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Migration, Displacement and Belonging: A History of the Tembo Mvura People, Northern Zimbabwe

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Abstract: Debates on who arrived in Kanyemba first have been central in many aspects of everyday life in the Kanyemba community. This study examines the history of the Tembo Mvura people in northern Zimbabwe, from the pre-colonial period to 1980. They have been subject to displacement, migration, and resettlement due to the actions of Portuguese prazeros and the Chikundas, who resided in the valley. This ethnographical paper uses oral histories and archival documents to provide an understanding of the history of the Tembo Mvura. Oral histories collected through interviews with community members provide valuable insight into the community's experiences and perspectives. Archival documents from the colonial period were used to gain a deeper understanding of the political and social context of the time and how the Tembo Mvura people were affected. The study argues that the Tembo Mvura arrived first in Kanyemba, but their voices have not been heard in discourses of belonging and autochthony. The study challenges the Chikunda trajectory and identity stereotypes about the community that have been perpetuated as historical truths. This study reinserts the Tembo Mvura history into the historical trajectory of the Kanyemba area, addressing topical subjects and themes of belonging, identity, migration, and settlement.

Keywords: Tembo Mvura; settlement; origins; Kanyemba; belonging

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Introduction

During a field visit to Mariga village in Kanyemba, northern Zimbabwe, my van became stuck in the sandy bed of the Mwanza-mutanda River. While I waited for assistance from acquaintances who knew about my arrival, numerous locals and unfamiliar faces offered their help to extricate my vehicle from the sand. As we dug, jacked, and pushed the van together, conversations naturally arose. Among the topics discussed was the longstanding and complex relationship between the Tembo Mvura and the Chikunda communities in Kanyemba. One of the men, Kacha (personal communication, 5 August 2017), offered an interesting observation: "Our people (Tembo Mvura) came first, but they (Chikunda) were many and clever; hence, they claimed the area as theirs." This casual remark made during an everyday moment highlights contests over history, identity, and belonging that have shaped the social fabric of the ward. This paper originated from this encounter. The conversation prompted an inquiry into the silenced past and contested presence

of communities whose histories are largely absent from dominant narratives. This paper explores the historical experiences of the Tembo Mvura or the Doma people, derogatorily referred to as the two-toed people (see Barritt(Barritt 1979, July)79; Nicholas, 1969), by tracing their migratory trajectories, modes of livelihood, encounters with colonial and postcolonial power, and ongoing struggles for recognition and belonging. Although marginalisation emerged as a central theme in many of the field conversations, this paper focuses on the historical narrative of the Tembo Mvura, whose story remains largely obscured in the broader historiography of the Zambezi Valley.

Historically, narratives of Kanyemba have been dominated by the Chikunda, a powerful and mobile, militarised group closely associated with the Portuguese during the pre-colonial economy. Since the Chikunda established themselves in the Zambezi Valley region, they have occupied positions of political authority, which has allowed them to shape and control both oral and written histories. As a result, the Tembo Mvura's voices have often been marginalised or excluded altogether. The Chikunda people assert they came to Kanyemba first; hence, their leader named the area after himself and gave himself power (chieftaincy). The Chikunda people's history in the Zambezi Valley is well-documented (see Isaacman et al. 1999; Isaacman, 1972), resulting in their narratives often overshadowing the Tembo Mvura. This paper does not aim to discredit the Chikunda's historical narrative. Instead, it seeks to reassert the Tembo Mvura into the history of northern Zimbabwe by portraying their stories of migration, displacement and belonging. The intertwined histories of the Chikunda and the Tembo Mvura stretch back to the era of the Portuguese *prazos* in the Zambezi Valley. When the Portuguese arrived in the Zambezi Valley, they created and developed a polity of the Chikunda (Isaacman, 1972). The Chikunda emerged as a militarised, well-armed auxiliary force tasked with defending Portuguese plantations, collecting tribute, and enforcing prazeiro rule (Isaacman et al. 1999:3). In this context, local agricultural and hunter-gatherer communities, including the Tembo Mvura, viewed the Chikunda as agents of the plantation exploitation system. The Chikunda considered themselves part of the Portuguese elite and treated their African counterparts as the 'other', inferior grouping (seeIsaacman et al. (1999) Isaacman et al. (1999) . The end of the prazo system did not end this binary relationship. Today, the effects of this historical subordination are still evident. The Tembo Mvura continue to struggle for recognition in both formal governance structures and local historical narratives. This study, therefore, offers an alternative historical lens that highlights the Tembo Mvura's perspective, interrogating how their belonging is constructed, contested, and denied.

Territorial belonging discourse links to the chronology of settlement and the assertion of ownership within a given area. This is evident in Kanyemba, where narratives of autochthony reveal a contestation between the Tembo Mvura and Chikunda, two distinct groups. Isaacman and Peterson (2003) posit that the Chikunda were the initial settlers in the region. This is because the authors focused on the history of the Chikunda in the Zambezi Valley rather than the small groups in the area. However, this paper introduces an alternative perspective, as narrated by the Tembo Mvura. While acknowledging their strong affiliations with the Chikunda, the Tembo Mvura assert their precedence in settlement, challenging prevailing accounts of historical arrival and territorial ownership.

Theoretical underpinnings: Belonging

The question of who 'does not belong' is always shifting, especially as societies undergo changes in their ethnic, cultural, and religious landscapes. This study draws on a growing body of scholarship to explore the multifaceted and evolving nature of belonging, which intersects with concepts of home, identity, memory, and community (Halse, 2018; Yuval-Davis, 2006; Koot et al. 2019; Ng'weno and Aloo (2019)Ng'weno and Aloo (2019). Belonging has emerged as a critical lens within the social sciences to analyse the complexities of inclusion and exclusion, particularly in African contexts where contested notions of citizenship and autochthony are prominent (Nyamnjoh, 2005; Geschiere, 2009). Belonging extends to individuals, social groups, solidarities, collectivities, and broader societies within historical contexts (Halse, 2018). As Yuval-Davis (2011:10) notes, 'the politics of belonging comprises specific political projects aimed at constructing belonging in particular ways to particular collectivities that are, at least partly, exclusionary.' Tomaney (2015:509) emphasises that belonging has both emotional and spatial dimensions, offering insight into the significance of communal attachments and rootedness. Halse (2018:12–16) similarly stresses that belonging functions as both theory and practice, revealing how individuals and groups experience inclusion, marginalisation, and claims to place. The concept extends beyond individual identity to encompass collective affiliations, cultural practices, and historical narratives.

In the African context, exclusionary discourses that define who is deemed an insider versus an outsider often shape belonging. Nyamnjoh (2005:18) observes that 'in Africa, as elsewhere, there is a growing obsession with belonging, along with new questions concerning conventional assumptions about nationality and citizenship'. These dynamics are particularly acute in postcolonial states where legal status and cultural belonging do not always align (Ng'weno and Aloo (2019)). Mujere 2011(2011) argues that in resettled communities in Zimbabwe, claims to belonging are often negotiated through land, graves, and religious affiliation, which together create a framework of autochthony and spiritual legitimacy. Similarly, Matanzima and Saidi (2020) show that in the Zambezi Valley, ethnic groups such as the BaTonga and Shangwe continue to assert belonging through symbolic and ancestral connections to the landscape, including place names and oral histories. This paper engages with the debates on belonging through the case of the Tembo Mvura, challenging dominant framings that position them as perpetual outsiders. The arguments advanced in this paper about the Tembo Mvura align with Yuval-Davis' (2006) conceptualisation of belonging as a multidimensional process that encompasses not only emotional attachment and identification but also claims of autochthony. As Koot et al. (2019:347) put it, 'to belong is to have a sense of connection; it implies familiarity, comfort and ease, alongside feelings of inclusion, acceptance and safety.'

Methodology

This paper uses oral history (testimonies), archives and secondary sources to recollect the history of the Tembo Mvura. The study draws on existing archival material. The archival material on the history of Kanyemba has scant details on the Tembo Mvura people. Academic and non-academic scholars have written about the people but have not dwelt on their histories, struggles and resistance. While conversing with existing archival material, the study extends the conversation and uncovers new layers of local narratives on the people's origins, movement, and settlement through in-depth interviews. This paper makes use of 34 interviews: 24 from Tembo Mvura and 10 from non-Tembo Mvura respondents. 24 interviews were conducted with members of the Tembo Mvura community. Of these, 14 are cited directly in the analysis, though all interviews contributed meaningfully by providing contextual depth and interpretive clarity. The interviews served as a platform for the Tembo Mvura to articulate their history, particularly regarding their origins, migration, and evolving sense of belonging. Two Tembo Mvura individuals, Prugia Chiyambo (in her late 90s at the time of the interview) and Saini (whose national identity card recorded his birth year as 1920), emerged as central informants. Their accounts provided rich, detailed narratives that anchored the broader oral history. To address the interpretive and evidentiary challenges posed by oral sources, the research incorporated 10 interviews with non-Tembo Mvura individuals, including members of the Chikunda and KoreKore communities. Of these, 6 are cited in the analysis. These external perspectives helped document internal variations, contestations, and broader regional dynamics. Rather than privileging a single voice, the study sought to capture a collective memory shaped by multiple narrators. In line with oral historians like Vansina (1985:119), who emphasised the need for internal criticism when working with oral traditions, and Portelli (2016:51–53), who underscored the interpretive nature of memory, this paper approaches oral history to understand how communities construct and communicate their pasts. Byrskog (2022) offers a related perspective in his study of gospel traditions, placing them within the oral cultures of the ancient Greek, Roman, and early Christian worlds. He argues that eyewitness testimony, passed down through discipleship and oral performance, shaped the interplay between historically grounded events and culturally mediated meaning in these narratives.

This study employed snowball sampling, also known as chain-referral sampling, as the method for identifying and selecting the interviewees. Snowball sampling is a widely used non-probability sampling technique in qualitative research, particularly effective when working with hard-to-reach or socially closed populations (Dusek et al. (2015))(Dusek et al. 2015). The approach involves asking initial participants to refer the researcher to others who may possess relevant knowledge or experience. As Naderifar et al. (2017:2) note, this method is especially valuable when studying communities where potential respondents are difficult to access through formal channels. Snowball sampling was particularly appropriate in Mariga and Chiramba, the primary settlements of the Tembo Mvura, where social and cultural dynamics pose significant challenges to outsider engagement. The Tembo Mvura are socially reticent and have a general hesitancy to share historical knowledge with strangers; therefore, it was pertinent to build trust through relational referrals. Snowball sampling enabled access to community members who might otherwise have declined participation, and it helped identify knowledge-holders who were not always in formal leadership roles but were recognised within the community as custodians of the oral tradition.

The sampling strategy extended beyond the Tembo Mvura to include interviews with members of the neighbouring Chikunda community. Incorporating Chikunda voices helped situate the Tembo Mvura's narratives within a broader regional context, highlighting intergroup dynamics, including myths, stereotypes, and misconceptions that shape the social memory of the Tembo Mvura. Each interview lasted an average of 45 min. The researcher strictly observed all ethical protocols. The researcher briefed participants on the research goals, their right to withdraw, and how their data would be used. On finalising this, they provided verbal informed consent before each interview. In keeping with ethical practices in qualitative and oral history research, pseudonyms were used to protect participant identity, and data were anonymised during transcription and analysis. Some interviewees consented to audio recording, while others preferred not to be recorded. Their preferences were respected.

In addition, the study used a life history approach, especially with the elderly members of the Tembo Mvura community, to provide insights into socio-economic and political continuities and discontinuities. Life history is a qualitative research method that involves collecting and analysing personal narratives to understand how individuals experience, interpret, and give meaning to events over time within broader historical, cultural, and social contexts (Atkinson, 2002; Goodson, 2013). The aim is to document personal experiences and situate them within larger social and historical processes (Chamberlayne et al., 2000; Goodson & Sikes, 2001). Life histories are particularly effective in research involving marginalised or displaced groups, where official records are sparse or silence alternative perspectives. Recent scholarship underscores the value of life history methods in researching marginalised or underrepresented communities. For example, Marks (2020:201–211) demonstrates that when applied with care and reflexivity, the life history approach opens new avenues for understanding how marginalised groups articulate identity, memory, and belonging across generations.

The researcher remained cognisant of the epistemological challenges posed by the data sources, oral history, life history, and archival documents. Oral and life history narratives are invaluable for accessing personal and communal memory, yet they raise concerns related to subjectivity, selective recall, and whose truth prevails (Abrams, 2016). In addition, colonial archives, mostly authored by non-local agents, exhibit their own power-laden biases. These documents from colonial governance frameworks frequently omit or misrepresent indigenous viewpoints (Stoler, 2002; Mbembe, 2002). Archives may obscure the voices of marginalised groups such as the Tembo Mvura, privileging those aligned with colonial authority. To address these limitations, the study employed methodological triangulation, integrating oral accounts from Tembo Mvura elders, corroborating voices from Chikunda interlocutors, and archival and secondary records. Triangulation strengthens the credibility, richness, and analytical rigour of qualitative studies by mitigating source-specific biases (Creswell & Poth, 2023).

Portuguese-Chikunda connection

Understanding the history of the Tembo Mvura requires a close examination of their interactions with the Chikunda, militia groups operating across the Zambezi Valley, whose presence, though not uniform, played a key role in shaping territorial politics and spiritual geographies. These were not a single cohesive entity, but rather multiple formations of armed retainers tied to different leaders. This interaction is central to the question of belonging in Kanyemba, as it reveals competing claims over land and historical legitimacy. While the Chikunda gained power through their association with Portuguese colonial structures and later through regional dominance under leaders like Chikwasha and Kanyemba, the Tembo Mvura maintained a parallel history of migration, spiritual independence, and resistance to assimilation. The tension between these two historical paths continues to influence contemporary claims to belonging, with spiritual allegiances, oral traditions, and ancestral legitimacy all becoming key areas of contest. This section contextualises these dynamics by tracing the histories of the Chikunda and Tembo Mvura.

In the seventeenth century, the Portuguese crown created a land tenure system called *prazos da coroa*, which equipped Portuguese nationals to establish African plantations (Isaacman 2000). The plantation system impacted the economic, social and political status of the communities near the plantations. The plantation system had a rigid social hierarchy of leaders (Portuguese). It comprised the slave army, often referred to as *Achicunda* (Chikunda) and the labourers (Isaacman, 2000; Marizane, 2016; Mudenge, 1988). The plantation system led to the rise of the Chikunda groups, which continued even after the demise of the plantations and into the colonial period. The plantations were famous for more than a century; however, towards the nineteenth century, the system began to decline, and the slave, gold, and ivory trade dominated the Zambezi Valley economy (Isaacman, 1972). The ban on the slave trade led to disorder in the plantations, and thousands of slaves became free. Formerly enslaved people joined regiments as hunters and were first and foremost loyal to their leader (for

example, Chikwasha, Kanyemba, Bonga), popularly referred to as *Chikunda* (Isaacman, 1972; Newitt, 1995; Selous, 1970). The ex-slaves came to be called Chikunda, hunted by their master, and were famous for their brutality.

The Chikunda had developed a social organisation and livelihood strategy as warriors, mercenaries, and traders, often operating as autonomous groups under strong leaders (Isaacman & Rosenthal, 1988). In the Zambezi Valley, they occupied a unique position within the Portuguese military and trading systems while maintaining ties with African polities. Their integration into local societies often manifested through marriage alliances, trade networks, and political patronage (Isaacman, 1972). The Chikunda leaders' (for example, eg Chikwasha, Kanyemba, and Manuel António de Sousa, see Newitt, 1995) political and military strength was facilitated by their mixed lineage and strategic marriages. This mixed lineage allowed them to navigate both Portuguese colonial authority and African political networks with relative ease (Isaacman & Isaacman, 1976; Newitt, 1995). In the 1850s, Emmanuel José Anselmo de Santana, popularly known as Chikwasha, allied with the Nsenga insurgent chief Chirungunduwi to assassinate Mburuma Nyanzokola (Isaacman, 2000; Livingstone and Livingstone (1865)Livingstone and Livingstone, 1865). Chirungunduwi, upon seizing power, rewarded Chikwasha with land extending into present-day Zambia. It was during this period that the Tembo Mvura, migrating from Nyungwe after leaving Songo (Mozambique), fled from the territory now controlled by Chikwasha. According to Saini (pers. comm., 17 August 2017), Tembo Mvura oral traditions describe their escape from capture by Chikwasha's Chikunda, attributing their evasion to familiarity with the terrain.

The Tembo Mvura fled from Chikwasha before the assassination of Mburuma Nyanzokola on behalf of Chirungunduwi, suggesting that the Tembo Mvura were present in the area before Chikwasha owned any land. Despite his lack of land ownership, Chikwasha was already a renowned slave and elephant hunter by the period between 1850 and 1855. He became politically powerful after acquiring land from Mburuma Nyanzokola. An account by Livingstone & Livingstone (1865) attest to Chikwasha's substantial power through the acquisition of ivory. Livingstone could not purchase canoes because 'a native Portuguese called Jose Anselmo de Santanna (Chikwasha) had purchased great quantities of ivory… and ten large canoes to carry it' (Schapera, 1963:61). The narratives stemming from the Tembo Mvura, as shall be shown, imply that their flight from Chikwasha occurred before 1860.

After Chikwasha died in 1868, his son Mpasu briefly succeeded him before being overthrown by José Rosário de Andrade, better known as Kanyemba (Isaacman, 2000). Kanyemba, the son of an African chief, Chowufumo, and a Goan mother, refused his father's (Chowufumo) chieftaincy and instead built a private empire and later became a *capitão-mor* (administrator) of Zumbo (Claudio, 2005). Kanyemba only assumed the role of *Capitao* of Zumbo in 1877, despite having caused significant disruption in the area since 1873 (Matthews, 1981; Newitt, 1973). His domain soon expanded across the Zambezi, reaching into the Dande Valley and Bawa in present-day Mozambique (Claudio, 2005; Isaacman & Peterson, 2003). Selous (1970) claimed that he met Shakundas (Chikundas), who pledged allegiance to Canyemba (a black man)[1], who held an official position under the Portuguese governor of Tete. When Kanyemba arrived in Dande, he encountered the VaSori under Chief Mburuma, who gave him land in exchange for tribute. Over time, however, Kanyemba asserted dominance and reversed this tribute relationship (Claudio, 2005:94; Isaacman 2000). The Chikunda, including Kanyemba's ranks, often recruited local people with strong hunting knowledge. Chatara (personal communication, 26 August 2017) noted that the Tembo Mvura were highly skilled trackers, and some had joined Chikunda hunting expeditions.

The pressure to acquire colonies increased in the late nineteenth century, threatening the authority of many African kings and warlords, including Kanyemba's. Kanyemba decided to cross and settle in Zimbabwe after the Portuguese began a military campaign to subjugate the Chikunda warlords, who were negotiating with the British (Isaacman & Peterson, 2003:280–281) and continued insurrections from his lieutenants. He and his followers settled between the Mwanzamutanda and Zambezi Rivers, an area he later named Kanyemba, after himself. This paper understands this (naming) as the beginning of a new era and subjugation of the area's existing residents. Kanyemba failed to acknowledge that the area he had settled in was occupied by others, meaning it was not his place to name. Marowa (2017) argues that naming an area goes beyond identity and belonging, as it also involves the narratives and meanings associated with the name. Narratives on the name Kanyemba (of the area) are closely aligned with the Chikunda people, who have close ties with Kanyemba (the person). Maita (personal

[1] In his book, Selous used the word Kaffir to refer to black people. I make an educated guess to conclude that when he referred to Kanyemba as black, he was, in fact, referring to someone of mixed race.

communication, 20 August 2017) stated that before his death, Kanyemba took the royal medicine *'Makoma*', which would transform him into a spirit of the land (Mhondoro) (see also Isaacman & Peterson, 2003:280). The use of *Makoma* was normal among the Chikunda, as exemplified by its use by Chikwasha. Isaacman (2000) asserts that Chikwasha, before his death, took some medicine to become a Mhondoro in the area where he died. This paper argues that the act was both spiritual and deeply political. Becoming a *mhondoro* ensured that Kanyemba's authority would transcend his physical life, allowing his descendants and community to continue consulting his spirit for legitimacy, protection, and guidance (see also Lan 1995; Lan 1995). Kanyemba residents are expected to pay homage to the Kanyemba *mhondoro* through the medium of *Mvura Kanyemba* of the Chikunda descent. The Tembo Mvura have continuously resisted paying homage to this medium, claiming that the spirit does not resonate with their traditions and ancestors. In an interview, Tafara (personal communication, 4 September 2017) explained how a Tembo Mvura man, host to the Chikwamba spirit medium, was refused access to Kamota Hills to complete his initiation process. The contestation over spirit mediums is a microcosm of the contestation of who belongs and who came first. The Tembo Mvura argues that the Chikunda 'imposed' their spirit on them.

At the time of Kanyemba's arrival and subsequent settlement in the area that now bears his name, the Tembo Mvura were still living as nomads. Their movements, shaped by spiritual guidance, ecological adaptation, and subsistence needs, did not conform to notions of fixed, permanent settlement. However, this mobility should not be misread as a lack of historical presence or attachment to place. Their form of mobility aligns with broader patterns of nomadism and seasonal or spiritual migration observed among various African societies, where land use did not always equate to exclusive territorial possession (Kopytoff, 1987).

Nyungwe/Tete/Songo origins

The Portuguese connection sought to highlight how the Tembo Mvura migration was connected to the Chikunda in ways such as fleeing from the warring Chikunda groups and evading capture by the Chikunda. This section reinserts the Tembo Mvura history outside of Chikunda lenses. The elderly members of the Tembo Mvura attest that they originally came from Songo Mountain in Tete, Mozambique. Saini (pers. comm., August 2017) recited a totemic poem and narrated their roots in the last line, '*…maera era, atembo Mvura we nyungwe'*. Nyungwe refers to Tete (see Isaacman, 2000). In his recitation, Saini describes how people migrated from Mozambique under a diviner named Mwanza. Prugia (personal communication, 26 August 2017) explained that the diviner advised the Tembo Mvura groups on the areas to settle as they migrated. The settlements established by the Tembo Mvura during their westward migration were largely temporary. Oral histories suggest that as the group's population increased, it often split into smaller sub-groups, with some establishing new temporary (which became permanent with colonisation) settlements that served as bases for continued nomadic excursions. A similar process was replicated in postcolonial Zimbabwe, where the Tembo Mvura initially settled in Mariga village. As the population expanded, a portion of the group established Chiramba village, reflecting a continued practice of adaptive settlement based on demographic pressures and spatial needs. The Tembo Mvura settlement patterns problematise rigid notions of territorial ownership or first occupancy.

Tembo Mvura oral traditions suggest that the migration took a long time, and the group grew large through integration with runaway slaves. Some of the integrated people were *nkumbalume* (respected hunters) fleeing from different Chikunda armies. Dongo (personal communication, 13 August 2017) reported that his grandfather claimed his ancestors, expert Chikunda elephant hunters, joined the Tembo Mvura as they migrated from Mozambique. The Tembo Mvura, who neither participated in the capture of people nor engaged in elephant hunting for the ivory trade, came to be seen as a refuge for individuals fleeing Chikunda slave raids and hunting expeditions. The Tembo Mvura were known for evading capture and their disappearing antics. Chaka (personal communication, 13 August 2017), a member of the Chikunda community, recounted stories passed down from his grandfather, who encountered the Tembo Mvura during their time in Mozambique. According to these accounts, the Tembo Mvura developed tactics of hiding and evasion, described as disappearing skills, as a means of avoiding capture by slavers and hostile groups during their stay and migration. While the Tembo Mvura recount skill and knowledge of the landscape as key to their survival, some Chikunda accounts ascribe their evasion to supernatural agency. John (pers. comm., 3 September 2017) claimed they were told the Tembo Mvura used *muti* to vanish from sight. It is important to note that the Tembo Mvura's disappearing practices did not cease with permanent settlement. During a chat with Mukaro (Personal communication, July 2017), a government official noted that the Tembo Mvura were known for avoiding contact with outsiders, often retreating from sight and leaving children to interact with unfamiliar visitors. First-time visitors to Mariga village

have observed that community members vanished or avoided interaction when strangers approached (Peter and Mukara, personal communication, 20 October 2017). While such behaviour was once widespread and linked to longstanding survival strategies, it has gradually diminished in recent years. The people have become more open and are now more likely to welcome visitors into the village.

Their migration, it emerged, took longer due to numerous stops. The group settled in different areas in present-day Mozambique. Evidence suggests that the people stayed for a while[2] in areas around Zumbo and were later displaced by Chikwasha's Chikunda army. Matthews 1981 highlights the importance and centrality of Zumbo and the convenience of its location. Located at the confluence of the Luangwa and Zambezi rivers, Zumbo was convenient for trade. Feira was located Northwest of Zumbo, just across the Luangwa River. Due to their location, Zumbo and Feira were important, and most of the Chikunda leaders preferred to control either of the two. During their (Tembo Mvura) stay in areas surrounding Zumbo, the group numbers increased, and some people decided to remain behind. The descendants of the Tembo Mvura people who remained behind are still settled in areas near Zumbo and have maintained a close relationship with their Zimbabwean counterparts. The existence of Tembo Mvura people in Mozambique helps substantiate the claim that they originated from Mozambique and temporarily settled around Zumbo.

Having been displaced by Chikwasha from Zumbo, the Tembo Mvura, under the instruction of Mwanza (the diviner), trekked westwards towards a present-day Zambian town called Luangwa. Tapiwa (personal communication, 7 August 2017) shared what he grew up hearing. 'The group could not cross the Luangwa River due to the high-water levels. As a result, they camped close to the river on the Mozambican side, waiting for the water levels to decrease. When the water levels receded, they crossed and settled in forests around Feira, an area under the control of Mburuma.' This study places their crossing time between September and November. The diviner and his group crossed into Zambia through a narrow gap in the river called Mukarivha/ Karivha[3], a place famous in the Tembo Mvura narratives (Prugia and Saini, personal communication, August 2017). They settled in areas around the Feira for an unknown period, staying far from the locals, and maintained a relatively quiet lifestyle. There is no mention of the Tembo Mvura paying tribute to Mburuma Nyanzokola or his sub-chiefs.

According to Sabhuku B, the diviner instructed the group to leave Feira and seek settlement in the mountains across the Zambezi River. Sabhuku A, Sabhuku C, and Ben (personal communication, September 2017) further affirmed that the oral histories passed down to them point to the continued harassment by Chief Mburuma or his subordinates as the primary reason for the people's departure. Mburuma Nyanzokola was known for terrorising communities that settled either within or near his domain (Isaacman, 2000). Guided by the diviner, the group headed toward what is now the Chewore Safari Area in Zimbabwe. Oral history specifies that the crossing took place at one of the narrowest points of the Zambezi River, near Kavharamanja (or Kavalamanja) village. The crossing point is referred to as the *Gate*. Unfortunately, due to their advanced age, Prugia and Saini were unable to recall the precise location. Present-day Zambia has a village named Kavalamanja, and satellite imagery (Google Earth)[4] indicates that some kilometres west of this village, the Zambezi River narrows significantly, supporting the plausibility of this oral account. Oral accounts suggest that some members of the Tembo Mvura remained in Kavalamanja while the rest continued their journey across the river. Kavalamanja would later gain historical prominence in the 20th century as a ZIPRA military base during Zimbabwe's liberation struggle was attacked by Rhodesian forces in 1978. Some respondents, both Chikunda and Tembo Mvura, recall relatives who perished in the assault. In recognition of this history and in honour of those who died, the Zimbabwean government donated two school blocks to the Kavalamanja community in 2021 (Musarurwa, 2023). The act of crossing both the Luangwa and Zambezi Rivers was later interpreted by neighbouring communities as evidence of the Tembo Mvura's use of magical powers. Sandi (personal communication, 31 August 2017) recalled stories alleging that the group used '*muti*' (magic) to survive the crossing of rivers infested with crocodiles and hippopotami. However, the Tembo Mvura strongly contest these claims, instead attributing their successful crossing to the leadership and intelligence of the diviner.

Following their successful migration across the Zambezi River, which posed significant hazards due to its population of crocodiles and hippopotami, the diviner was bestowed with a new name - Chiyambo, meaning

[2] The duration of the stay was described as a while as compared to some of the durations in other areas they settled. I could not get the respondents to estimate the length of the time.

[3] The Tembo Mvura call the place Kariva. Thos has nothing to do ith the Tonga name for Kariva (present day Kariba).

[4] Google Earth. (2025). Kavalamanja region, Zambia [Satellite imagery, coordinates: 15°37'45"S 30°15'27"E]. Retrieved June 14, 2025, from https://earth.google.com

'the crosser'. It is important to highlight that the Tembo Mvura migration was led by various diviners, with succession occurring upon the demise of a leader or, in rare instances, when the diviner stayed behind. The people settled in the mountains in the present-day Chewore Safaris. Oral traditions maintain that Chiyambo ascended to the position of the inaugural headman in the area where they ultimately established their settlement. The Chiyambo family, who persist in their role as Tembo Mvura community village heads, has upheld the mantle of leadership. This section of the paper traced the origins of the Tembo Mvura people, tracing their lineage back to Mozambique. In addition to relying on oral tradition to reconstruct the historical narratives, this paper also considers lexical and linguistic evidence. To note is that elderly members of the Tembo Mvura community continue to converse in chi-Nyungwe, the language historically associated with the inhabitants of Nyungwe in Tete Province, Mozambique (see also Nicholas, 1969). Doke and Litt (1931) identify Chi-Nyungwe as the vernacular spoken in the ancient Portuguese town of Tete. Furthermore, chi-Nyungwe exhibits dialectical similarities with the Chikunda language, a creolised Bantu-Portuguese language that developed among militarised African communities under the Portuguese prazo system. These linguistic similarities lend further weight to the claim that the people migrated from Mozambique and the interconnected historical trajectories of the Tembo Mvura and Chikunda communities, as explored in earlier sections. However, it remains essential to approach such linguistic connections with caution.

From nomadism to permanency: Settlement and displacement trajectories

The Tembo Mvura, as nomadic people, exhibited a lifestyle characterised by perpetual movement, a trait underscored in the preceding paragraphs. This segment of the paper explains the settlement and displacement patterns of the Tembo Mvura after crossing into present-day Zimbabwe. Upon their arrival, the Tembo Mvura established settlements in the present-day Chewore safaris. Their temporary settlement oscillated between Chirambakudomwa, Karemwa, Karuwaya, and Katsuuku Mountains.[5] Seasonal variations influenced these recurrent migratory behaviours. Within the mountainous terrain, the Tembo Mvura primarily subsisted on tubers like mpama (Dioscorea bulbifera), manyanya (Boscia Angustifolia), and bepe (Tacca leontopetaloides), supplementing this diet with meat from hunting small and large game, using snares, and fishing with locally crafted nets in the Mwanzamutanda and Zambezi rivers (Guvamombe, 2013; Hasler, 1990; Marindo-Ranganai and Zaba 1995). Kanja (personal communication, 10 September 2017) pointed to the strategic settlement of the people near the Mwanzamutanda River, capitalising on the opportunity to apprehend prey accessing water. After settling in the Chewore Safaris mountains, the group later separated. Oral histories suggest two plausible scenarios for this branching. One account holds that the group grew too large to be sustained within a single locale, divided, with one faction moving further inland toward the Angwa and Mukanga riverine regions. Another version maintains that the diviner chose to settle in what is now Kanyemba, while the other group opted to establish themselves elsewhere. The kinship ties between the Tembo Mvura groups settled in Kanyemba and those in Angwa remain strong to this day. Research conducted by Jani et al. (2022, 2023) has documented the continued presence of Tembo Mvura descendants in the Angwa region. The paper asserts that, in the absence of external disruptions, the Tembo Mvura's movement might have continued indefinitely.

During the colonial period, the Tembo Mvura experienced minimal interference with their traditional modes of subsistence and mobility. Despite the broader restructuring of land and governance under settler rule (banning hunting and gathering, establishment of game parks [Chewore, for instance, in 1964]), their hunting and gathering lifestyle remained largely intact. Colonial administrators occasionally ventured into the mountainous areas inhabited by the Tembo Mvura, but their presence was sporadic and non-disruptive. Archival records suggest that these officials often failed to encounter the people themselves, instead finding only remnants of habitation *misasa* shelters made from tree leaves, a small drum (*jenje*), klipspringer skins (*ngururu*), cooking pots, and a bark tray (*mwadiya*) used for collecting honey. Tamayi (1959), a colonial registration officer, described the people as elusive, noting their tendency to avoid contact with outsiders. Rather than forcibly settling or controlling the Tembo Mvura, colonial actors appeared to have supported their lifestyle. Oral testimony from Sabhuku A recounts that colonial officials left wire to make traps with the Chikunda chief Around Zimbabwe Doma People 2017(youtube, 2017). The Tembo Mvura interpreted this act as indirect support for their hunting practices.[6] This relative autonomy, however, came to an end with the onset of the Zimbabwean liberation war, which marked a turning point in the community's relationship with land, mobility, and state authority.

[5] These mountains now are part of the Chewore game safaris and Chitsere conservancy.
[6] Around Zimbabwe Doma people. Available on YouTube https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NgfhsVX4jvM

The Zimbabwean liberation war changed the Tembo Mvura status quo and landscape. It prompted them to engage with freedom fighters. Both the Tembo Mvura and Chikunda peoples claim to have aided the fighters in their passage into Zambia for training as liberation combatants (Maheve, 2024; Marindo-Ranganai & Zaba, 1995; Mberengwa, 2000). Notable among the accounts is Chaka's (personal communication, August 2017) assertion regarding his father's involvement in facilitating the movement of freedom fighters into Zambia and providing sustenance such as biltong sourced from hunted game. These fighters would then proceed to Zambia for training, utilising locations like Kavalamanja as launch pads. However, the covert activities at Kavalamanja came to the attention of the Rhodesian government, culminating in the Kavalamanja battle on 5 and 6 March 1978. This confrontation saw Rhodesian forces targeting the Zimbabwe People's Revolutionary Army's (ZIPRA) Northern Region front launchpad base (Musarurwa, 2023). After this confrontation, the Sipolilo District Administrator mandated the temporary relocation of Kanyemba residents to protected villages, colloquially referred to as 'keeps', in Mushumbi Pools until the end of the war (Charata, personal communication, 28 August 2017). Tapera's (personal communication, August 2017) recollection of his father's account highlighted the coercive nature of this relocation: 'A lorry came to fetch our people, and only a few were "captured" and transported to Mushumbi'. Although some Tembo Mvura people were captured, many escaped and returned to Kanyemba, continuing their nomadic lifestyle with minimal external interference. The forced removal of the people to a protected village in Mushumbi marked the beginning of the permanent settlement of the Tembo Mvura people.

When the war ended, the Zimbabwean government initiated a comprehensive resettlement program aimed at rectifying the historical disparities in land distribution inherited from the colonial era. In 1981, the government extended an offer to the populace residing in Dande to relocate and establish new settlements elsewhere, under the land redistribution programme. The resettlement initiative sought to ameliorate poverty levels among marginalised communities,(Derman 1990),; Spierenburg, 2004). Acting under government auspices, Chief Chapoto of the time asked the Tembo Mvura to resettle on agriculturally viable lands. Notably, Sabhuku B recounted his father's refusal of the relocation proposal, anticipating the preservation of traditional hunting and gathering practices. However, governmental policies subsequently criminalised unauthorised wildlife hunting, thus disappointing this expectation. While legislative frameworks such as the Parks and Wildlife Acts initially restricted hunting and gathering activities, enforcement remained relaxed until the inception of the Communal Areas Management Programme for Indigenous Resources (CAMPFIRE) in 1989. This regulatory paradigm shift compelled the Tembo Mvura community to migrate from their mountain habitats and settle close to the Mwanzamutanda River. The Tembo Mvura community chose to settle on the western side of the river, near the mountains, which conjured a sense of 'home'. They maintained a distance from the Chikunda and endeavoured to preserve semblances of their traditional nomadic lifestyle. With the burgeoning Tembo Mvura population, spatial constraints necessitated the establishment of a new settlement by 1985, resulting in the formation of Chiramba village, approximately five kilometres from Mariga village. Initially, Mariga was exclusively inhabited by the Tembo Mvura. Chiramba gradually evolved into a heterogeneous community characterised by inter-ethnic marriages between the Chikunda, Kore kore and Tembo Mvura populations.

The broader trajectory of this paper reveals that the Tembo Mvura were historically a nomadic group whose mobility shaped both their social organisation and their interactions with the landscape. Their reliance on hunting and gathering necessitated continuous movement in search of game and wild plant resources, discouraging the establishment of fixed settlements or territorial claims in the modern, legalistic sense. This mobility pattern, determined by the availability of wanted resources, contributed to their perceived failure to assert and defend exclusive rights to lands. As a result, the areas they traversed and temporarily inhabited were often interpreted by others, in this case the Chikunda, as unoccupied or unclaimed. This misrecognition facilitated Chikunda assertions of ownership, renaming, and the institutionalisation of their authority over the region.

Conclusion

This paper has sought to recover and re-centre the historical experiences of the Tembo Mvura in the Zambezi Valley. Dominant Chikunda-centred accounts of territorial authority and autochthony in Kanyemba have systematically obscured their narratives. Through oral histories, archival fragments, and ethnographic engagement, the paper has illuminated the migratory trajectories, livelihood strategies, and contested belonging of a community long relegated to the margins of regional historiography. The paper shows how exclusionary logics of territoriality and historicity construct belonging as both practice and discourse. The Chikunda's political and spiritual institutionalisation, characterised by Kanyemba's renaming of the land and the imposition of the Chikunda Mhondoro cult, erased the Tembo Mvura's earlier presence, rendering their mobility as absence rather

than alternative spatial practice. The paper, in its exploration of the historical relations between the Tembo Mvura and Chikunda, encourages a reimagining of belonging beyond fixed territoriality. The Tembo Mvura's experiences starting from Songo to Kanyemba, from nomadism to enforced permanent residence, showcase belonging as dynamic, contested, and multiply articulated. This paper aimed to reintegrate the Tembo Mvura history into the historical narrative of the Kanyemba area.

Declarations

Interdisciplinary Scope: This article advances an interdisciplinary inquiry by mobilising conceptualisations of belonging from sociology, psychology, philosophy, and cultural studies to reconstruct the historical experience of a marginal community. Although the theory of belonging has been elaborated within sociology and psychology, particularly in relation to identity politics, this study extends its analytical reach to the politics of precedence in Kanyemba. Situating belonging within the first-comer narrative, the article contributes to historical, sociological, and political scholarship on the peopling of the region, while addressing a lacuna concerning claims of autochthony and precedence in contested borderland spaces.

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