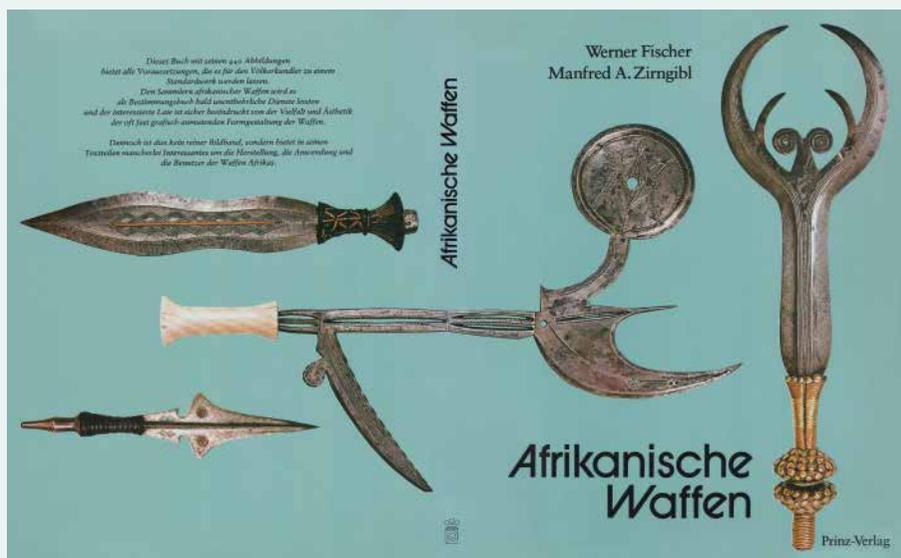


The Fantastic African Blades of Tilman Hebeisen

By Ethan Rider and Wolf-Dieter Miersch



In 1978, Werner Fischer and the late Manfred Zirngibl published *Afrikanische Waffen* (*African Weapons*), the first truly comprehensive book strictly dedicated to African knives.¹ The cover features four fine blades, prominent among them a spectacular ivory-handled prestige knife with radical projections and elaborate incisions in a form that no one had previously seen (fig. 1). Fischer and Zirngibl attributed the blade to the Azande-Idio, but the blade type is most commonly attributed to the Yakoma or Zande (it will be referred to as Yakoma below). Though its provenance contains some suspicious information, the remarkable form and beauty of this rare masterpiece virtually guaranteed that it would appeal to collectors, dealers, and auction houses, and indeed this proved to be true. Comparison with a traditional Yakoma throwing knife (fig. 2) illustrates why this object received so much attention. At the time it was published, it was the only example known, and it was in the collection of one of the authors, Manfred Zirngibl.

FIG. 1 (above):
The cover of *Afrikanische Waffen* showing a masterpiece ivory-handled Yakoma blade.
Werner Fischer and Manfred A. Zirngibl, *Afrikanische Waffen*, Passau: Prinz-Verlag GmbH, 1978.

FIG. 2 (right):
A more typical example of a throwing knife.
Yakoma, Central African Republic.
Iron, leather (?). H: ???????
Ethan Rider Collection.
Photo: Ethan Rider.

Over the years, several other weapons of this rare type have come to light and have fetched significant prices on the art market. However, viewed from a perspective of expertise, these seem to have more in common with each other than with the one that appears in Fischer and Zirngibl. A close examination of one example, currently in the collection of co-author Ethan Rider (fig. 3), reveals troubling details.²

A significant inconsistency can be found in the way in which the iron was worked. A knife produced at the forge by a traditional blacksmith in Africa will show signs of being drawn out and wrought into its final shape. Certain elements should be visible, such as slag streams resulting from this manipulation of the iron and overlaps that show where separate pieces of iron were hammered onto other pieces to join them. The iron on the Rider Yakoma shows no sign of such traditional forging and was likely cut from a solid sheet.

The incised decoration on the Rider Yakoma also is problematic. Many of the patterns on the blade are inconsistent with traditional Yakoma designs, and the manner in which they were executed is patently incorrect. The markings on authentic Yakoma blades, as well as on other blades from the region, were achieved by a process of punching and/or hammering, often carried out while the iron was still hot. Here, however, the incisions are unquestionably burned in. While this isn't immediately visible to the naked eye, it is blatant under magnification. Photographed at 20x magnification, both the extremely consistent circular cone incisions, which indicate the shape of the tool that was used, and the crisscrossed lines along the stem show undeniable evidence of the same inappropriate technique, that of burning markings onto the blade (figs. 4–6).

Stylistically, the incised lizards on the Rider knife are far too naturalistic (fig. 8). While the lizard is a recurring theme, no traditional knife from Africa depicts one with such realism, and especially not with the muscular legs seen here. Abstracting the form of a lizard is something an African blacksmith would take pride in doing, as embodying the creature's avatar, or symbolic spirit, would be much more important than producing a lifelike representation.





An additional small but telling oversight appears in the copper rivet, which is—incorrectly—bulging and rounded on both sides. Authentic metalwork from this region displays rivets that are flat on one side and rounded and attractive on the other (fig. 9).³

This technical analysis seems damning to the Rider Yakoma and, by extension, the other examples that have more in common with it than with the example in Fischer and Zirngibl, which is widely accepted as an authentic specimen, or, to be precise, *the* authentic specimen, as it is the only one of its type reportedly to have been collected in Africa. Our reasons for believing these “Yakoma” blades are inauthentic go far beyond the analysis of a single example.

AFROPAPA.DE

In 2009, Alexander Kubetz and Manfred Zirngibl (co-author of the above-mentioned *Afrikanische Waffen*) published *Panga Na Visu*, an encyclopedic book on African weapons that is packed with photographs. While some consider it an excellent reference book, others find it to be something of a curiosity because it presents numerous knives that seem suspect or obviously inauthentic alongside knives that are old, rare, and widely accepted as authentic.

In 2014, a provocative comment appeared on the website afropapa.de in a discussion thread about *Panga Na Visu*. An obviously disgruntled reader wrote, “Aber Hallo, Ein schönes Buch???? Ja??? alles echt??? Ja?? Ich biege mich vor lachen ‘Schmiedekunst’!!” which roughly translates as “Hold on there, nice book? Yes? All are real? Sure? I’m bent over with laughter, ‘blacksmithing’!!”⁴ The emphatic disdain piqued the interest of long-time African weapons collector and expert Wolf-Dieter Miersch, who had recently become aware of some suspicious transactions between Zirngibl and a German museum and was interested in pursuing leads about his other dealings.

Miersch contacted the author of the online comment, one Tilman Hebeisen, and after a ninety-minute phone call, he realized that Hebeisen was the key to unlocking the door to Zirngibl’s incredibly strange world of secrets. A blacksmith by trade, Hebeisen declared that Zirngibl, who had long collected and dealt in African weapons but whose academic background lay in business

FIG. 3 (left): One of Tilman Hebeisen’s ivory-handled “Yakoma” blades, this one manufactured in 2004.

Ethan Rider Collection.
Photo: Ethan Rider.

FIGS. 4–6 (right): Leica stereomicroscope images of the Rider Hebeisen “Yakoma” blade.

Photos: Joel Siegel

FIG. 7 (below right): Iron protruding through the bottom of the ivory handle on the Rider Hebeisen “Yakoma” blade.

Photo: Ethan Rider.

FIG. 8 (below): The overly naturalistic and muscular incised lizard on the Rider Hebeisen “Yakoma” blade.

Photo: Ethan Rider.



FIG. 9 (right): The incorrect backside-bulging rivet on the Rider Hebeisen “Yakoma” blade.

Photo: Ethan Rider.



administration, hired him in 1976 to manufacture replicas of African knives in Austria, and that he had been doing this work for decades.

On November 18, 2015, Miersch traveled to meet the eighty-three-year-old Hebeisen in the tiny town of Wernstein am Inn on the Austrian side of the Austria/Germany border, only eight km away from Zirngibl's hometown of Passau. A series of conversations with Hebeisen conducted by Miersch furnished the basis of much of the material presented herein. The interviews began in November 2015 and continue to this day. In 2016, Ingo Barlovic, a member of the editorial staff of the German magazine *Kunst & Kontext*, also paid a visit to Hebeisen in Wernstein. Barlovic published an article about his interviews with Hebeisen in the July 2017 issue of *Kunst & Kontext*.⁵

moving on to the production of seemingly vintage African weapons that he claimed were for clients who couldn't afford authentic examples. For Hebeisen, Zirngibl's requests were a pleasure to fulfill, as they represented an opportunity to be creative with his craft.

Following the publication of *Afrikanische Waffen* in 1978, Zirngibl commissioned Hebeisen to manufacture two versions of the spectacular ivory-handled blade that was pictured on the cover. While based on the singular original knife, each one intentionally displayed its own artistic idiosyncrasies. Over the course of the next twenty-five years, Hebeisen would manufacture roughly a dozen more.

FIG. 10 (below left): The Rider Hebeisen "Yakoma" blade photographed in the home of Tilman Hebeisen. Photo: Tilman Hebeisen.



Hebeisen related that he completed his apprenticeship as a blacksmith in Munich and fabricated artistic fences and gates, as well as crosses for cemeteries. He described work experience during the 1960s that involved making European objects "look old fashioned."⁶ After moving to Wernstein am Inn in 1976, he was contacted by Zirngibl, who was to present him with a great deal of work. Zirngibl proposed a succession of projects, starting with repairs to antique African knives, then

FIGS. 9a and b (above): Two Hebeisen "Yakoma" blades sold at auction photographed in the home of Tilman Hebeisen. Photo: Tilman Hebeisen.

According to Hebeisen, the ivory handles were supplied by Zirngibl, who had either taken them from old knives, or ordered them from an Austrian carver who was capable of providing expertly carved pieces with balanced, graceful curves and surfaces with a patina that seemed to be derived from years of handling. The ivory on these handles exhibits convincing marks of crazing (an attribute that typically develops with the passage of time), but none of the telltale signs of artificially induced crazing, such as discolor-

ation. Because Hebeisen had the ivory handles before he manufactured the blades, he was able to manipulate the iron so that it would protrude through the handles' bottoms (fig. 7). This subtle detail is present on many authentic African knife types, lending credence to Hebeisen's blades.

Though Hebeisen was a sound blacksmith, his techniques were not African, as the analysis of the Rider "Yakoma" revealed. But in case any doubt remains that these blades were not manufactured by the Yakoma, Hebeisen produced several significant photographs during his interviews with Miersch. One depicts the Rider blade (fig. 10) and others depict two "Yakomas" that Hebeisen would later discover on the market, leading to his distressing revelation that he was not in fact creating artistic reproductions but

original, it was the perfect object for him to have copied, guaranteeing that he would be both the expert on the type and the only dealer who had examples for sale.

Further Evidence and Corroboration

Hebeisen's commissions were not limited to Yakoma blades. In 1983, Zirngibl published *Seltene Afrikanische Kurzwaffen (Rare African Short Weapons)*, which featured another masterpiece knife that had never been seen before: an oversized solid-copper "Kota" *musele* blade (fig. 18). Like the Yakoma blade, these exceedingly rare and unusually obscure "Kota" knives quickly became some of the most highly sought after types of African knives, and to this day they sell for amounts

FIGS. 11–14 (below): Hebeisen "Yakoma" knives in various stages of construction photographed in the home of Tilman Hebeisen. Photos: Tilman Hebeisen.



rather forgeries (figs. 11 and 12). Other photographs show partially completed blades in conjunction with a sketch in one case and a full-size photocopy of the original Yakoma knife (figs. 13 and 14). All of these photographs were taken by Hebeisen in his home in Austria.

By placing the radically extravagant and authentic Yakoma blade on the cover of his 1978 book *Afrikanische Waffen*, Zirngibl guaranteed its significance as a rare object and reinforced its considerable value. Since there was only one

exponentially higher than most other African knives.

In the late 1970s, Zirngibl delivered eight 36 x 16 x 1 cm copper sheets to Hebeisen and asked him to invent a new knife based on the iron Kota double-eye *musele* (fig. 16).

To his delight, Hebeisen was granted artistic liberty, which meant that while he was required to follow the general style of the authentic blades and was constrained by the size of the copper sheet, he was otherwise free to design the new

knife as he pleased.⁷ Over the course of three years, Hebeisen made five copper *musele* knives, each imbued with its own personality.

One of these five was the example that appeared in the above-mentioned *Seltene Afrikanische Kurzwaffen*. Like the Yakama blade five years earlier, this was the first time that a solid-copper “Kota” blade had ever been published, but this time Zirngibl provided a detailed history:

Toward the end of the 1960s, the author first heard about copper-bladed bird’s-head knives. These knives, used by the Kota and their northwestern neighbors the Fang, usually have blades of steel. An excerpt out of a travel book written by one L. A. (?) Smith mentions Sir George Fullham, who was given five of these copper knives by a “Fan” chieftan named “Njong” as tokens of appreciation for his successful treatment of an eye infection. To quote from the book, “in return, Njong had presented him with five copper knives, which, in form, all resemble vultures or toucans. Later on he showed us these strange knives, which were very heavy, some of them having one, two, or three large, angular-shaped eyes.”

After “hunting” for these copper knives, for years, which were originally in England and later in the United States, the author finally succeeded in obtaining all five pieces.⁸

This tale resulted in the knives being widely referred to in African weapons circles as the famous five copper knives of Sir George Fullham. Zirngibl’s flair for marketing led them to being some of the most obscure, valuable, and sought after of African knives. He sold one of them as early as 1981.

After the publication of *Seltene Afrikanische Kurzwaffen*, Zirngibl encountered a client who wanted to purchase the copper blade published in the book (Hebeisen’s first “Kota,” but since Zirngibl had decided to keep it, he commissioned Hebeisen to manufacture a similar knife.

According to Hebeisen, he disliked the task of copying his previous work, as it limited his creativity and was a greater challenge than inventing a new piece. But he obliged, and the result was a sixth example (fig. 15), which differs from the published example only in small details of proportion.

Hebeisen did not create another copper “Kota” until 2003, when a different art dealer commissioned one, long after Hebeisen’s relationship with Zirngibl had ended in 1992.

That piece, his seventh, eventually found its way into the pages of the first edition of the catalog for *Fatal Beauty: Traditional Weapons from Central Afri-*



FIG. 15 (above): Hebeisen’s copper “Kota” *musele* #6. Ethan Rider Collection. Photo: Wolf-Dieter Miersch.

ca, the comprehensive 2009 Taiwan exhibition.⁹ Hebeisen provided a photograph taken in 2003 of this very knife propped up on a rock in his garden (fig. 17).¹⁰

In keeping with his practice of creating false histories for his knives, Zirngibl provided two pieces of evidence to a private collector who purchased one of the famous five copper knives. The first piece of evidence is a picture of two pages purportedly from the alleged L. A. Smith book that relates the tale of Fullham and the copper knives. However, in his 2017 article Barlovic determined this to be a composite of invented material and snippets from an obscure 1913 book about a Ugandan journey.¹¹ Barlovic included a photo of this two-page spread in his *Kunst & Kontext* article.¹²

Zirngibl’s second piece of evidence is a photograph that is shrouded in mystery. The owner of the photograph—actually a polaroid of an original photograph—will not allow it to be seen, and a witness present on the day the photograph was staged will not allow her name to be revealed. However, both Miersch and Barlovic have seen the photograph and relate



that it shows four of the five original copper “Kotas” hanging on a wall alongside an iron example.

No solid-copper Kota blade exists in any early collection—the blade type simply did not exist before Zirngibl invented it. Nor are there any other knives from Africa constructed of a single solid piece of metal—blade and handle are always two distinct pieces, even when both elements are composed of metal.¹³ Hebeisen

made only seven copper “Kota” blades, which are large and artistically distinctive. Incredibly, when Miersch visited Hebeisen in 2015, he still had the eighth and final copper plate from the original batch that Zirngibl had provided him nearly forty years earlier (figs. 18a and b). However, his seven blades have been copied repeatedly over the years, forming a genre unto itself and thereby producing a profound and lasting impact on the African weapons market.

FIG. 16 (above):
Musele blade.
Kota, Gabon.
Iron, copper. W. ??????????
Allan Ridel/Memoire Africaine
Collection.
Photo: Ethan Rider



CONSCIENCE AND REVELATION

After producing both replica and fantasy knives for Zirngibl and other dealers for decades, Hebeisen states that he finally became aware of the consequences of his work. While he initially thought he was making creative replicas for collectors who couldn't afford authentic blades, he began to suspect that he was actually participating in a scheme to deceive. The first clue came in 1995, when he saw one of his solid-copper "Kota" *musele* blades in a gallery in Munich and requested the price. The response came in a letter, quoting 65,000 Deutsche Marks, roughly \$45,000 (fig. 19).¹⁴ Although alarming, it was, for the time being, an isolated incident, and Hebeisen continued to produce.

In 2008, Hebeisen found one of his "Yakoma" blades in a Paris auction, estimated at 11,000–13,000 euros, and in 2013, he saw another of his "Yakoma" knives sold by a prominent auction house for \$17,500. He now knew that he had been duped, finally understanding that the creative projects that Zirngibl and others had brought him in fact had made him a key part of a lucrative and dishonest enterprise. He posted his aggrieved comment on *afropapa.de* and thus began the unveiling of the true provenance of his knives.

To his credit, while he participated in questionable activities for decades, Hebeisen has been willing to share his story and expose the truth, supported by the photos he had taken of his replica knives in their various stages of production, including his "Zande/Makaraka" blades, of which he made at least fifteen, identifiable

by their flamboyant handles (fig. 20). Scholarly focus on African blacksmithing techniques involving meticulous comparisons of Hebeisen's knives with traditional examples undoubtedly would have resulted in the exposure of these forgeries sooner or later, but the fact that he has fully acknowledged his complicity has moved the conversation to the fore. Others involved in this deceptive trade have declined to follow his lead or have taken their secrets to the grave.

A clear indication of the success that Hebeisen's knives have achieved is what is known as the "boomerang effect." They are currently being reproduced in Africa to be sold in the West, demonstrating the African blacksmith's proactive response to the demands of foreign market forces.¹⁵

NOTES

1. H. Westerdijk's *Ijzerwerk van Centraal-Afrika* (1975), was published before Fischer and Zirngibl's *Afrikanische Waffen*, and was certainly comprehensive. However, it was a smaller volume that was illustrated mostly with drawings as opposed to Zirngibl's book, which was illustrated with photographs.
2. Ethan Rider is in the process of establishing a definitive collection of "masterpiece" examples of inauthentic African knives in order to analyze their fabrication and formal

FIG. 17 (above left): Hebeisen's copper "Kota" *musele* #7, photographed in his garden and published on Facebook in 2003. Photo: Tilman Hebeisen.

FIGS. 18a and b (above): An unworked copper sheet given to Hebeisen by Zirngibl with a rough sketch of a "Kota" blade on oneside and inscribed on the other "Ausgangsmaterial Vogelkopfmesser Kupfer Zirngibl, 10 x 160 x 360" (Starting material, Zirngibl copper bird-head knife, 10 x 160 x 360 [mm.]). Photo by Wolf-Dieter Miersch, 2015

- qualities. His findings are available online at ERTribal.com.
3. While some larger copper rivets on Sudanese blades have been rounded on both sides, this exception is rare and is only present on blades where either side could be presented as the front. This is not the case for the Yakoma blade, which has a dedicated front and a dedicated back.
 4. "Afrikanische Waffenkunst," (Author attributed to the user 'afropapa'), Afrostore.biz, 6 July 2014, <http://www.afropapa.de/afrika/afrikanische-waffenkunst>.
 5. Ingo Barlovic, "Geschmiedete afrikanische Kurzwaffen made in Österreich?," *Kunst & Kontext*, July 2017.
 6. Barlovic, *ibid*.
 7. Hebeisen's finished products would all be larger than 360 x 160 x 10 mm, the result of hammering and flattening the copper sheets, which augmented their surface area.
 8. Manfred A. Zirngibl, *Seltene Afrikanische Kurzwaffen*, Grafenau: Morsak Publishing, 1983, 137.

9. The second edition of the catalog was substantially redesigned and did not include these objects.
10. He published this photo on his Facebook page at the time as an example of his handiwork. When he came to realize his involvement in the larger scheme, he updated this post with additional information.
11. Barlovic, *op cit.* cites this as Rudolf Kmunke, *Quer durch Uganda: eine Forschungsreise in Zentralafrika 1911/1912*, Dietrich Reimer, 1913.
12. Barlovic, *op cit.*
13. There are a number of Akan goldweights depicting knives that are composed of a single piece of metal, but these are cast-bronze symbolic objects rather than functional knives.
14. The 1995 annual average ratio of Deutsche marks-to-dollars was 1.43:1, making the price of the Munich gallery "Kota" blade \$45,454.54. Harold Marcuse, "Historical Dollar-to-Marks Currency Conversion Page," UC Santa Barbara, 9 Feb. 2013, <http://www.history.ucsb.edu/faculty/marcuse/projects/currency.htm>.
15. Luc Lefebvre, *Ngbandi Yakoma: Armes Traditionelles*, 2017.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Barlovic, Ingo. "Geschmiedete afrikanische Kurzwaffen made in Österreich?" *Kunst & Kontext*, July 2017.
- Elsen, Jan, and Marc Leo Felix (eds.). *Fatal Beauty: Traditional Weapons from Central Africa*. Taiwan: Suhai Design and Production, 2009.
- Fischer, Werner, and Manfred A. Zirngibl. *Afrikanische Waffen*. Passau: Prinz-Verlag GmbH, 1978.
- Lefebvre, Luc. *Ngbandi Yakoma: Armes Traditionnelles*. 2017.
- Spring, Christopher. *African Arms and Armor*. Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1993.
- Westerdijk, Peter. *The African Throwing Knife: A Style Analysis*. Utrecht: OMI, 1988.
- Zirngibl, Manfred A. and Alexander Kubetz. *Panga Na Visu*. Riedlhütte: Hepelo Publishing, 2009.
- Zirngibl, Manfred A. *Seltene Afrikanische Kurzwaffen*. Grafenau: Morsak Publishing, 1983.

FIG. 19 (left):

Letter from a Munich gallery quoting the price of 45,000DM for one of Hebeisen's copper "Kota" blades.

Image courtesy of Tilman Hebeisen.

FIG. 20 (below):

"Zande/Makaraka" blade in Hebeisen's workshop.

Photo by Tilman Hebeisen, 2010.

Herrn
Tilman Hebeisen
Kunstschmiede

München, den 0.6.95

Sehr geehrter Herr Hebeisen,

gestern erfahren wir von Ihrem Interesse für das Fang/Kota Vogelkopfmesser, das wir im Rahmen unserer Ausstellung „beads & figures“ gezeigt haben. Eine Bekannte von Ihnen, die unsere Galerie besuchte, gab uns Ihre Adresse.

Leider konnten wir für das Messer nicht mehr zeigen, da es demnächst einer Ausstellung Afrikanischer Kunst im Ethnologischen Museum in Schmiding bei Wels zur Verfügung gestellt wird.

Trotzdem können wir Ihnen freibleibend folgendes Angebot machen:

Fang/Kota Vogelkopfmesser
Gaban
Kupfer
Höhe 44 cm

Preis: 65.000 DM

Für weitere Informationen, die über unseren Katalogtext hinausgehen (den wir Ihnen beigelegt haben), können wir Sie auf ein Buch von Manfred Zirngibel über Vogelkopfmesser verweisen.

Der Experte für Afrikanische Kunst ist:

- 1 -

