MAKING THE CHIKUNDA: MILITARY SLAVERY AND ETHNICITY IN SOUTHERN AFRICA, 1750–1900

By Allen Isaacman and Derek Peterson

From the vantage point of American history, military slavery is a paradox. With few exceptions, American slave-holders were careful to keep weapons away from their slaves for fear that they would rebel. Scholars of military slavery have therefore had to explain why owners in other parts of the world found it desirable to arm their slaves. Max Weber was among the first to propose an explanation. In his seminal analysis of patrimonial government, Weber argued that slaves were ideal clients: owned by the ruler, slaves were bound to obey his commands.¹ Scholars have elaborated on this line of analysis by exploring the manifold strategies by which patrimonial rulers secured slave soldiers' loyalty.² But in their eagerness to unravel the paradox of military slavery, scholars have often obscured slave soldiers' own political imaginations. The focus has been on slaves' relationship with their masters, not on how enslaved men organized their daily lives and forged new social identities. Rather than treating slave soldiers as objects of rulers' indoctrination, we think it is more revealing to explore slaves' self-fashioning in relation to their rulers and to each other. How did slave soldiers create rituals and practices that made courage, loyalty, and military discipline seem virtuous? How, that is, did they construct a culture that idealized military service as a masculine virtue?³

This article explores how military slaves in Portuguese-run estates along the Zambezi River (in contemporary Mozambique) came to define themselves as sharers of a new social identity, Chikunda ("the conquerors"). The estates, called prazos, were initially granted to Portuguese settlers who, from the seventeenth century onwards, moved inland from the Indian Ocean coastal towns to profit from the lucrative Zambezi trade. They used slaves as soldiers, equipping them with guns and spears and using them to collect taxes from peasants, patrol the borders, and police the estates. Asked to perform highly dangerous tasks in the service of their owners,

slaves developed shared behaviors and beliefs, a patrilineal system of kinship and inheritance, and a rich repertoire of cultural practices that celebrated their prowess as warriors and hunters and distinguished them from the indigenous peasant population. We emphasize that this “domain of commonality” was not created to serve slave owners’ purposes. Chikunda identity was in large part the product of slaves’ own cultural and political work. Slaves made themselves Chikunda in order to set themselves apart from the local peasantry, gain leverage with owners, and lend meaning and prestige to their lives of danger.

The article begins by exploring the relationship between military slavery and economic production on the prazos. Slave soldiers were also traders, hunters, policemen, and overseers. Their dangerous, demanding work enriched prazo holders. The second section highlights how slave soldiers, commanded to perform dangerous tasks, valorized courage and military skill. In language, songs and ceremonies, through initiation rituals, in clothing and in facial tattoos, slave soldiers defined themselves as Chikunda and celebrated their physical prowess. Being Chikunda was for slave soldiers a way of dignifying their work with a clear sense of vocation, a way also of distinguishing themselves from peasant subjects. In the third section, we outline how, after the collapse of the prazos in the nineteenth century and the manumission of the slaves, former soldiers enlarged on their shared history and forged a Chikunda ethnic identity. This ethnic identity survives up to the present day.

The Chikunda on the Prazos

The military slavery practiced on the prazos was not unique in precolonial African history. Slaves often served African rulers as soldiers. Their military power underpinned rulers’ political authority. As early as the thirteenth century, the rulers of Mali appointed slave officials and enrolled slaves in the military. The eighteenth-century kingdom of Oyo similarly used slaves in administrative and military capacities. Slaves guarded Oyo’s king and his family, collected taxes, and administered provincial towns. Armed with cutlasses and mounted on prized war-horses imported from the north, Oyo’s slave cavalry was a terrifyingly effective military force. In the nineteenth-century Sudanic state of Damagaram, slave officers led cavalry units of up to two thousand men, many of them armed with modern weapons. Slaves also

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occupied up to half of the titled positions in the state bureaucracy.\(^7\) In northeastern Africa, Sudanese captives played a prominent role in the Turco-Egyptian army during the first half of the nineteenth century.\(^8\) In some contexts, the unbridled power of slave soldiers earned them the distrust of free citizens. In the Wolof and Sereer states of the Senegambia, seventeenth- and eighteenth-century rulers used armed slaves, called *tyeddo* (or *ceddo*), to conduct warfare, collect taxes, and perform other administrative tasks.\(^9\) Their heavy drinking, bright clothing, long hair, and arrogance offended industrious Muslims.\(^10\) For many precolonial African rulers, arming slaves was not a last resort. It was an established strategy of political consolidation, a means of controlling fractious and potentially rebellious subjects.

The Chikunda are in some ways exceptional in the African history of military slavery, for they served individual settlers, not a state.\(^11\) For the Portuguese adventurers and mercenaries who claimed vast estates along the Zambezi River in the sixteenth century, arming slaves was a means of consolidating control in a highly fluid political context (see Map 1). African polities of the Zimbabwe plateau had for centuries used the Zambezi to export ivory, gold, and slaves to the coast. The Portuguese adventurers set themselves up as middlemen in this long-established trade, at first under the patronage of established political leaders but increasingly with the support of their own followers. These settlers became extremely powerful, forming military alliances with the rulers of the Zimbabwean plateau in exchange for economic concessions. The Portuguese crown, eager to take advantage of local situations for its own benefit, granted powerful traders titles to massive estates known as *prazos*. It is important to recognize that the estate-holders, called *prazeiros*, were not emissaries of Portuguese colonial authority. They were transfrontiersmen: the *prazeiros* crossed political and cultural boundaries and took on a new way of life.\(^12\) Over time, they intermarried with the local population. Many adopted the lifestyle, cosmology, and political trappings of the indigenous political authori-

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\(^11\) Arab and Swahili planters on the East African coast did use armed slaves to oversee the captives who worked on their fields. See Frederick Cooper, *Plantation Slavery on the East Coast of Africa* (New Haven, 1977), 172.

ties. Prazeiros rarely removed local chiefs or rulers living on their estates: instead, they superimposed themselves over the already-existing political hierarchy. Few attempted to establish commercial agriculture on their estates. Instead, they siphoned off surplus from peasant producers (colonos) living on the estates and accumulated additional wealth from the profitable Zambezi ivory and slave trade.

Given the exploitative economy of the prazo system, it is not surprising that the Portuguese estate holders relied on military power to support their authority. That power could not come from Portugal itself, however, as Lisbon was neither willing nor able to station an effective colonial army in this frontier region. Throughout the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, the number of Portuguese soldiers stationed in the Zambezi usually ranged from one hundred to three hundred. They were poorly armed, poorly organized, and poorly trained. Many were debtors, vagrants, and former convicts who had been conscripted into the military, and who deserted at the first opportunity. A senior official acknowledged in 1825 that the colonial army was in complete shambles. "In all these districts," he wrote, "there are fortifications, and a garrison consisting of a company of infantrymen, roughly eighty men including officers, but rarely are more than half present, and they are badly armed and without discipline, and thus of little utility."

In the absence of an effective colonial army, the prazeiros recruited and armed slaves. According to early accounts, it was not uncommon for such powerful early prazeiros as António Lobo da Silva (known by his African name, Nhema) to own upwards of five thousand slaves. His contemporaries, Lourenço de Mattos (Maponda) and Sisnando Bayão (Massuampaca), also had large slave retinues. One estate-owner was reputed to command an army of fifteen thousand captives. With these slave armies, estimated at around fifty thousand strong in the middle of the eighteenth century, the prazeiros defeated a number of Sena, Tonga, and Tawara polities located on the southern margins of the Zambezi. These polities were relatively small, and since they lacked a standing army, they could probably put no more than a few hundred men into battle. The prazeiros also made substantial

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14 Sebastião Xavier Botelho, Memória Estatística sobre os Domínios Portuguezes na África Oriental (Lisbon, 1835), 50.


17 Miranda estimated that there were 34,000 slaves on 41 of the over 90 estates. Arquivo Nacional de Torre de Tombo [A.N.T.T.], Ministério do Reino, Maço 604, "Memória Sobre a Costa de África," António Pinto de Miranda, undated, 36–53.
inroads north of the Zambezi River, vanquishing several Chewa and Mang'anja polities by the end of the seventeenth century. The conquered lands and the peasants who lived on them were effectively incorporated into the prazo system.18

There is no seventeenth-century documentation that refers to the military slaves as Chikunda. The earliest explicit reference to the Chikunda dates from a century later. In 1752, a Portuguese priest wrote that the “respect and power of the estate holders rests on their slaves (bazekunda) under the direction of a slave chief known as the mukazambo and a second in command called the sachikunda.”19 A decade later, a prominent Zambezi settler was more explicit. “The Chikunda,” he wrote, “are our slaves.”20 It is difficult to be more specific, but this evidence suggests that, at least on some prazos, military slaves had forged a sense of collective identity by the middle of the eighteenth century.

The time lapse between the formation of slave military regiments and the creation of the name Chikunda highlights the difficulties that slave soldiers undoubtedly faced in creating a common identity. For slaves on the prazos were deeply divided by language and ancestry. Like military slaveholders in other parts of the world, the praZeiros preferred to acquire captives from distant regions rather than enslaving local peasants or acquiring captives from nearby populations. As one descendant of a prominent praZeiro family noted, “In the beginning the Chikunda were not a tribe. They were a mixture of people who came from far away.”21 A detailed list of 659 male slaves freed in the Tete area in 1856 highlights the ethnic heterogeneity of the slave population.22 The captives came from 21 different ethnic groups. The overwhelming majority, 83 percent, came from well outside the prazo zone, from the matrilineal belt north of the Zambezi. The preponderance of captives from the north reflects the political chaos in that region. The decline of Undi, paramount ruler of the Chewa, set local land chiefs against one another in competition for preeminence. The praZeiros took advantage of this turmoil, repeatedly attacking the divided Chewa and Mang’anja polities during the seventeenth century.23 These raids intensified in the first half of the nineteenth century, spurred by the dramatic increase in demand for slaves from Brazil.24 These raids were an important source of slaves for the prazos. Other slaves came by way of purchase. Most praZeiros

19 A.H.U, Moç., Cx. 3, Fr. Fernando Jésus, M.A., 13 April 1752.
21 Interview with Ricardo Ferrão et al., Tete (Mozambique), 22 October 1997.
23 See Isaacman, Mozambique, 95–113.
24 Ibid., 92–93.
Map 1  Principal Zambezi Prazos
regularly dispatched trading caravans to areas known to have large numbers of captives available for sale. Young, easily transportable boys commanded the highest price, since it was believed that they could easily be trained in martial arts and molded into the norms of soldierly life. After the captives arrived at the estate, they were assigned to slave soldiers' squads, made household slaves or field hands, or sold to the slave market in Quelimane. Many Africans thus became slaves involuntarily, through praizeiros' raids or through capture and purchase at the hands of African chiefs.

For some people, however, selling themselves into military slavery was a strategy of economic survival in dangerous times. The region's low and unpredictable rainfall meant that food shortages occurred with regularity. One eighteenth-century chronicler observed, "The greatest part came to be captives from the times of famine, pestilence, and locusts and because of their urgent necessity, they had no alternative but to come and offer themselves as captives." The actual process of self-enslavement varied. Sometimes it involved detailed negotiations in which the praizeiro pledged that the slave would never be sold outside the prazo. At other times, an impoverished man simply swore loyalty and accepted the conditions that his protector imposed. Entering the ranks of the Chikunda offered a number of advantages. In returning for enlisting, the recruits gained highly valued imported goods, including cloth, beads, and guns. Others received land, wives, and the right to hunt on the estates. To an unattached, vulnerable individual, these benefits held an obvious attraction.

Divided by language and ethnicity, divided also by their experiences of enslavement, slave soldiers nevertheless shared a similar mode of organization from one estate to another. They were carefully set apart from the local peasant population and settled on regimental villages called butaka, located strategically throughout the prazo. According to the local historian Custódio Chimalenzi, "The Chikunda lived in distinct villages, separate from the local population. They were organized into military villages. The peasants had their own villages and they never mixed." Portuguese accounts from the eighteenth and nineteenth century confirm this spatial

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26 Suzanne Miers and Igor Kopytoff argue that slavery was one among a variety of options that Africans used to ameliorate difficult economic situations. See their "African 'Slavery' as an Institution of Marginality," in Kopytoff and Miers, eds., Slavery in Africa, 3–81.

27 A.N.T.T, Ministério do Reino, Maço 604, "Memória sobre a Costa de África," António Pinto de Miranda.

28 António Candido Pedroso Gamitto, King Kazembe (Lisbon, 1960), II, 145.


separation. Each butaka had a clearly defined political hierarchy, with a slave chief (mukazambo) exercising considerable authority over his soldiers’ lives. With the assistance of a council of elders, the mukazambo distributed bounty received from the prazeiro, allocated land and captives, punished members of his regiment who violated local practices and laws, resolved disputes between his subordinates, and administered the poison ordeal to any Chikunda suspected of practicing witchcraft. During military campaigns many slave chiefs and their subordinates were permitted to take captives of their own. Even when the action of a slave jeopardized the prazeiro’s position, responsibility for disciplining the guilty party generally rested with the mukazambo. When a Chikunda slave fled prazo Inharuga with valuable trade goods belonging to the estate-owner in 1783, it was the slave chiefs who dispatched soldiers to capture the runaway, and ordered him chained and beaten.

Set apart by their economic and political privileges, Chikunda soldiers were used by prazeiros as a means to control the often-restive peasant population. Such was the reputation of the Chikunda that among the settlers it was taken as fact that “twenty slaves could reduce one thousand colonos to complete and perfect obedience.” The prazeiros selected their most loyal slaves, called chuanga (pl.achuanga), to oversee the principal villages of their estates. The achuanga were agents of the prazeiro, transmitting his orders to the land chiefs and ensuring that they were followed. They recruited peasant labor to clear roads, transport goods, and repair buildings on the estate. The chuanga personally resolved minor infractions committed by the villagers against the interests of the prazeiro. Villagers who failed to give the estate holder a proper share of meat of the animals they killed, for example, were punished by the chuanga. For more serious infractions, the chuanga referred the case to the prazeiro himself. In this way, the estate-holder was informed of the activities of the peasants, and could stifle organized opposition.

The achuanga also supervised the collection of the annual tax that all peasants were required to pay. The exact content of this tax varied substantially from one prazo to another. One particularly knowledgeable observer noted that the tribute extracted was directly proportional to the military power the prazeiro possessed. Shortly before the harvest, the slave overseers, together with the land chief and village headmen, took a census of all the households on the estate. Each household

31 Gamitto, King Kazembe, I, 36.
34 A.H.U., Cx. 20, Józé Manuel Pinteira, 20 January 1783.
35 A.H.U., Moç., Cx. 3, unsigned, undated.
had to pay the same amount, regardless of how much it actually produced. For their
loyalty, the achuanga received a portion of the taxes, as did the land chief and his
assistants. The achuanga also enforced the commercial monopoly of the prazeiros,
collecting sorghum, maize, and rice from peasants at harvest time. Peasants referred
to this practice as inhaucangamiza, or forced sale, since the prices they received for
their goods from the prazeiro were well below the market rates.

Controversies frequently arose over tax and tribute collection. If an entire
village failed to pay tax or refused to obey some other order of the prazeiro, the
estate owner dispatched a slave squad to deal with the miscreants. Chikunda slaves
publicly punished tax evaders, sometimes beating them with rhinoceros hide whips.
Other tax evaders were killed or enslaved along with their families. Indigenous
authorities suspected of encouraging acts of disobedience were subject to similar
punishment. These harsh reprisals were an intrinsic part of the system of domina-
tion on the prazos. They created a deep antipathy toward the alien Chikunda among
the local peasant population.

Hoping to escape from the violent conditions on the prazos, many peasants
ran away, seeking sanctuary from neighboring chiefs or other prazeiros. Runaways
had several options. They could “jump fences” and migrate to another estate, or
they could flee to a neighboring chieftaincy. Prazo-holders, nervous that peasants’
flight would undermine the viability of the estates, garrisoned Chikunda squads at
strategic points on the frontiers in order to thwart peasants’ escape. Chikunda
soldiers were also used to quash peasant uprisings, which regularly occurred in the
second half of the eighteenth century. According to José da Costa Xavier, a great-
grandson of a prominent prazeiro, “The Chikunda helped put down revolts ... but
they did very little other work.” Insurrections seem to have been most common
on the smaller estates where the prazeiros had only limited forces at their disposal,
or on frontier estates, where neighboring chiefs would ally themselves with rebell-
ious peasants. The Chikunda were of critical importance in suppressing these peas-
ant uprisings.

The Chikunda were also of military importance in protecting the prazos
against external threats. “The job of the Chikunda,” stressed Custódio Chimalenzi,
“was to defend the prazos and to protect the frontiers against attacks from neigh-
boring tribes.” In the highly competitive world of the Zambezi, a strong military

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37 A.H.U., Moç., Cx. 34, Francisco José Lacerda e Almeida, 22 March 1798; A.H.M.,
Fundo do Século XIX, Quelimane, Códiçe 2–266, Fd. 3, fols. 17–19, João de Souza Machado et
Custódio José da Silva to José Maria Pereira, 24 July 1859; interviews with José António,
Cheringoma (Mozambique), 7 Sept. 1968; Sete Marqueza, Gente Renço and Quembo Pangacha,
Caia (Mozambique), 4 September 1968.
38 Interview with José da Costa Xavier, Tete (Mozambique), 22 July 1968.
39 Interview with Custódio Luís Gonzaga Chimalenzi.
served as a necessary deterrent against attacks not only from adjacent African polities but also from rival prazeiros. Some of the fiercest conflicts occurred between estate-holders trying to usurp the authority of their neighbors and establish themselves as the dominant economic and political power in the region. Periodic raids, full-scale battles, and prolonged wars were a recurring theme in inter-prazo relationships.

In addition to their military role, the Chikunda performed a wide range of economic activities that enhanced the wealth and power of their owners. Caravans of Chikunda traders, porters, canoe men, and soldiers, ranging in number from ten to several hundred men, traveled far into the interior exchanging imported cloth and beads for slaves, ivory, and gold. Their expeditions dealt primarily with the Chewa and Nsenga chieftaincies but went as far north as the Lunda kingdom of Kazembe, sometimes lasting as long as eighteen months.40 A trusted slave official known as the musambadzi led the caravans, determined the itinerary, and negotiated with local rulers. Because the Zambezi Valley was a tsetse fly infested zone, pack animals could not be used to transport goods into the interior.41 Slaves had to carry such heavy commodities as ivory, hippo teeth, and copper great distances. The absence of roads made their tasks more difficult, as did the rapids and the swollen rivers that the caravans had to cross in the rainy season. Official Portuguese accounts noted the skill and daring of the canoe men "who were not intimidated by the large rocks jutting out of the Zambezi River north of Tete."42 In addition to natural obstacles, there were the perils posed by hippopotami and crocodiles and the threats posed by marauding bands of brigands. One prazeiro lamented, "It was rare indeed when one of the musambadzi was not robbed or assassinated in the interior and the caravan returned safely."43

Their Chikunda slaves also made profits for prazeiros as elephant hunters. Armed with spears, axes, scimitars, locally made guns, and European muzzle-loaders, Chikunda hunters took advantage of the large elephant herds north of the Zambezi. Oral traditions throughout the region recount the fearless way that hunters incapacitated the elephants by cutting their hamstrings with axes and their skill as marksmen. Even those disdainful of the Chikunda because of their predatory activi-


42 Ibid.

43 A.N.T.T., Ministério do Reino, Maço 604, Diego Guerreiro de Aboime, 27 August 1779.
ties acknowledged that “the Chikunda were the best hunters in the region; no one was better. In the beginning they hunted with bows and arrow and spears. Later on they began to use muskets. It was the great hunters who used muskets.” While the prazeiros retained all the ivory, the hunters kept the elephant and hippo meat, which they distributed throughout the slave community and exchanged for grain with local peasants.

The multiple functions that the Chikunda performed highlights the relationship between military slavery, economic production, and political consolidation on the prazos. In a violently unstable social and political context, the Chikunda were for estate holders a means of controlling the peasants living on the estates. Chikunda also produced wealth for the slave owners through hunting, slave raiding, and trading. Military slavery was an engine of economic production, and a means of producing and solidifying the prazeiros’ privileged class position.

Their work demanded a rare courage and skill. Asked to perform highly dangerous tasks, bound together by their common experience as skilled traders and adventurers, military slaves elaborated a culture that celebrated daring, valor, and military discipline.

Making the Chikunda

Uprooted from their natal linguistic and cultural communities, first-generation slave soldiers undoubtedly experienced a kind of “social death.” Their enslavement ripped them out of the physical and social world they knew, making it impossible for soldiers to honor their ancestors or organize their communities in the manner that they had learned. Coming to think of themselves as “Chikunda” was probably difficult, divided as they were by language and ancestry. But their internal divisions may have made the creation of overarching, commonly understood standards of behavior all the more urgent. The political economy and social structure of the prazos ensured that slaves could not easily blend into peasant communities. Their work as tax collectors, overseers, and police earned them the hostility of the peasant population. And as renowned hunters and traders, the slaves had access to imported goods, which reinforced their differences with the peasantry.

But a sense of difference did not in itself create the Chikunda. Creating a common identity required imaginative work of slave soldiers. Over time, they created a distinctive set of rituals and practices that valorized courage and denigrated weakness and inconstancy. Making themselves Chikunda—the “conquerors”—was a way for slave soldiers to celebrate the hard work they did, making it seem honorable.

44 Interview with Castro Amoda Jack et al., Tete (Mozambique), 21 October 1997.
45 See Orlando Patterson, *Slavery and Social Death* (Cambridge, Mass., 1982).
and socially meaningful. Crafting Chikunda identity was also a strategy of social differentiation, a way, that is, for proud soldiers to set themselves off from the peasants around them.

The term Chikunda is derived from the Shona verb *kukunda*, which signifies to vanquish. Their military work was one means by which Chikunda identified themselves. Despite the fact that most first-generation slaves came from farming communities, Chikunda regarded agricultural work with disdain. To farm would have reduced them to the level of common field slaves or subjugated peasants. As one Chikunda descendant remembered, “our grandfathers hated to work in the fields.” Portuguese official accounts confirmed this aversion to farming. As a result, the Chikunda had to rely on the peasants living on the estates for much of the grain they ate and the beer they consumed. The slaves acquired these foodstuffs by levying taxes on peasants, or by exchanging meat for peasants’ grain. The soldiers’ wives cultivated small fields, sometimes with the aid of captives, to supplement the agricultural produce extracted from the local villages. Thus, from the earliest days on the prazos, a clearly defined gendered division of labor existed within Chikunda communities. Farming was women’s work. Hunting, commerce, and warfare were the domain of Chikunda men.

Their disdain for agriculture—as women’s work—was for male slave soldiers a means of setting themselves off from the peasant farmers alongside whom they lived. The new gendered division of labor also reflected radical shifts within the social organization of slave soldiers’ families. One of the defining features of the new Chikunda communities was the organization of slave families around a patrilineal system of descent. Most captives had originally come from matrilineal peoples living north of the Zambezi. In their home villages to the north, husbands lived with their wives’ relatives, maternal uncles exercised domestic authority over a man’s children, and family property was controlled by the wife’s lineage. Both men and women had taken part in farming activities. Female religious figures were central to northerners’ spiritual lives: the Chewa, for example, propitiated Makewana, the “Wife of the Spirit,” and venerated female ancestors.

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47 Interviews with João Alfai, Chioco (Mozambique), 26 July 1968; Sete Marqueza, Degue (Mozambique), 27 July 1968.

48 Interview with Kapurika, Guta (Zimbabwe), 10 January 1973.


50 Gamitto, “Escravatura,” 399; interviews with Castro Amada Jack; Ricardo António Ferrão et al.

Slave soldiers’ adoption of patrilineality was therefore a radical change from inherited practice. They probably had little choice in the matter. Living and working with their male comrades-in-arms in the prazeiros’ service, slave soldiers could scarcely ask their owners for leave to live with their wives’ families. One elder whose ancestors lived on prazo Massangano explained the dynamics of patrilineality very simply. “The Chikunda children could not leave; they stayed and remained Chikunda.” Patrilineality gave longevity, and permanence, to new Chikunda communities. Wives were brought back to their husbands’ village, creating new patrilocal residence patterns. Over time a patrilineal extended family emerged. Land, property, and familial identity were all transmitted through the male line.

If becoming Chikunda meant rethinking kin relations and inheritance, it also meant rethinking the past. New patterns of ancestor veneration dignified patrilineal slave households with a local, male-centered history. The Chikunda no longer invoked the spirit of their distant ancestors, but instead sought the assistance of their predecessors who had died on the prazos. Many of them also began to pay homage to the local lion spirits, the mhondoro, who were the patrilineal spiritual guardians in the territory in which they now resided. The slaves invoked the mhondoro to insure supernatural protection during battle and before hunting dangerous animals. They also propitiated the lion spirit to guarantee the fertility of their wives and their land. As Custódio Chimalenzi explained, these religious innovations were a necessity for a people cut off from home.

The Chikunda always consulted the mhondoro of the area. They all had to adopt the local mhondoro because they had come from a variety of people who lived far away. The Chikunda consulted the mhondoro because the mhondoro had the power to tell them where the enemy was and what dangers they faced.

Bound together by a new set of ancestors, Chikunda elaborated markers of social identity with which to distinguish themselves from peasants. In their households, communities, and military regiments, the slaves spoke Chi-Chikunda. As the local historian Conrado Msussa Boroma put it, “The language of the Chikunda is a language without a land. It is a mixture of Atawara, Azimba, Makanga, Quelimane, Atonga, and Barue, each slave brought a little with him.” Although a detailed historical linguistic analysis still needs to be undertaken, the evidence suggests that

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52 Interview with Chale Lupia.
53 Interviews with Custódio Luís Gonzaga Chimalizeni; Castro Amoda Jack et al.; Ricardo António Ferrão et al.
54 Interview with Custódio Luís Gonzaga Chimalizeni.
55 Interview with Conrado Msussa Boroma, Boroma, 28 July 1968.
56 For a preliminary discussion, see J. R. dos Santos Júnior, Contribuição para o Estudo da Antropologia de Moçambique (Lisbon, 1944), II, 247–78.
their language was based on a substantial number of cognates introduced by slaves from the north together with Chi-Sena, Chi-Tonga, and Chi-Tawara terms borrowed from the peasants living on the prazos. The relatively large number of Portuguese greetings and expressions of deference incorporated into the language called attention to slaves’ proximity to the estate-owners and involvement in the larger world of the Zambezi.\(^{57}\) As a “language without a land,” Chi-Chikunda helped to bind uprooted slaves together as members of a common cultural and intellectual community. Their speech differentiated them from peasant population of the prazos. When Chikunda greeted each other they saluted, shuffled their feet in a differential manner, and declared in their best Portuguese, “Bom dia.”\(^ {58}\) This greeting was called *kukwenga*. They made no such gestures when they encountered peasants who, by contrast, were expected to clap their hands as a mark of deference whenever they came upon a Chikunda man.

Just as Portuguese greetings were a mark of social superiority, so bodily markings helped to define Chikunda identity. Both men and women had a unique set of facial tattoos, known as *makaju*. *Makaju* were an affirmation of Chikunda superiority over the local population. As Diamond Mpande explained, “The reason that we had the *makaju* was to show others that we were the Chikunda. In that way we differentiated ourselves from other people.”\(^ {59}\) But the *makaju* were more than a social marker. They were also an affirmation of Chikunda successes as soldiers. As one elder in Tete put it, “Originally, when the Chikunda came to the prazos, they did not have *makaju*. The *makaju* developed out of warfare. It became a symbol of their position as warriors and distinguished them from the other people.”\(^ {60}\)

The Chikunda also filed their front teeth, reinforcing their menacing appearance. “Our ancestors did this,” explained Diamond Mpande, “so that they looked different from the local people and so that all the other people knew that we are all Chikunda.”\(^ {61}\) Their menacing appearance was an integral part of Chikunda identity.

Clothing was another marker of status and power on the prazos. Because of their success as ivory hunters, slave raiders, and long-distance traders, the Chikunda received bolts of calico cloth, called *kapundu*, from estate holders as a reward for their labors. Calico became their standard dress, a uniform that they flaunted. “Chikunda men wore *kapundu* in the old days,” remembered one old man. “It was a white cloth worn over a smaller undergarment. Some also wore a sleeveless

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60 Interview with Custódio Luís Gonzaga Chimalizeni.
61 Interview with Diamond Mpande.
Chikunda women also dressed in blouses made from calico. Their attire set them apart from peasants living on the prazos. “Most people wore mkuende,” one elder recalled. “The women removed the bark from a tree, took the fiber, washed it in water to make it soft, and made clothing called mkuende. Others wore mphalame, which were animal skins.

Their mythology and dances similarly celebrated Chikunda men’s valor. Soldiers’ return from a successful military operation or hunting expedition was the occasion for great celebration. A British traveler passing through the Tete region in the middle of the nineteenth century observed one such performance.

Here forms a double ring of fifty or sixty men, in each hand a bullock’s horn, clashing them in unison to the stroke of one supple and lithe-limbed native, who springing into the center, leaps nearly his own height from the ground…. Not far from them, single dancers are weighing against each other, brandishing their weapons, muskets, assegai, battle axes, or bow and arrows, and achieving pirouettes that would open the eyes of some of our ballet dances. In another place is a circle of women performing a more measured dance.

Chikunda celebrated their daring in public dances like these. Their performance of military skills in dances publicized their courage, concretizing their military work as a virtue to be admired.

Clothing, dancing, language, and bodily markings celebrated slave soldiers’ dangerous lives, joining them in common pursuit of honor through military service. Initiation rituals were the means by which slaves learned to value military service as an honorable occupation. Boys learned from male elders, grandparents and specialists known as tsanculu. They recounted the military and hunting exploits of their ancestors in evening discussions around the campfire and in Chikunda pre-puberty schools. Custódio Chimalenzi described how young captives were educated. “The original Chikunda elders formally taught the Chikunda offspring,” he remembered. “The boys who were born into slavery had to be taught what their responsibilities were—how to make war and defend the prazos. There was a special hut in which they were taught, where they build a fire and sat around during the night discussing things. The children would sit around the fire and learn.” Once they finished their
schooling young men’s faces were tattooed. They were then deemed ready for mili-
tary service and marriage.67

Girls underwent a parallel process of socialization at a somewhat earlier age. They learned from elderly women, typically under large trees in their village, who trained them to cook, keep house, make mats and pots, and perform domestic labor. They also stressed the importance of celibacy until the girls had completed rites of initiation and became adults. One older woman described the initiation schooling like this:

The old woman taught the girl how to sleep with her husband, what she should do when he came to her. “Since you are going to sleep with your husband, you must demonstrate your love for him. You must also help him to know how to make love with you. You have to gyrate your hips. Later, you must take a small cloth and wipe his penis, wash his feet, and stretch his toes and fingers. Then you rise and give thanks by clapping your hands and bending your knees up and down three times.”68

Once the Chikunda girls had completed puberty school, they went to the home of an elderly woman, where they pounded corn and performed other domestic chores. It was here that their faces were cut with makaju. Later, the young women returned to have additional incisions made on their necks, breasts, and thighs, which enhanced their beauty and sexuality.69

The very different education that boys and girls received underscores the inextricable relationship between gender and Chikunda ethnicity. Being Chikunda demanded discipline, self-sacrifice, and courage of men and domestic labor of women. This conclusion is not meant to minimize disputes within Chikunda house-
holds and communities: women may well have argued for a different division of labor. But the contrasting masculine and feminine roles taught at initiation schools does highlight how Chikunda men idealized their ethnicity by concretizing gender roles. As military men and adventurers on untamed frontiers, Chikunda men proved their virtue through their courage and daring.

Notwithstanding their ability to acquire a modicum of prestige and wealth, one fact remained unchanged—the Chikunda were slaves, unable to choose their own place of residence or dispose of their property. Moreover, they lived and worked in a highly regimented labor regime. Despite these constraints, there is ample evidence that the Chikunda sought to minimize prazeiros’ control over their lives, while expanding their limited autonomy and access to scarce resources. Recur-

67 Interview with Chale Lupia.

68 Interview with Vena Dixon et al., Bawa (Mozambique), 20 Sept. 1997.

ring complaints from Portuguese slaveholders testify that the Chikunda often withheld taxes, ivory, and trade goods. Estate owners brutally punished slaves whom they considered to be disloyal or disobedient. Episodic, spectacular displays of violence were an essential feature of slave discipline and control. The historian Malyn Newitt records that “flogging with a chicote—a hippopotamus hide whip—was popular among the Portuguese senhores as well as the more subtle torture of the palmatoria—a sort of bastinado of the hands. The stocks were used and for serious offences spectacular executions were carried out, the guilty one being blown from the mouth of a cannon.”

The well-armed Chikunda, however, were anything but pliable instruments in the hands of their masters. The prazeiros were terrified that the slave soldiers would rebel. They had good reason to worry. Throughout the eighteenth century, Chikunda soldiers regularly rebelled against owners who were perceived as ungenerous or needlessly cruel. According to one eighteenth-century settler, “The kaffir slaves live almost completely disobedient to their masters, so that if these do not have any business or any goods in their house, they despise them and do not recognize their bondage.” Another contemporary observer noted, “A prazeiro cannot give a single negro of the slave regiment away without the others all mutinying.” Some Chikunda were prepared to defend their privileged position on the prazos.

Other soldiers, when faced with a particularly rapacious or abusive master, chose to run away. By the middle of the eighteenth century the problem of slave flight was serious enough that the estate-holders began a series of military campaigns to punish Chewa and Manganja chiefs who provided sanctuary to runaways. Other runaway slaves established communities in the hinterland. They posed a serious challenge to the Portuguese, both because they offered refuge


71 Newitt, Portuguese Settlement, 190.

72 A.H.U., Moç., Cx. 3, Fr. Fernando Jesús, M.A., 1 April 1752; Cx. 16, D. Diego António de Barros Sotto Mayor, 1 August 1780; A.H.U., Moç., Cx. 31, Manuel Ribeira de Sousa, 7 January 1795; A.H.U., Moç., Cx. 42, João Felipe de Carvalho, 28 May 1803; A.H.U., Moç., Códice 1452, João Bonifácio Alves da Sa to Francisco Henrique Ferrão, 10 January 1827.

73 Quoted in Newitt, Portuguese Settlement, 193.

74 A.H.U., Moç., Cx. 3, Padre Fernando Jesús Maria, 13 April 1752.

75 A.H.U., Moç., Cx. 5, António Martins, undated; A.H.U., Moç., Cx. 5, António Gomes Machão, 1 December 1756; A.H.U., Moç., Códice 1314, fol. 34, D. Manoel António de Almeida to Francisco de Mello de Castro, 9 July 1757; Newitt, Portuguese Settlement, 201.

76 National Archives of Zimbabwe (N.A.Z.), LII/I/1, David Livingstone to Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs, 9 September 1858; Francisco Raimundo Moraes Pereira, Journey Made Overland from Quelimane to Angoche in 1752, M.D.D. Newitt, trans. and ed. (Salisbury, 1965), 27.
to other slaves and because they had the military capacity to threaten outlying prazos. By 1806, an official census of the prazos listed almost half of the twenty thousand slave soldiers as “missing”. The size of slave armies was correspondingly reduced. Early in the nineteenth century, the largest estates could only muster a thousand soldiers, while smaller estates had armies a fraction of that size.

The always-volatile relationship between the Chikunda and the prazeiros came to a head in the first half of the nineteenth century. Made greedy by the ever-increasing demand for slaves from Brazilian and Cuban sugar plantations, shortsighted prazeiros began selling both peasants and Chikunda. Their violation of the time-honored practice forbidding prazeiros from selling the Chikunda or their family members precipitated wide-scale insurrections and flight. This political instability, combined with recurring droughts and other natural disasters, led to a dramatic decline in the agricultural production of the estates. Successive invasions by the Barue and Nguni in the second quarter of the century sealed the fate of the prazo system. During the 1830s, invading Nguni forces occupied 28 of the 46 legally functioning prazos. By the middle of the nineteenth century most of the prazos were in disarray. One official claimed that the “estates are abandoned as a result of the prazeiros’ blind lust for profits.” The rapid disintegration of the prazos left thousands of Chikunda unattached. Lisbon’s 1858 abolition decree set the remainder free over the ensuing two decades.

The prazos had been the crucible of Chikunda identity. Slave soldiers became Chikunda in order to dignify their lives of danger and to differentiate themselves from peasants. Their shared sense of consciousness grew out of their shared political and economic position, and was idealized in their dress, their language, and their unifying rituals and traditions.

The collapse of the prazos compelled Chikunda, no longer legally bound as slaves, to rethink their identity. Some left their military lives behind, fleeing the prazos and returning to their homelands to become peasants. In doing so, they reaffirmed their social origins, reinvigorating their links with the ethnic communities they had left behind. Other freed slaves shed their Chikunda past, blending in with

77 Truão, Estatísticas, 10; Botelho, Memória, 266; David and Charles Livingstone, Narrative of an Expedition to the Zambesi and Its Tributaries (London, 1865), 37; F. C. de Lacerda e Almeida, Travessia de África (Lisbon, 1938), 106.

78 Truão, Estatísticas, 20.


80 A.H.U., Códice 1315, fol. 37, Francisco Henriques Ferrão to Comandante de Tete, 10 December 1829; A.H.U. Moç., Maço 8, Jozé Miguel de Brito, 18 July 1830.

81 Quoted in Isaacman, Mozambique, 116, n. 7.
the local Sena, Tawara, and Tonga population. Given the long-standing animosity toward the Chikunda among local peasants, the decision to obliterate their soldierly identity made good sense. Still others became freelance elephant hunters, or worked as porters, hunters, or canoe men in the service of the Portuguese merchant community. Many of the workers living in the Tete region ultimately took on a new identity, Nyungwe. These shifting identities underscore the fact that, then as now, ethnicities are made and remade in changing political, social and economic contexts.82

Chikunda Conquest States

Most of the freed slaves were incorporated into new Chikunda states in the wake of the prazos' collapse. The nineteenth century was a time of political instability throughout eastern and southern Africa. The social unrest caused by the continuing slave trade, combined with recurring ecological crises and massive migrations of people, undermined older polities and opened up opportunities for political entrepreneurs. It was in this political context that Chikunda ex-slaves, eager to exercise the skills of hunting and fighting learned on the prazos, established slave-trading conquest states to the north of the Zambezi. José Rosário de Andrade, more commonly known by his African name of Kanyemba (“the ferocious”), was perhaps the most successful of the warlords who dominated the Zambezi interior (see Map 2).83 Son of a Tande chief and a Goan mother, Kanyemba began forming a private army in Tete in the 1870s. Many of the enlistees were Chikunda ex-slaves, some elephant hunters, all of them young and impoverished males.84 Joining Kanyemba offered them an opportunity to use their military skills for profit. Kanyemba and his followers settled in the elephant-rich region of Bawa, some 200 kilometers east of the trading center at Tete. Over the next quarter-century, the well-armed Chikunda ravaged a vast area of South Central Africa.85 Frederick Selous observed that Kanyemba’s forces were “constantly making raids upon any people in the [interior] who have anything to be taken.”86 Elders throughout the region made a similar point:

82 For an exploration of these shifting Chikunda identities, see Allen and Barbara Isaacman, *Slavery and Beyond.*

83 For a discussion of these warlords see Newitt, *Portuguese Settlement,* 295–311.

84 Interview with Mafioso Sejunga, Bawa (Mozambique), 21 Sept. 1997.


86 Selous, *Hunter’s Wandering,* 298.
Approximate boundaries of three Chikunda conquest states

- Matakenya
- Carazimamba
- Kanyemba
- Prazo zone

Direction of Chikunda slave raiding

Map 2  Chikunda Conquest States, ca. 1880
Kanyemba never traded freely with the local peoples for slaves. He forced them to sell slaves. If they refused he ordered his Chikunda warriors to raid the villages, kill all the elderly men and bring the young men and women back to his stockade. Because of Kanyemba’s raids people on both sides [of the Zambezi River] the Tande, Tonga and the Nsenga of Mbuluma lived in fear.87

By the 1880s, the warlord had forged a powerful conquest state that was the equal of any in South Central Africa. His state was modeled on the prazos, which were for Kanyemba a template of political and military organization. One observer estimated that Kanyemba had 10,000 Chikunda soldiers under arms.88 Chikunda regiments were billeted in strategic locations along the borders, near the principal population centers, and at the capital. Kanyemba’s fortified village at Chipera housed several hundred Chikunda warriors, had large warehouses with arms and ammunition, and even contained a jail for slaves awaiting export to the coast.89 Chikunda agents collected taxes from peasants, transmitted orders from Kanyemba, and enforced the warlords’ monopoly on commerce. These were all the same types of activities performed by the chuanga and his Chikunda regiment centuries earlier on the prazos of the lower Zambezi.

The parallels between Kanyemba’s conquest state and the prazos highlights how deeply their shared history shaped the political imagination of the Chikunda. At Bawa and in other nineteenth-century conquest states, ex-slave soldiers used the markers of communal identity forged on the prazos to found a self-reproducing Chikunda ethnicity. The core group of ex-slaves brought a shared set of practices and rituals to Bawa. These practices distinguished the Chikunda immigrants from the new recruits and the local, subject population. Slaves and others who joined Kanyemba’s polity adopted these markers of Chikunda identity. This process of cultural integration was easiest for the female captives whom Kanyemba distributed throughout the ranks of his military. Because most of his followers had come to Bawa without wives,90 spouses were essential to the long-term survival of the Chikunda enclave. Whatever their origin, these women always went to live in their husband’s village. If still young, they underwent Chikunda rites of initiation in which the makaju was tattooed on their faces and their front teeth were filed.91 Cut off from their natal societies and incorporated into a new set of social networks, over

87 Interview with Sunda Mwanza, Feira (Zambia), 2 August 1974.
88 W. Montagu-Kerr, The Far Interior (Boston, 1886), 46.
89 Interview with Tiyago Matega; A.H.M., Fundo do Século XIX, Governo Geral, Cx. 11, Theodório Francisco Diaz to Goverador de Tete, undated.
91 Interviews with Mafioso Sejunga; Vena Dixon et al.
time they downplayed their former diverse identities and became Chikunda. Their children were always brought up as Chikunda. The offspring of free women who married Chikunda also adopted their father’s ethnic identity. “My mother was Nsenga,” recalled Vena Dixon, “but I am Chikunda because my father was Chikunda.”

Because of the patrilineal practices of the Chikunda, the assimilation of male slaves married to Chikunda women was more problematic. Older male captives often retained the identity they brought with them. Other men, immersed in a new world, gradually became Chikunda. Emma Sinturarai described the ethnicity of her male relatives in this way:

My father’s father was a Lamba from far away. He was sold to Kanyemba’s clan Abreu. I am a Chikunda. My grandfather was the only one who was a Lamba. He settled here and married and had children. When my grandfather came here, he stopped speaking his own language and started speaking Chikunda. My father was born here and became a Chikunda and so are all his children.

Although the details of their fathers’ autobiographies varied, one constant remained—the offspring of mixed marriages between strangers and Chikunda women adopted their mother’s ethnic identity. That children of Chikunda mothers regularly became Chikunda—ignoring the ethnicity of the father—highlights the radically incorporative nature of Chikunda identity. Becoming Chikunda was a way that outsiders, women, and children identified themselves as loyalists of the warlord’s conquest state. Initiation practices among the ex-slaves in Zimbabwe seem to have stressed the open quality of Chikunda ethnicity. As Willie Payson remembered:

The elders taught the children at the initiation school what it means to be Chikunda—that we are Chikunda and that Chikunda act in certain ways. They taught them the culture of being Chikunda, the story of how they came to be Chikunda, how the Chikunda came from the other side [Tete] and conquered the people here, and how the many tribes whom they defeated became Chikunda. They stressed how the Tande, Tawara, Tonga, and Nsenga were initially not Chikunda, but after they were conquered they all came to call themselves Chikunda. These ideas and a sense of pride in being Chikunda were passed on from father to sons and when the fathers died and

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92 Interview with Vena Dixon et al.
93 Interview with Carlos Chicandari
their sons grew up, the latter passed on to their sons a pride in being Chikunda.95

Initiation schools encouraged diverse groups of slaves, women, and children to think of themselves as Chikunda. As they learned to be Chikunda, outsiders also learned a Chikunda dialect that was different from the local Shona languages. This linguistic difference was evident even in the twentieth century. As one villager complained in 1917, "They were Achikunda—I knew by the way that they spoke."96 In appearance, too, Kanyemba’s Chikunda were easily distinguished from both the subject populations and the recent conscripts. Whereas the latter dressed in a locally woven bark-cloth, Chikunda men were clad in imported calico cloth that they draped about their waists. Their wives also wore calico.97 Dress marked Chikunda identity. So did the makaju, with which slaves and others who were initiated as Chikunda were tattooed. Willie Payson stressed that the makaju set boundaries between Kanyemba’s partisans and Atande peasants:

What distinguished our Chikunda ancestors from the Atande was the makaju. The makaju said that a person was Chikunda. Our ancestors had three marks—one on their foreheads and one on each cheek. The makaju was like a uniform of a soldier. It signified that the person was a warrior. When Kanyemba came with his soldiers they had the makaju on their faces.98

There was more than appearance at stake here. Through facial tattoos, initiation schooling, and language instruction, ex-slaves made newcomers Chikunda. Being Chikunda had once been a means by which military slaves on the prazos distinguished themselves from peasants, and dignified their dangerous work. Under Kanyemba and other warlords, the marks of slaves’ identity became a basis for political unification. Ex-slaves used their known, shared vocabulary of identity in order to incorporate strange women, men, and children. At Bawa, in other words, ex-slaves enlarged Chikunda identity in order to create and consolidate an ethnicity, a shared political community.

The final stage in the transformation of the Chikunda from descendants of slave soldiers to ethnic group was Kanyemba’s death and reinvention as an mhondoro. Mhondoro are guardians of the land, spirits in whom the lives of dead chiefs and rulers continue. When properly propitiated, they bring rain and health to their descendants. Chikunda remember that Kanyemba took special medicines to ensure

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95 Interview with Willie Payson et al., Bawa (Mozambique), 27 Sept. 1997.
97 Interview with Diamond Mpande.
98 Interview with Willie Payson et al.
that, after his death, he would be transformed into a mhondoro. He died in the last years of the nineteenth century. After his death, a young boy from Chipoto named Alimação manifested Kanyemba's spirit. The young boy remained Kanyemba's medium for many years, until he was "an elderly man who used a walking stick." After Alimação passed away, Kanyemba's spirit found refuge in a lion and, some time thereafter, entered the body of Joaquina. After she was recognized as Kanyemba's earthly medium, she settled in his village at Bawa and lived there at least until 1997.

With their own mhondoro, the Chikunda gained ritual security over their new homeland. As an mhondoro, Kanyemba had the power to bring the rain, ensure the fertility of the land, aid the hunters, and protect the warriors. Chikunda venerated him as a means of ensuring prosperity:

After our ancestors gathered the crops they brewed beer and brought it to him. They then danced and thanked him for the good harvest. Before hunters [and soldiers] left, they informed Kanyemba's spirit and asked Kanyemba to protect them in the bush and ensure a good hunt. If they failed to do so, they would not be successful. When they returned they immediately brought meat to Kanyemba.

In the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, Chikunda identity was crafted by military slaves on the prazos. In later times, being Chikunda came to mean different things to different groups of slaves and their descendants. By the late nineteenth century, some ex-slaves had expanded the markers of their identity to found a Chikunda ethnicity. Chikunda ethnicity was for Kanyemba and his partisans a strategy of incorporation, a way of integrating slaves, women, and others as members of a cohesive citizenry. Imagining themselves as a Chikunda people, children of common ancestors and followers of shared mhondoro, was also a way for ex-slaves to gain ritual security over the land.

Kanyemba’s state did not survive colonization. In 1884–85, the Congress of Berlin decreed that European states wishing to establish colonial empires in Africa had to demonstrate effective occupation of the regions they claimed. Worried about reports that Kanyemba and other Chikunda warlords were secretly negotiating with the British, the Portuguese began a lengthy military campaign to subjugate them in

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99 Interviews with Diamond Mpande and Willie Payson; Carlos Chicandari; Mafioso Sejunga; António Gregório, Cambera Island (Mozambique), 22 Sept. 1997.
100 Interview with Carlos Chicandari.
101 Ibid.
the 1890s. Chikunda loyalists fought hard, but by 1903, the bulk of the Chikunda armies had been forced to surrender.102

Despite the defeat of the conquest states, Chikunda identity was preserved and reproduced in remote communities at the confluence of the Zambezi and Luangwa rivers. There, the descendants of Kanyemba and several other warlords became colonial chiefs, sanctioned by British and Portuguese authorities. To this day, many descendants of the ex-slaves live in Chikunda communities in the backwater regions along the Mozambican-Zambian-Zimbabwe frontier. Though disarmed long ago, they still sing the praise of the great warrior hunters, recall in rich detail the exploits and abuses of their warlord chiefs, and greet each other with the traditional military salutes. They take pride in the fact that “Chikunda meant victors.”