt ornamented with small pins

**raʿs sikkīn**lit. head of knife; here: silver casing for a *sikkīn* or *shafra* / *shibriyye***sabīkī**

short sword worn horizontally in front of the belly; to this day part of the traditional dress of some tribes of the Khawlān b. ʿĀmir confederation on both sides of the Yemeni – Saudi Arabian border

**ṣadr, pl. ṣudūr**

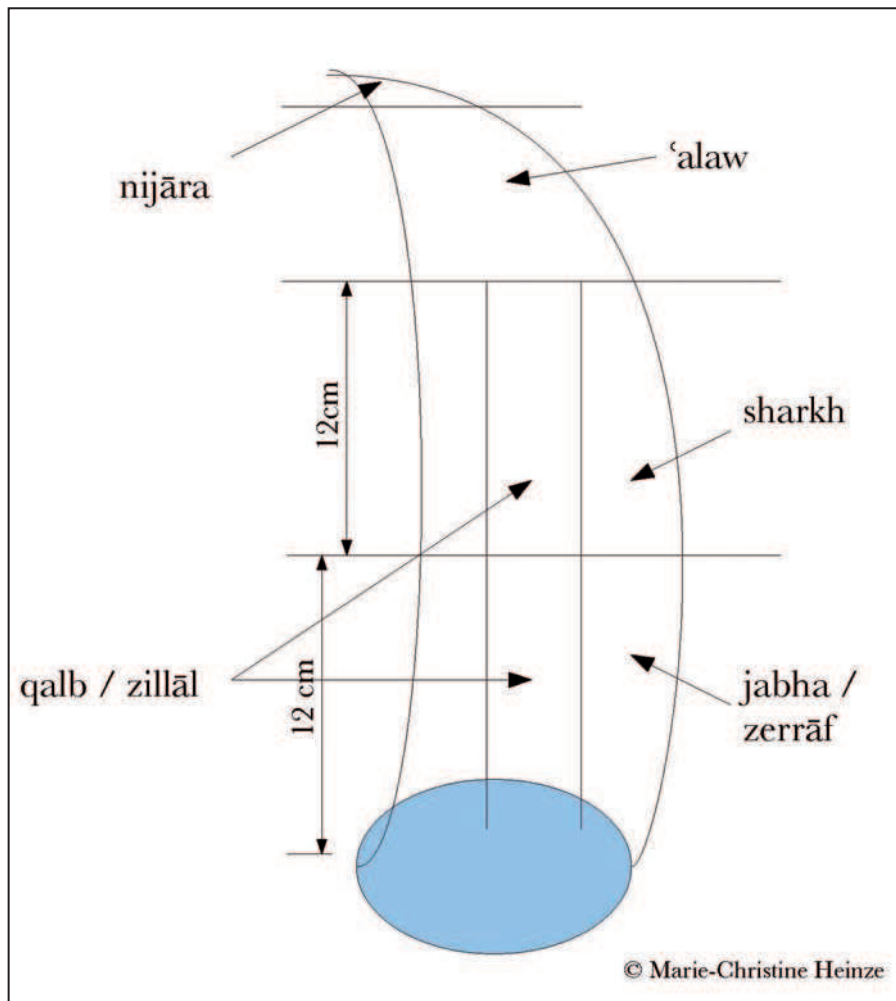
(noble) metal upper front plate on the scabbard, locket

**salab**

lit. rope; here: fibres used for faking rhino-horn hilts

The *miṅqalah* (second from left and far right) is a type of knife worn as part of the traditional dress by some tribes of the Khawlān b. ʿĀmir confederation.

Photo: Marieke Brandt



A not so perfect drawing of a qarn waḥīd al-qarn to explain rhino horn terminology

**sharkh**

the outside (i.e. not the *qalb*) of the middle part of a rhino horn; translated to me as ‘thin’ as the hilts carved from this part of the horn tend to be rather thin; hilts cut from here will be referred to as *janbiya sharkh*

**sharqiyya**

lit. eastern; here: used in the North of Yemen to refer to the *‘asīb*

**shibriyye**

thin, bent, long knife worn behind the dagger = *shafra*

**shinjīl**

belt buckle

**sikkīn**

lit. knife; a thin, bent, short knife worn behind the dagger<sup>2</sup>

**silāḥ, pl. asliḥa**

weapon

**silāḥ abyāḍ**

edged [lit. white] weapon

**sirāja**

belt base onto which the ornamented cloth for a *janbiya* belt is sown

**ṣīwa, pl. ṣiyaw**

flat *zahra* on a *thūmah* belt in the shape of a *maḥfaẓa*

**sunniyye**

another name given to me for *ibzīm*, but rejected by tradesmen in the Sūq al-Fiḍḍa

**sūq**

market

**Sūq al-Aḥzama**

belt market



The *sabīkī* is worn horizontally in front of the body. Photo: Aḥmad al-Ghurābī

**sannān**

(blade) sharpener

**ṣaqqāl, pl. ṣayāqīl**

(blade) polisher

**sarrāj**

belt-maker

**sayf, pl. suyūf, asyāf**

sword

**ṣayfānī**

mature rhino horn hilt (50 years or older) that has been worn

**shafra, pl. shafrāt**

(southern) term for a thin, bent, long knife used for shaving and sometimes worn behind the dagger; believed to be a malapropism of the term ‘shaving’ and thus to have originated as denotation in Aden = *shibriyye*; in the Khawlān b. ‘Āmir also sometimes used to refer to the *minqalah*



The *thūmah* is worn on the right side of the body. Copyright: Stephen Gracie



Zaharāt on a thūmah belt. From left to right: *ṣīwa*, *kutub* (or *hurūz*), and *zaharāt* with *hilaq*



Zahra on a thūmah belt: *ibzīm*  
Photos: Marie-Christine Heinze

**Sūq al-Fiḍḍa**

silver market

**Sūq al-‘Iswab**

dagger sheath market

**Sūq al-Janābī**

dagger market

**tarsha, also tīrsha or tursha**

dyed green leather strips/ribbons which decorate the *‘asīb*

**thūm**

lit. garlic; here: sometimes used to refer to the *kawthara* when it has a garlic-like appearance

**thūmah, pl. thuwwam**

type of dagger worn on the right side of the body, generally confined to the religious elite of the North during the time of the Imāmate; also: lower front plate of the *thūmah*, see *tūza*

**tūza, also tūzā or tūzī, pl. tuwaz**

lower (noble) metal plate on a *thūmah* or *‘asīb*, chape; sometimes also used as a synonym for *thūmah*

**‘ushshār**

Calotropis; preferred wood for dagger sheaths

**waḥīd al-qarn**

rhinoceros

**yasara**

all-leather belt

**zahra, pl. zaharāt**

lit. flower, blossom; here: general term for ornaments on dagger hilt or *thūmah* belt; more specifically also the small rosette or flower ornaments on a *thūmah* belt

**zar‘a**

small pin ornamentation on the front of a hilt

**zerrāf/zurrāf/zurrāfa**

lit. giraffe, although it is unknown whether the term actually refers to the animal or not; here: a hilt carved from the outside (i.e. from the *jabha* or *sharkh*, not the *qalb*) of the lower part of a rhino horn; tends to be more white/reddish in color than an *as‘adī*

hilt (i.e. one carved from the *qalb/zillāl* of the horn); popular in Ma‘rib, al-Bayḍā‘, al-Jawf, Ibb and Ta‘īz; hilts cut from here will be referred to as *janbiya zerrāf* = *janbiya jabha*

**zillāl**

lit. egg yolk; here: the core of the rhino horn from which the most popular hilts in Ṣan‘ā‘ are carved = *qalb*

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Ibrahim, aged 15, who works in the *Sūq al-Janābī*. He goes to school in the morning and attends to his shop in the afternoon and evening, where he also does his homework.

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**Notes**

<sup>1</sup> I particularly would like to thank Stephen Gracie for his insightful feedback and input not only in regard to this glossary but on my research project in general.

<sup>2</sup> On the *sikkīn* see also my recent blog entry *What Yemeni men wear behind their daggers II* (14.12.2012): <http://babal-yemen.blogspot.de/2012/11/what-yemeni-men-wear-behind-their.html>.



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