

SPIRIT MEDIUMS AND THE AUTHORITY TO
RESIST IN THE STRUGGLE FOR ZIMBABWE

by

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I

On April 18 1973 the medium of Chiwawa, one of the senior lion spirits (mhondoro) of Dande Communal Lands in the Zambezi Valley, was found guilty on three charges under the "Law and Order (Maintenance) Act". He had been charged with "recruiting an African for terrorist training", "failing to report the presence of terrorists to the police", and that "being a spirit medium by repute he had accompanied, encouraged and purported to protect terrorists and porters by means of his supposed supernatural powers", and was sentenced to twenty-five years' hard labour. The activities for which he was indicted had led to the attack on the white-owned Altena Farm in Centenary District which marked the beginning of the second and decisive phase of the liberation struggle.

The involvement of spirit mediums in political and military activity has been a major theme in the study of Shona history and sociology. Ranger's pioneering Revolt in Southern Rhodesia (1967) gave a detailed account of the leading role taken by a number of mediums in the first Chimurenga or liberation struggle of 1896/7. His book is an attempt to demonstrate that the military co-ordination of the many independent chieftaincies that participated in the war was, to a large extent, achieved by the mediation of the mhondoro mediums associated with each chieftaincy. The genealogies of the rulers of the state systems of the past provided a framework which, when activated by the mediums of the spirits of those dead rulers, allowed the creation of a proto-nationalist unity in the face of political and economic imperialism.

Ranger's work has been criticized (notably by Beach [1979] and Cobbing [1977]) on two main grounds. The first is that the intermediating role that Ranger ascribes to the mediums was not necessary as alliances already existed between the chieftaincies involved; the second is that it was not possible, as mediums are firmly under the control of chiefs, have authority only within their chieftaincies, and because statements made by mediums in trance simply reflect the opinions of their chiefs. Amongst anthropologists, Garbett (1963) and Bourdillon (1971) have also argued that, as far as their political function is concerned, mediums are mouthpieces for a "consensus" of local opinion.

In view of all this, the fact that spirit mediums became intimately involved in the second Chimurenga was of no little interest and I have recently

completed twenty months of fieldwork studying this involvement. My fieldwork was carried out in the Zambezi Valley, the home of many senior Korekore spirit mediums and the scene of intensive and continuous fighting throughout the full span of the war. In analysing my material, it has quickly become apparent that to understand the highly influential position that the mediums undoubtedly achieved during the war it is necessary to examine a wide range of political and religious authorities. The work I am engaged on at present is an attempt to show how, in a few villages in the Zambezi Valley, the centre of political authority has progressively shifted from the chiefs to the mediums to the guerrillas and, finally, to the newly established ZANU (PF) political committees. This analysis of the transformations of the structures of political authority, as well as being a contribution to the study of Shona political process, is also intended to explore the ideological nature of the idea of descent from which indigenous notions of political authority are derived. Far from being the empirical basis of the major social formations (homestead, village, chieftaincy, "tribe"), "descent" seems to be a concept used by the people to justify and explain to themselves the results of a number of (frequently conflicting) social processes such as conquest, migration, uxori-locality and adelphic succession.

In this paper I will outline one shift in the focus of political authority from chiefs to mediums. This shift, presented first in general terms, will be illustrated by a discussion of certain changes that occurred in the organization of the shrines of the mhondoro Chiwawa owing to the commitment of the present medium, Pondai Enos, to the war of liberation.

II

In the past, Dande was a province of the Mwenemutapa state. Today, it contains five chieftaincies, each with its own demarcated territory. Earlier anthropologists have described the essential responsibilities of the chief as (i) control of land and (ii) administration of the law through his court (dare). The chief holds this authority as head of the lineage whose domination of the territory is based on a claim either to have been the first to live in the area or to have conquered the people who lived there before. The authority of the individual chief is based on his selections from all possible candidates by the senior mhondoro of the chieftaincy through his medium. Acceptance of the authority of the royal lineage and of the individual chief is expressed by prestations made to the chief by members of other lineages resident in the chieftaincy and by his own. The chief has little power to enforce these prestations. As individuals can legitimately affiliate themselves to the chiefs of their fathers, mothers or fathers-in-law, the perpetuation of the chief/subject relationship depends in each case on its mutual desirability. These prestations take the form of labour in the chief's fields, gifts for access to land or fines as reparation for crimes, such as murder, arson, incest and witchcraft. Some have a strong ritual component. For example, if a pangolin is found it must be presented to the chief, as must other animals found dead in the bush. This is the position described by Garbett as "traditional" for the Valley Korekore (1963, 1966, 1967). Holleman's description of the Hera chieftaincy (1952) suggests that their key relationships are similar to those of the Korekore, and Bullock's account of the Zezuru (1927) contains the following statements: "It is the chief's prerogative to institute the proceedings for witchcraft" (p. 303); "in the case of homicide ... the bereaved family could claim compensation of the killer ... [and] the chief imposed a fine of one bull for the blood spilt" (p. 300); in the case of inter-clan incest "people ease their minds of any scruples by 'cutting the kin'. This is done by sacrificing an ox. The chief of the tribe should carry out this rite" (p. 80).

Cross-cutting the territories of the chiefs are the "spirit provinces", each of which is associated with a chief of the past, an ancestor of one of the present chiefs, some of whom are thought of as having been rulers of the Mwenemutapa state. These dead chiefs are known as mhondoro - lion spirits. They

are characterised by their ability to possess mediums in order to participate in the fortunes of their descendants. Their major responsibilities are ensuring that the rains fall and that agricultural production is sufficient for the needs of the people. They also have healing powers and a loosely defined political function. At its least, this consists of resolving the crises of succession to chieftaincies which frequently occur by selecting one of the many possible candidates. From the data I collected in Dande between 1980 and 1982, it is apparent that the political function of the mediums is capable of a great deal of expansion.

Before the establishment of the political committees in which a large degree of political authority is now vested, it was not the chiefs who allocated land either to their own people or to "strangers". It was the medium. It was, and it continues to be, the medium who performs the ceremony of "cutting the kin" in the case of inter-clan incest. It is the medium to whom a fine must be paid as reparation for murder. And it is the medium who is charged with finding and dealing with witches. It is the medium to whom a pangolin must be brought if found in the bush, and the same with dead animals. It is not the case that people work on the fields of the mediums. Nor do they work on those of the chief. But they build huts for the use of mediums during possession and, on occasion, they tend his yard and do other household tasks for him as well. The ritual prestations that indicate acceptance of political authority, therefore, are all made not to the chief but to the medium.

If a medium takes on the responsibilities associated with a chief, or is treated by his followers as one would expect them to treat a chief, an obvious interpretation of this behaviour is that the medium is "acting as a chief" or even pretending to be a chief. This has the implication that it is in some sense illegitimate for a "religious" leader to participate in "politics". But the people of Dande do not see things in these terms. From their point of view it is the mhondoro that is the source of authority and legitimacy. The characteristics of chief and of medium are the consequence of the different ways in which they represent the mhondoro to his descendants - the chief as senior member of his descent group, the medium as mouthpiece of the mhondoro itself. As long as it is believed that both chief and medium are legitimate representatives of that mhondoro, either or both may be the recipients of the ritual prestations which are in reality directed at the mhondoro. For the "real" enforcer of fines for murder or incest is the mhondoro, just as he is the "real" recipient of the pangolin. "The real owner of the land", wrote Bullock, "is on the spiritual plane", and the same can be said of other examples of political authority as well. Both medium and chief owe their status to the fact that they are the legitimate representatives of the mhondoro on the "material plane", the medium because he is possessed by him, the chief because he is descended from him and was selected by his medium (see diagram 1a, page 5). What varies from one account of political organization to another is the conception of which of these two representatives is the most suitable to perform the rituals that protect the descendants of the mhondoro from the consequences of crime (incest, murder, witchcraft). Either or both may be referred to as mambo. This term is usually translated as "chief" and is commonly used to refer to any figure of authority. The core meaning of mambo is perhaps best rendered as "legitimate representative of a mhondoro". If this legitimacy is lost, then the flow of ritual prestations stops or is redirected to the legitimate representative of the mhondoro, chief or medium, that remains. Taking together all the data presented so far, it seems that, whereas in the past it was the chief that was regarded as most suitable to perform the protective rituals, now it is the medium. Not exclusively but by and large what chiefs used to do the mediums now do.

A description of some characteristics of the mediums' daily lives will demonstrate how these ideas are handled in practice. In some cases, symbolic statements associated with mediums imply, as we might expect, that the chief and his ancestor the mhondoro are essentially the same. For example, the wife of a mhondoro (as opposed to that of a medium) is known by the same term as the wife of a chief, mukaranga. Messengers or intermediaries of chiefs and of mhondoros are called by the same term, vanyai. Hats and shoes must be removed when one approaches

a medium possessed by a mhondoro. This is not an unusual gesture of respect but it is precisely what is described as having been compulsory when addressing the mutapa in the past (Randles, 1981). The house in which the medium becomes possessed, that is the house of the mhondoro, has two doors; so, in the past, had the houses of chiefs. These possession huts may be referred to as dzimbahwe, the term used for the stone-walled royal burial-grounds found in many chieftaincies. The medium himself can be referred to as a dzimbahwe, suggesting that the dead chief is, as it were, buried inside the body of the medium. In all these cases, the identification of chief with mhondoro is clear.

In other cases, however, the symbolism suggests that it is the chief and the medium who are thought of as being in some sense "the same". For example, the dress that all mediums wear (a length of black cloth draped over the left shoulder and under the right, and sandals) seems to be based on the dress of chiefs in the seventeenth century as described by Randles (1981). Most mediums may not see a rifle. For some, it is dangerous even to hear the sound of a shot that kills an animal. According to Randles, it was forbidden to appear before a chief bearing a rifle or any other weapon. Garbett (1963) reported the restriction on mediums moving out of their provinces, that is on crossing the rivers that bound them, unless they performed a set of rituals to protect themselves. In the nineteenth century it was observed by Fynn among the Mpofu Chieftaincy of Bahera, but in this case the restriction applied to chiefs:

A custom prevails to this day that the chief when crossing the Tshadzire stream, must be blindfolded and carried across amid shouting and singing. It is a belief that should he walk across he would become blind and lose his chieftainship.

(A similar practice is reported by Posselt [1935] for the Hera chieftaincy.) The significant point is that this type of behaviour occurs when the medium is not possessed. The clinching evidence that mediums and chiefs may be identified one with the other is that a medium is buried in precisely the same way as a chief, though he cannot return after death as a mhondoro spirit and possess his own medium.

The focus of ritual attention can be divided and combined in this way because the set of symbols used to establish the authority of the chief, medium, or both are, in the first instance, associated with the mhondoro. From the local point of view, the dead provide the symbolic materials with which those among the living who can establish their right to appropriate them legitimate their authority. I shall term authority acquired in this way "ancestral" authority.

In view of this customary double attribution of authority to mediums and chiefs, it can be seen that the shift of political authority that has taken place in Dande is not, in reality, from chief to medium but from the "ancestral" authority of chiefs and mediums together, to the "ancestral" authority of mediums alone.

The reason for this shift lies in the recent history of chiefs in Dande, as in Zimbabwe as a whole. In brief, the interference of the white administration in the appointment of chiefs and in the operation of their traditional duties had the effect of delegitimizing their "ancestral" authority. After the occupation the chieftaincies were restructured so that the chiefs became civil servants and hence subject to the wishes of the "native commissioner" rather than those of the mhondoro as communicated by the medium. Some chieftaincies were abolished, some amalgamated. Chiefs considered inadequate or "disloyal" were replaced by more pliable members of the royal lineage. Although a charade of adhering to "traditional custom" was performed, few, if any, chiefs unsympathetic to government policy ("unprogressive" in government terminology) were chosen.

The most significant powers of the chiefs were taken from them. The right to try criminal cases was put in the hands of the commissioners. A series of "Land Apportionment Acts" divided the country into white and black areas, causing massive resettlement of blacks into so-called Tribal Trust Lands, with the boundaries of each chieftaincy demarcated and defended by the state. With the loss of the right to allocate land, the chiefs suffered a huge decline in prestige. "Today you see Natives passing their chiefs with little or no formal salutation. When reproved they will say 'Where is the land?' That is to say: 'The whites are now owners of the land. Why should we salute a landless man?'" (Bullock, 1927, p. 70.)

The loss of these powers did not presage a total loss of authority. Garbett has described how the integrity of the royal lineages of the Valley Korekore is customarily protected by virilocal residence and resistance to migrant labour. To achieve this requires unusual wealth. The income lost to the chiefs as collectors of fines and tribute was replaced by the salaries paid them by the government. "Many royals still find chiefly office a powerful attraction for which they are prepared to scheme and contrive as they struggle in earnest competition" (1967). But the most powerful blow to the authority of the chiefs came from another direction, one which the white administration was not able to predict.

With regard to many illegal acts such as murder and arson, the local conception of the offence coincided more or less with that of the government. Some benefit may have been perceived in the new system of justice in so far as it dealt with these, though the guilt of individuals and the nature of guilt were frequently disputed. But, according to the Shona, one of the most serious and frequently committed crimes was witchcraft. According to the government, witchcraft did not exist and the Witchcraft Suppression Act drawn up in 1899 declared that accusing a person of witchcraft was as great an offence as practising it. The chiefs were forbidden to deal with these cases. Fear and aggression, the causes and consequences of accusation, which might in the past have been dispelled and resolved at the chief's court, were forced below the surface of social life.

One solution that presented itself to people who believed that they or their children were at risk of death from witchcraft was to kill the suspected witch. Another, less drastic, solution was to refer witchcraft cases to the mediums and, in Dande at least, this frequently occurred. In a manner which I have no space to elaborate here, in Korekore cosmology the mhondoro spirits which stand for lineality, legitimate power and life are opposed to the witch spirits (varoyi) which stand for anti-lineality, illegitimate power and death. When it was no longer possible for people to take these overwhelmingly significant and troubling cases to one representative of the lineal principle, the chief, they took them instead to the other, the medium. It is not surprising, then, that the prestige and authority of the mediums rose as that of the chiefs declined. (The new and old sources of authority are compared in diagram 1, below.)

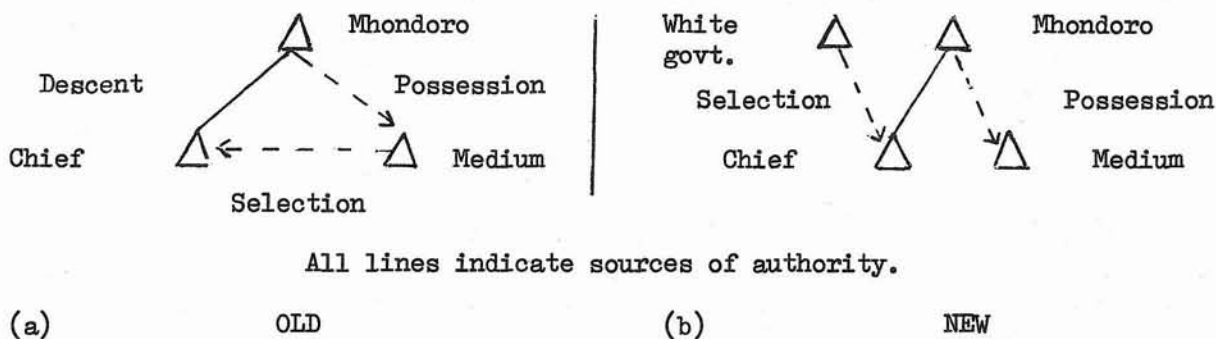


Diagram 1

The once common source of chiefs' and mediums' authority has been split into two: ancestral authority from the mhondoro, and "governmental" authority from the native commissioner. In the light of this, the significance of a second set of restrictions which the mediums have until recently observed becomes clear. These relate to the attitude of the mediums to white society. They declare the mediums' intention to avoid it. Mediums may not ride in cars or buses. The smell of petrol is so dangerous that the medium of Mutota is said to have died of it. They may not enter shops or eat foods produced by mechanical means. Cigarette smoking is forbidden, as is the taking of western medicines. It is inconceivable that a medium would accept employment from a white person. To do so would be regarded as proof that the medium was no longer practising, that the mhondoro had left him. Many mediums refuse to see whites at all, few will allow whites to be present when they become possessed. Their mhondoro, they say, lived a long time before the whites arrived, are not used to them, and will not come if whites are there.

At first sight these taboos might appear to be simply conservative. They seem to disapprove of change, to guard against and to protect the mediums' power from challenge by that of the whites. I have no space to support this here, but I suggest that the refusal of mediums to have contact with whites is more accurately interpreted as an acting out of avoidance of whites based on experience of them in the past, i.e. the loss of land, the military defeat of 1897, the forced labour, the taxation and the many other repressions too many and well known to list here. The statement made by this type of behaviour seems to be that mediums behave as chiefs ought to behave, that is they behave as the chiefs who are now the mhondoros who possess them used to behave in the past.

Willingly or otherwise, the chiefs became intimately associated with the white government. The mediums rejected it and demonstrated this rejection by their "ritual" avoidances. As the "governmental" authority of the chiefs increased and their "ancestral" authority decreased, so the increased authority of the mediums as protectors against witchcraft was reinforced by their avoidance of whites until the clear distinction between "sell-out" chiefs and "chiefly" mediums emerged. It was not the case that one crucial factor caused a sharp swing of authority from chiefs to mediums. Rather a number of factors reinforcing and supplementing each other gradually resulted in the sharp contrasts that were in play at the time of the liberation struggle. And the authority of the mediums was expressed and increased by the traditional prestations, now received - in Dande at least - exclusively by them.

III

I turn now to the case of Pondai Enos, one of the mediums most intimately associated with the objectives and activities of the ZANLA guerrillas. The transformations that occurred in the organization of his shrine are more radical than those that were carried out by other mediums, but for this reason they emphasize the more clearly the ability of the mediums to adapt to and keep ahead of the changing political environment in which they live. A few details of the organization of the shrine of a mhondoro spirit are necessary.

When a medium is possessed, he is thought to be unconscious of what is happening around him. The chief officer of the shrine, known as the mutapi (pl. vatapi), acts as an intermediary between the spirit and those who have come to consult him, organizes the rituals, explains the messages of the spirits, and so on. From observation of the close relationship between mutapi and medium it would seem as if the responsibilities of the mutapi are performed on behalf of the medium, but in fact they are carried out on behalf of the chief whose ancestor the medium is possessed by. For the mutapi is also a munyai (pl. vanyai), a royal servant or messenger. In his capacity as munyai, he carried messages between the chief and the chief's ancestor, the mhondoro. Through his numerous vanyai the chief is able to keep himself informed of all the messages spoken by the mediums of the numerous mhondoro in his territory. The title munyai is used interchangeably with that of mutapi.

In the absence of a recognized mutapi it is permissible for any descendant (or vazukuru = grandchildren) of the mhondoro to act as his intermediary. In practice, this applies to anyone who lives within the spirit province of the mhondoro. (Diagram 2a shows the lines of communication between the various agents in this relationship.)

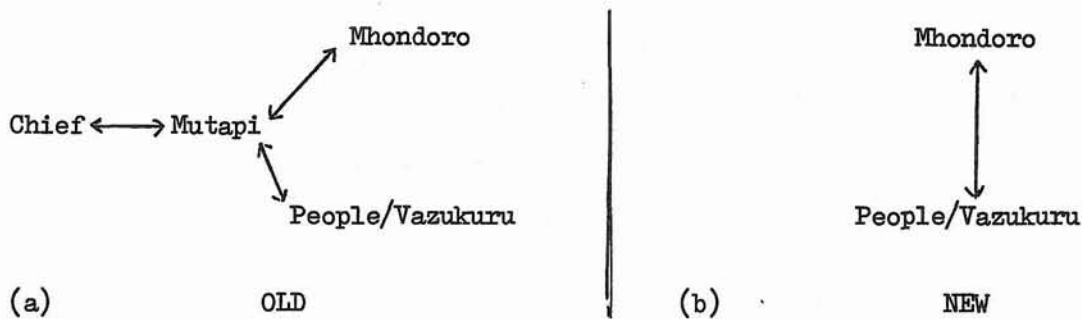


Diagram 2

The unusual feature of Chiwawa's spirit province is the claim made by Chiwawa's present medium that Chiwawa has no vatapi. Within his spirit province there are six lineages that provide intermediaries for Chiwawa. Despite the fact that they all have the necessary credentials for vatapi and are known and referred to as such beyond the limits of the province, they refuse the title of vatapi and say simply "we are Chiwawa's vazukuru (descendants)".

The reason for this lies in the history of the three chieftaincies with which Chiwawa is associated and for whom, in the normal course of events, these vatapi (intermediaries) would act as vanyai (messengers). Only one of these, the house of Chiweshe, can claim full "ancestral" legitimacy. The Kasekete chieftaincy was created by the white government as a reward for assistance against the 1896 revolt. The Chitsungu chieftaincy was also created by the whites, largely to diminish the power of ex-chief Mzarabani who had supported the revolt and was demoted to headman under Kasekete. Chiweshe, too, had been made a headman under Kasekete. The many appeals made to the government by this house for reinstatement as a full chieftaincy were all rejected. The status of all the chiefs and headmen operating in Chiwawa's spirit province, therefore, both represented and permitted the intrusion into the world of the ancestors of the white administration. This intrusion the medium of Chiwawa was committed to resist.

One form this resistance took was cutting the link between the mhondoro and the chief. In other words, the officer of the shrine who acted as intermediary ceases to operate as a mutapi/munyai, a royal messenger, but mediated only between the mhondoro and "the people". This was more than a symbolic statement of political intent. It is the mhondoro who is the true source of political authority. Statements made by the mhondoro through his medium were regarded as vital information and guidance in the organization of resistance. As the local people, with the assistance of the guerrillas and the mediums, began to organize in opposition to the white state, it became essential to keep the messages of the mhondoro secret from the chiefs, the servants of that state. The link between the chief and the mhondoro had to be snapped.

This is precisely what the medium of Chiwawa did. The chiefs had lost their "ancestral" authority. The medium, therefore, acted independently of them. Communication between the ancestor and his descendants was no longer mediated by an agent of the white state. The mhondoro spoke directly to the people. Certain individuals were still required to prepare the rituals, receive visitors, and so on, but these were no longer regarded as vanyai or vatapi. They were simply descendants

of the mhondoro, the yazukuru, and this is the title they gave themselves. (Diagram 2 compares the new and old lines of communication.)

By accepting their lowly position in the government hierarchy, the chiefs had acquired the authority to receive a monthly salary, to collect taxes, to wear a flamboyant uniform, and to little else. Their followers were left with no authority but to do what the government required of them. The shift of "traditional" political authority from the chiefs to the independent, nationalist mhondoro mediums provided the thousands of deeply discontented villagers in Dande with the authority to do what the ancestors required of them. They received the authority to resist.

IV

If it is the case that from the point of view of the people whom they rule, judge and advise, chiefs and mediums share a common source of authority, what distinguishes them? Firstly, it is only the mediums who can perform the rituals which bring rain and ensure good crops. It is only the mediums who can authenticate another medium. Mediums can cure diseases. The other activities that characterize the present mhondoro mediums of Dande appear to have been carried out by chiefs either in the past or in other parts of the country. But there is one other important distinction between them. In terms of political action, the main responsibilities of the chiefs lie within their chieftaincy. The mediums deal with matters of importance between chieftaincies.

The reason for this supra-chieftaincy authority has nothing to do with any charismatic quality mediums may or may not have. It is a consequence of the historical process by which chieftaincies are formed. Let us say that chieftaincy X claims mhondoros A, B and C as its ancestors and that A has a medium. (See diagram 3.) For a number of reasons (shortage of land, competition for the role of chief, etc.), chieftaincies frequently divide. Let us say that a lineage segment establishes itself as an independent chieftaincy on its own territory. This is now chieftaincy Y. In time mhondoro B may come out in a medium attached to the new chief Y. But B is also the ancestor of chief X and therefore his medium has authority in chieftaincy X as well as in Y, just as medium A, though especially associated with chief X, also has authority over chief Y. If X and Y divide again, medium B may attain authority over a larger and larger number of chieftaincies. However, if chief Y comes out as a mhondoro, his medium will have authority only over the chieftaincies descended from Y and not over those descended from X.

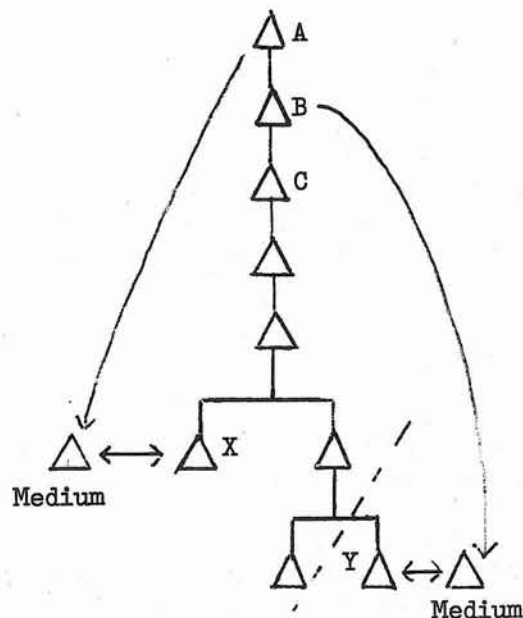


Diagram 3

One of the ways in which Chief Y may claim political independence is to deny, for example, that mhondoro A has any authority in his chieftaincy. Similarly, medium A may claim that medium B is not a true medium and consequently chief Y should come to him for the rain-bringing and crop-protecting ceremonies. Claim and counter-claim obscure the original historical relationship but in many cases a powerful (i.e. senior) medium is able to maintain authority in a number of chieftaincies at the same time. The medium of Chiwawa is a good example of this.

As far as chiefs are concerned, their authority is largely confined to their own territories. (As described above, there is evidence that in the past they were symbolically confined within their own territories and not permitted to cross the river boundaries unless certain rituals were performed.) In broad terms, then, chiefs have political authority within their chieftaincies; mediums have authority within and between chieftaincies. The political content of the authority of the medium varies in relation to the authority of the chiefs, as I have shown. This does not mean that chiefs can never have dealings with other chiefs. With the exception of the "religious" functions listed above, there is nothing a medium can do that a chief cannot. But the tendency seems to be as I have suggested. And there is another reason for this.

I have so far described inter-chieftaincy activity in neutral terms. It may be negotiation but it may also be war. The association of mhondoro mediums with war goes very deep. The idea of conquest underlies the idea of the mhondoro. Their senior mhondoro is thought to have conquered the territory in which his descendants now live. More junior mhondoro are thought to have conquered their own spirit provinces. The symbolism that demonstrates the authority of the medium and the chief also demonstrates the status of the warrior. Unlike many neighbouring peoples, the Shona have no warrior class. All men are soldiers. Political leaders are military leaders. In Dande today no ritual involving ancestors is complete without the singing of the Chimurenga songs, the military songs of the liberation struggle. This association of mhondoros and war appears in many accounts of the ritual of mhondoro mediums all over Zimbabwe. For example:

Should the swikiro(medium) be present, he will be doing the whistling and crooning of the war songs (ngondo) while seated on a mat in the centre of the singing and dancing circle.

(Chitewhe, 1954.)

The songs sung by mhondoro mediums when performing their dances are war songs, and their dances are dances of war.

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Some criticisms of Ranger's analysis of the first liberation war are certainly justified. It is clear from material I have no space for here that "genealogies of empire" change rather quickly over time, exist in numerous different versions and do not in fact reflect "the past". Moreover the analyses on which Ranger based his account of the mediums (Gelfand, 1959, 1962) suggested that one or two pan-Shona hierarchies of ancestors might exist. There is no doubt today that this is not the case.

But Ranger's argument has strengths and insights which have not all received full recognition. Firstly, though the genealogies of the ancestors do not reflect the historical past, they are not therefore meaningless. What they do reflect is historical and political process. They contain information about contemporary loyalties and identities and as such provide supra-chieftaincy identities. For many people in Dande, being a muzukuru (descendant) of Chiwawa is of the greatest significance, especially as, and this is the second point,

affiliation to chieftaincy is not once-for-all. Though one may be born in the chieftaincy of one's father and be descended from that chief, one may affiliate to the chieftaincy of one's mother or father-in-law or any other that will accept one, and therefore to their ancestors and mediums. In the context of a war, individuals could choose to join the side of a chief whose position agreed with their own. The existence of supra-chieftaincy mhondoros (like Chiwawa) makes this changing of affiliation to chiefs all the easier. There are therefore (contra Beach, 1979) no sociological reasons why the intermediating role Ranger ascribes to the mediums in the first Chimurenga could not have occurred. The extent to which it occurred is another question altogether.

On the political authority of mediums, Ranger has written:

One might speculate that a constant theme of Shona political history has been the rise of [charismatic prophetic figures], sometimes offering a challenge to established political power, sometimes acting as a rallying point in a period of political breakdown.

In this paper I have shown how such "challenges to established political power" may in practice be achieved.

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