

# "Slavery and Beyond: The Making of Men and Chikunda Ethnic Identities in the Unstable World of South Central Africa, 1750-1920"

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The book goes back to 1968 when he was living in Zambizi Valley, Mozambique. 'Prazo' system, Portuguese states in the interior. We came across Chikundas (captives) retainers of Portuguese state holders. No military presence in interior, settlers had to rely on slaves to control peasants, collect taxes, etc. Common wisdom was that Prazos were destroyed, the slaves themselves were absorbed into local societies by 1968. Work was difficult because Mozambique was a victim of South African destabilization, an intense war zone. By 1996, men in this remote area would engage in 'Kuquenga' (sp?), a military salute that was an important social marker distinguishing the Chikunda men from the neighboring people. There the old slave communities had flooded into this interior and had reproduced their community. How did these descendents of slaves maintained and reproduced the Chikunda identity that scholars had ignored? How to reconstruct their past so that they didn't live in the shadows of history anymore? In this context (1996), we realized that we had stumbled across this large group (about 40,000 people) of descendents of ex-slaves from the 17th and 18th century who still maintained their names, called Chikunda.

The Chikunda were recruited from 18 different ethnic groups. Their role was as military slaves, their purpose was to control the peasants, serve as hunters and in trade networks. Overtime, they forged a domain of commonality. In 1860, many of the slaves rose up and drove the state holders out of their land. Destruction of Prazo system meant that they were free, but also created many political and economic challenges. Not all free slaves stayed in the area around the Zambizi River. Many of them went into the more remote interior to create a better life.

Is the term 'slave' adequate analytically to convey the historical experience of the Chikunda? Are they really slaves? There's a great deal of skepticism about the notion that they are slaves. What makes Chikundas unique is that they were slaves of the state and also the military arm of settlers.

*Ethnic Identity: Major debate in African Studies in how we understand ethnicity.*

## Prevailing theories:

1. Identities are inherited, transmitted over time and space.
2. Identities (the 'we' and 'they') are created in border between different people.
3. They were often invented traditions - Colonial regime invented them to drive, rule and promote colonial agenda. Fictions of colonialism.

We argue that identities were developed inside of African communities, not at boundaries or from colonial regimes. Africans had the capacity to elaborate own identity; they are reconfigured over time. Portuguese created category 'Chikunda', but it also true and more relevant that it was through practice that Chikunda filled this category with social meaning. They were the greatest elephant hunters, the bravest warriors in the region.

During this moment when they fled into interior, they developed a common language from 18 others including Portuguese. Enabled young to work in world of elders. Identities are not fixed; they change.

Chikunda work: dangerous, physically demanding, specialized skill, ability to move beyond cultural and spatial frontiers. What is defined as work? What is valued as work? Linked to gender ideology. Chikunda working for the Portuguese or by themselves often do the same things in similar contexts and conditions (notion of post-emancipated society).

The study of chikunda men requires the study of chikunda women. It requires us to look at inequities and power relations within men and women and between male affinity groups. There was a correlation between sexual power, male control of women's bodies and elephant hunting.

Chikunda were part of a larger phenomenon called "Trans-frontier communities". In course of human history, socially oppressed people have often fled beyond frontiers of societies to crate a new life, to have a new chance.

#### Problems with oral history:

1. Accounts are partial, so we try to get around it by getting broad range of interviews.
2. Individuals in social groups have limited memory. Accounts tend to become more generalized, normative.
3. Death of elders - details get lost.
4. Relocation weakens connection with the past. Divorce from social context in which it was produced.
5. Chikunda elders disregarded disturbing parts of their past. This is not unique, we choose to remember something and the history is not as analytical.

It's not that all sources are invalid, quite the contrary, but historians have to be very attentive specially if we want to liberate the past. For all the problems of interpretation, I have enormous confidence in the power of Chikunda oral history and their neighbors. Oral testimonies require careful and critical reading; the question is "how well we as historians do it?"