

Exposing, Analyzing, & Understanding Inauthentic African Knives An Ongoing Survey

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By: Ethan Rider

A knife is a pretty standard instrument: a pointed tip, a sharp edge, and a handle. Often symmetrical, occasionally curved, and sometimes both or neither, a knife is a generally straightforward object... except for knives from Africa. Knives from Africa don't resemble knives from anywhere else on the planet, or from any other period in time. Whether used for throwing, farming, stabbing, chopping, sparring, bartering, celebrating, or simply for projecting prestige, each style is special and often beautiful, if not astounding.

The design of African weapons has appealed to Western tastes for generations. As a result, these objects have had a marketable value for quite some time. The Mangbetu and Songye were among the first ethnic groups to recognise European interest, and manufactured knives for sale to foreigners as early as a century ago. Groups like the Ngombe and Ekonda changed their traditional knife designs and even invented new styles to satisfy Western demand.



Authentic vs. inauthentic Banda knives, Central African Republic

Today, the production of traditional weapons has all but ceased, and the available supply of collectible quality, original material is shrinking. At the same time, the market has refined its tastes and values, and collectors are consistent in what they deem special. Under these circumstances, the manufacture of reproduction weapons has increased, allowing sellers to continue to meet market demands.

In my experience, the identification of reproduction weapons isn't a great challenge for African weapons specialists, but outside of that niche group, very little information has been disseminated about how to identify reproduction weapons, even to general African art experts. To compound this problem, there are a number of African weapons specialists who have been involved in the unscrupulous process of using their expertise to manufacture extremely convincing reproductions.

Over the last year, I have been actively purchasing inauthentic African weapons so that I can publish them on my website and write about the ways in which their manufacture proves their inauthenticity. My hope is that my efforts will help to inform buyers and sellers about the myriad types of reproductions on the market. I am aware that my efforts could—as a colleague warned me—*“make the fakers better at what they do”*, however I feel the truth is more important in this case than the unintended consequences.



"Inauthenticity is an object manufactured or altered with the intent to deceive."

My criterion for defining inauthenticity is that the object must have been manufactured or altered with the intent to deceive. Thus far, I have managed to acquire a number of inauthentic objects that meet that criterion:

- A so-called masterpiece, commissioned by a renowned African weapons scholar and manufactured in Austria;
- A deceptively masterful blade in a rare style, commissioned by a known European expert and author, and acid-treated to simulate age;
- A knife made in copper and electroplated to imitate the appearance of iron;
- An authentic, antique blade that was married to a replacement handle, and then further manipulated to cloud its history;
- A knife composed of incorrect materials, machined, and then improperly adorned;
- A knife made with traditional but modern materials, and executed in a thoroughly incorrect manner;
- A knife cut from sheet metal that shows only a few clues of its dubious origins;
- Two knives that are entirely correct and made in Africa, but only 10 percent of their correct size (likely copied from a photograph).

Additional examples of inauthentic material will be added, including some that are more challenging to wedge into my unavoidably simplistic criterion. For example, I recently acquired a Luba short sword in-sheath which was manufactured correctly in almost every way, but is clearly not only recent, but brand-new. This knife only became inauthentic when the seller described it as an antique. However with no demand for this weapon type (other than for sale), it can still loosely be described as manufactured with the intent to deceive. As I dig deeper into this endeavor, I expect more nuanced examples like this to emerge.



Authentic vs. inauthentic Kreish knives, Sudan

Exposing inauthentic African knives for what they are and delineating in detail the ways in which they reveal their true nature, is important to the antique, traditional African weapons market. Buyers should not be tentative about acquiring a knife because they've heard rumblings about all of the fakes, nor should buyers acquire an object only to discover it is disingenuous when information that could have protected them was available. My goal is to continue to work with buyers, sellers, and independently to share information about reproduction weapons, so that we can all appreciate the genuine ones even more.

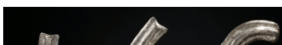
My collection of images and essays on inauthentic objects is located [here](#).



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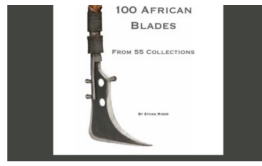
[Ethan Rider](#) is an African art dealer from Oakland, California who has been in the business since 2004. In 2011, he focused his business on two specific niches: African metalwork (particularly knives) and terracotta. His second book is slated for publication this year, showcasing 100 knives from more than 50 collections. Previously, he authored 'Something Magical: The Kwagh-Hir of the Tiv' (2018), and 'The Fantastic African Blades of Tilman Hebeisen' (2018).

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