AK-47S FOR THE ANCESTORS

BY

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For centuries iron implements have enabled Africans to forage and hunt, cultivate the soil and assure their own protection and prosperity. Iron blades not only create and save lives, but they can take them also. The more mundane utilitarian purposes of iron tools, however, are often complemented by ritual or ceremonial roles. Ceremonial weapons in particular take on a rich ambiguity that depends on the fact that they could be used to create or kill but in reality never are, and instead take on other subtle symbolic meanings. This article intends to investigate one such example of this by examining the ceremonial knives and axes of the Shona people of Zimbabwe.

In the West we also have categories of ceremonial weapons that people are familiar with, such as monarch's maces and military parade swords. They also have left the realm of the utilitarian and are primarily symbolic. How are these different from the African examples? For one thing their meanings are quite esoteric, not at the core of commonly held beliefs as they are in the African case. Also, just as our own art has largely been segregated into our aesthetic storehouses—museums—Western ceremonial weapons are mostly relegated to royal treasure houses or military display cases. In Africa, however, they are still very much a popular art, kept in people's homes and used throughout their lives.

A further question frequently asked is whether weapons can be considered art? While the primary purpose may be functional, African blackssmiths will frequently impart their aesthetic sensibilities as they skillfully execute their craft. Indeed, as is so often the case in Africa, it is spurious to consider aesthetics as separate from craftsmanship.

Writers often characterize the visual arts of southern Africa as personal and utilitarian. This is essentially true of the Shona. They
have no masking or figurative sculpture traditions. Objects such as the knives and axes this article will focus on, are personal utilitarian objects, but they also present significant religious and symbolic features that have not been adequately addressed in the past. Ceremonial or ritual knives and axes are common throughout Africa. Their various forms, sometimes intricate, sometimes simple and elegant, are now being recognized as worthy of admiration and study.

The historical data on the usage of Shona knives and axes come from a variety of sources. There is archaeological evidence for the existence of them from the 13th century onwards. Portuguese travellers observed them beginning in the 17th century, and in the 19th and early 20th centuries other European travellers reported briefly on these Shona items. More contemporary accounts of these objects are given by scholars in ethnographies and other written sources, and I have supplemented this with information obtained while interviewing Shona makers and users of knives and axes.

From the evidence it seems obvious these objects have had multiple functions throughout history that included practical, prestige, religious and political emphases. It is also obvious that various historical events have had a marked impact on these functions. For example, with the imposition of colonial rule during this century political control was taken away from the Africans. Political usage of Shona art consequently changed. Similarly, the introduction of Western-made knives and axes and the integration of many Shona into the modern market and cash economy affected the utilitarian aspects of these items as well. Christian missions and government laws combined to diminish the strength of traditional religion (or at least force it underground) and so religious usage of Shona knives and axes seems to have waned during the first half of this century.

All this has changed with the upsurge of nationalist politics in the 60s, the war of national liberation in the 70s, and the coming of independence in 1980. Traditional religion experienced, and is still experiencing, a revival in popularity. Concomitantly a renaissance of traditional art has become apparent, particularly in the usage and production of items for traditional religious practices. One factor contributing to this general resurgence of traditional religion and art is the increased visibility and public acceptance of traditional medicine. Organizations such as the Zimbabwe National