

## Identifying and dating Anglo-Zulu war related iklwas

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In combing numerous militaria and antique shows over the years, I have come across many examples of African spears that were specifically represented as Zulu weapons and, furthermore, associated with the conflict in 1879. More often than not, I found myself handling interesting spears associated with other tribes typically removed from South Africa such as those used by Amanda slavers from the Congo, Maass warriors and others with origins from all over the Dark Continent. In other words you never know what to expect, except that most of the time, sellers are adamant that the spears are of Zulu origin, possibly due to the fact that they fetch a premium, given the historical interest in the tribe. Spinning a story to convince a prospective buyer that a weapon is authentically connected to the conflict in 1879 to close a deal, is just as common as selling truly fake militaria. Having said that, a little basic knowledge and a feel for what should be real which develops over time, it is quite easy to determine with some latitude the authenticity of Zulu related spears.

Cetshwayo's warriors at the time of the conflict in 1879 were armed with a wide variety of different looking spears. There are certain examples such as spears in the Museum in Brecon in Wales which were actually used in the war, though some of these are seemingly not the type that one would normally associate with the tribe. The ability to identify a spear that might be connected to the Anglo-Zulu war comes with experience and does not usually entail a textbook approach. Spears purported to have been used by the warriors of Shaka, Dingane, and Cetshwayo are common and need to be properly identified as to vintage and possible if not likely connection to specific conflict periods. However, while this cannot always be carried out with surety, certain familiar characteristics and peculiarities are vital clues, some hidden, others clear to see and which are difficult to reproduce and fake, in order to misrepresent the spear. Both art and science together with the history of the artefacts may be used in authenticating original Zulu spears.

King Shaka has been recognized as revolutionizing the combat spear in the early 1800s by radically altering the tactics for which it was designed and in doing so, changed the shape of tribal warfare in South Africa for the rest of the century. We identify the unique shape and form of a truly Zulu stabbing spear as the iklwa; the origin of this term is associated with the sound made by the withdrawal of the blade from a victim's body. This close combat weapon is typified by an extraordinarily long blade up to 18 inches long, an inch and half wide and an eighth of an inch thick, connected to a shorter shaft with a flared butt to reduce the likelihood of the weapon slipping off a blood soaked hand. The usual length of the entire spear varied from 3½ to 4 feet. The iklwa is often also mistakenly called an assegai, which is a general term for a slender javelin or spear with a much smaller blade than the iklwa and used by the Bantu people of Southern Africa. The two types of spears are very different but important pieces of armamentarium. Usually each warrior carried an assortment of spears into battle in 1879 and the scope of discussing the various types and forms is beyond the limitations of this article which will restrict itself specifically to the iconic iklwa.

Unlike the Zulu war shield, a warrior's spear was a personal item as it remained his property at all times. Each iklwa or assegai was individually made by skilled craftsmen and while certain specifications as to length, size and shape might require conformity, no two spears were exactly the same. The end product reflected not only the status of the warrior but more importantly the intended function.

Many Zulu weapons were brought back to Britain as trophies by victorious British soldiers and used in impressive displays in museums and many stately homes. Officers could afford to transport large quantities of materiel whereas the enlisted rank and file could only bring back parts of broken spears as would fit into their kit bags. These collections effectively establish the standard with genuine examples, which can be used to compare with and authenticate similar weapons. It is worth noting that Zulu iklwas and other weapons connected to the Anglo-Zulu war may likely precede the 1879 conflict by decades. A well cared for iklwa and preserved in 'good working condition was often passed down a Zulu family. A blade might be re-forged or simply re-bound with a new shaft to maintain the usefulness and longevity. Tribal conflicts prior to 1879 claimed the lives of many warriors on the battlefield which resulted in surplus supplies of weapons and the practise of reuse and recycle was very effective in allowing warriors to maintain, increase and improve their armamentarium. It is worth noting that among the significant number of spears picked up in 1879 and exhibited at the Museum of the South Wales Borderers in Brecon, few examples are "typical iklwas" as the blades and wooden shafts appear to differ from what one might typically expect to see. In other words assegais and iklwas used in 1879 appear too have varied enormously in terms of shapes and sizes.

Dating and identifying vintage iklwas involves the use of a number of techniques and noted features.

Properties of the metalwork.

Iron-working in South Africa was well established long before Shaka's reign. In the early days smelting was achieved in an open forge fired by hardwood and driven by bellows. The raw iron was hammered by stone rocks such as quartzite. By 1800 ironworking remained at a primitive level and never established itself on a factory scale and a smithy would work alone with an apprentice or mate. By the time the Zulu nation became established, the varying quality of the iron produced initially, resulted in a more brittle spear which tended to corrode and chip easily. Examples of these have survived albeit often in rusty and brittle condition. Others have been reworked with new wooden and binding components. These are different from the later produced Zulu spears. With time, the iron forging techniques improved, so too did the final product. Trading with Europeans, particularly the Portuguese in the Delagoa Bay, area introduced steel-grade iron materials which the Zulus re-melted to refine the manufacture of the iklwa using higher quality metal. The extent and type of corrosion of the spear, together with discernible brittleness, offers clues which may assist in forming an overall opinion of the product. It is very difficult to reproduce and therefore fake the specific chemical and micrographic properties of the blades. To complicate this for the modern forger, each smith would likely have had his own special recipe of minor additives to add to the mix with the purpose of improving the properties of the final product, in the same way as a cook would have his secret ingredients. These might include adding scraps of leather or tree bark and other organic materials together with small amounts of inorganic substances, including chemical compounds such as salts. Characteristics and the micro-properties of metalworking artefacts are often peculiar to a region and even a particular tribe. To more accurately date the metal of the early spears, chemical and physical properties are easily determined using advanced metallurgical tests. These might include the use of very technical X ray fluorescence spectrometers and metal analysers in addition to crystallography or electron photomicrography. Such techniques would normally be beyond the reach of most collectors as these are within the forensic scientist and metallurgist realm.

## Physical features

Spear makers would be rewarded with cows by the Zulu king for high quality iklwas which would be personally handed to favourite and ranking warriors. The more numerous and simpler spears would usually be traded among the rest of the Zulus for goats.

Zulu and indeed many Nguni related spears contain two notches or pincer marks below the blade of the spear which usually has a tang that fits into the wooden shaft. A strong vegetable glue is used to set the tang which is secured with a binding material which can be derived from such materials as cow tail, leather strips, sinew, reed, palm leaf, split cane, brass, copper or steel wire. Warriors of status would benefit from more elaborate and decorative binding which took much longer to complete than for the average spear. Cow tail availability declined in the period following the Anglo-Zulu war with expropriation of the animals by both the British and Boers. The subsequent civil war simply made things worse. Leather and plant material used for binding tended to deteriorate and new binding would be required. Examples of reworking are often easy to identify. Wire bound spears were often associated with status. The thicker brass wiring examples might not necessarily be associated with the conflict in 1879 though they do indicate an earlier binding than the copper and thinner steel wires which appeared later with the advent of the telegraph for communication.

The wooden component of the vintage Iklwa might easily show signs of wear and tear, desiccation of the wood, cracking, splitting, distortion or bending, re-polishing or refinishing and a definitive patina that comes with age. Interestingly, the style and methodology of binding might indicate the hands of an individual spear-maker or a group working together where the style of manufacture and details of the finishes would connect the individuals. "Kill notches" represent another clue regarding the history of the iklwa. Crudely drawn marks close to the flared butt of the wooden shaft become a guide to the experience of the warrior in combat. They might also mark the number of wild animal kills too. Look for inconsistencies in terms of thickness of the notched or cuts in the wood together with length and angle. These marks were usually accumulated often over a period of years.

Iklwa blades offer important clues such as the expected thickness, weight and finish. Undoubtedly, a machined spear is easy to identify. Corrosion and changes in the physical quality of the metal does change over time. The older and poorer chemical quality blades tend to show signs of chipping and the workmanship might look rough with destruction of the surface layer.

Authentic spears are usually well balanced in terms of weight and handling which would be expected for the purpose of combat. A poorly balanced iklwa would be forward weighted to the extent that the spear would be difficult to be used smoothly when thrusting and would feel too heavy very quickly.

Become knowledgeable, establish the basics, visit museums and other exhibits. Ask questions and develop a feel for iklwas and other Zulu weapons. Do not be fooled by the spin. If it looks too good, proceed with caution and as with everything in the militaria collecting world, misrepresentation and fakery is very common. There are many genuine examples of the entire range of Zulu weapons across the market such was the collectability of these trophies very soon after the conflict in 1879. Remember, caveat emptor.



Display at the Regimental Museum of the Royal Welsh at Brecon. Spears from the AZW in 1879 in a variety of forms with no 'typical' example of the iconic Shaka-like iklwa. Reproduced with permission.



AZW spear blades on exhibit at the Regimental Museum of the Royal Welsh at Brecon. Examples of an iklwa with the typical tang and a sleeve fitting leaf blade. Reproduced with permission.



Typical iklwas from the AZW period. Author's collection



Iklwa blades. Author's collection



Early cow tail binding.



Examples of binding, from top to bottom: copper wire (1), reed or palm leaf binding (2,3 & 4), Sinew (5), brass wire (6).