

Basic Detail Report



Knife (Tebutu)

Date

19th Century

Primary Maker

I-Kiribati

Medium

Wood, shark teeth and sennit

Description

This small knife is one of the many shark teeth tools that have been identified as having originated in the Gilbert Islands. Most of these are weapons that are large in stature and would have been reserved for usage in combat. The function of this smaller bladed tool has been described in varying manners, sometimes as a weapon used by women and—specifically because this tool only has a single shark tooth blade—as an implement of ritual scarification. Ethnographic studies of Gilbert Islands combat mention that the first wave of a battle was generally a non-fatal fought between women of the warring groups. Though no lives were lost, the fighting was described as brutal with the potential to leave a combatant disfigured for the remainder of her life. Other sources describe the usage of the knives in less formal altercations: disagreements over partners and other such matters, but reiterate the damage exacted by these knives. Shark teeth are very sharp, albeit fragile, the teeth may have needed regular replacement but would have been effective at cutting what they were set against. Less information is available on traditional scarification practices in Kiribati, but the serrated edges of shark teeth makes them ideal for creating permanent scars. Sharks also have an important cultural significance in the Gilbert Islands—featuring heavily in the islands’ mythological oral history. This and the ferocity of the beasts would have made these weapons intimidating despite their small size.

Dimensions

10 × 3/4 × 2 1/4 in. (25.4 × 1.9 × 5.7 cm)