Introduction

The fieldwork situation

Southern Rhodesia in the first half of the 1960s was the scene of many confrontations. African nationalism which had got under way towards the end of the 1950s had been met with a strong white nationalism which swept the polls with the election to power of Mr Smith’s Rhodesia Front party. In 1963 the African Nationalist movement split into two bitterly opposed parties, the People’s Caretaker Council (PCC) and the Zimbabwe African National Union (ZANU) who fought with one another for the right to represent the mass of the people. During my fieldwork in Chiota Tribal Trust Land, ZANU and the PCC were banned, Mr Smith declared unilateral independence from Britain, and the world reacted with economic sanctions against Rhodesia. African leaders were rounded up and put either in detention or in restriction in camps miles out in the bush and the situation returned to an uneasy peace maintained by a constantly renewed State of Emergency under which the minority white government used its extra-ordinary powers to thwart any kind of overt opposition on the part of the Africans.

The task of the fieldworker, which is not easy in any situation, was therefore daunting. Anthropologists fall into none of ‘the known and accepted categories, neither missionary nor preacher, trader nor administrator’ (van Velsen 1964: xix) and there was plenty of scope for both the people of Chiota and the government to imagine what my purposes could be. To begin work in Chiota required the permission of the District Commissioner in Marandellas and of the African council which met in Mahusekwa, the central township of the area. The meeting was turbulent. While the chiefs present supported my application (three of them offered houses in which to stay), a number of the elected councillors¹ raised serious objections. Had not Cecil Rhodes claimed to be a friend; had he not given rise to the situation which now prevailed where Africans were being dominated by the whites and denied their true worth as citizens?

However, the council finally agreed to my working in the area (they could hardly refuse, for I was, after all, white) and I took up residence in the village of one of the chiefs, where I spent the first three months.

For the first year the position was difficult. Many of the people of Chiota thought that I was an emissary of the government and during the period of strife between ZANU and the PCC I was even accused by each of being a member of the other. As often as I tried to deny any allegiance to the police or government
Spirits of protest

I was faced with evidence to the contrary. The Special Branch of the British South Africa Police visited me in their Land Rover to ask about my political affiliations, my views on African nationalism and my strange tastes for African beer, African food, and African friends. The suspicions of the ‘Europeans’ continued, and although the people of Chiota became more and more friendly, they could never come to terms with what I was really trying to do. Most people believed that my living there was a hardship (on the contrary I enjoyed it) and that there must therefore be a pay-off in the end. Others continued to believe that I was inextricably linked with the government.

They were, of course, quite right; even if I disagreed with the policies of Mr Smith’s government, and even if I felt that I was being unjustly identified with them, I was white, and had benefited from the accident of birth which made me English. I did not have to endure that kind of life for ever; as a white man I could be assured of a certain respect from the police; and, in the last analysis, I would be able to earn my living as an anthropologist on the basis of the information which the people of Chiota could give me. As long as social anthropology continues to study the underdogs this will always be the case.

With all these difficulties I had to work as unobtrusively as possible, and the material on which this book is based was gathered more from the passive observation of social and ritual life than from the asking of questions in formal interview situations. I realise that a certain amount of statistical information would have been of great value, especially in relation to the social characteristics of spirit-mediums, but when I once launched a very simple survey of a small number of villages the reaction threatened to prejudice whatever goodwill I had succeeded in establishing.

The pace of fieldwork, then, was dictated by circumstance, rather than design, and I had to make the best advantage of anything that came my way. Although these tactics meant that I was unable to collect material systematically, they had the enormous advantage of allowing me to keep a relatively open mind and to be sensitive to matters of importance which might otherwise have escaped my notice. Indeed, it was by chance that my attention came finally to be focused on spirit-mediumship and religion.

The emergence of a problem

Chiota Tribal Trust Land had originally been chosen for research because of its proximity to Salisbury. It was known that many of the able-bodied men of Chiota worked in the town during the week and returned to their villages, where they left their wives and children, at weekends, and it was hoped to make a study of this kind of labour migration with fieldwork both in the countryside and in the town.

Due to the tense political situation this was perhaps the most difficult aspect of social life that I could have chosen to study; not only was it impossible to
Introduction

work freely in the African townships which were under heavy police control, but it was also very difficult to probe into such details as family budgets, job experience and the like for the simple reason that such questions were usually only asked by policemen. The systematic collection of information relating to life histories, kinship and friendship was therefore well nigh impossible.

From the start of my fieldwork I had intended not to be preoccupied with studying religion and ritual, mainly because of my interest in making a contribution to an understanding of what were considered to be more basic matters, but also because I had been led to believe that ‘traditional’ beliefs and practices were dying out and were of little significance to the contemporary situation.2

However, bit by bit I became aware of the fact that this was by no means the case. Rituals were a regular weekend occurrence in many villages, the number of persons who were succumbing to spirit-mediumship was increasing, churches were being burned and stoned and these events were the subject of much comment and speculation. It became quite clear that ‘traditional’ beliefs and practices were related to the rise of African nationalism and as such of considerable relevance to the social life of the people of Chiota.

At first my attempts to attend seances were frustrated, and I was generally politely turned away from them with the explanation that the spirits present were of people who had lived and died before the arrival of the whites in Southern Rhodesia; they would not, therefore, like to have a white person presented to them. When I discovered that one prominent medium had been visited by the police and had been found in possession of PCC party cards it became clear that I had chosen an even more sensitive area of social life and resigned myself to even greater frustration.

However, when my assistant himself started to develop the symptoms of spirit-mediumship I began to gain easier access to other mediums and when, quite by chance, I gave a lift to one of the most popular mediums of Chiota, my luck turned. He expressed his thanks and offered me unlimited access to his seances. The support which he gave me meant that other mediums who had previously been hostile opened their doors and I was able to spend about three months living at this medium’s village as a honorary member of his administrative staff. I made myself useful where I could; my car was used for visits to outlying village rituals; I used what small influence I had as a white man to facilitate certain negotiations and I learned to play the thumb-piano (mbira) which meant that I could occupy a place with the musicians in the seance house (banya). The hospitality that I received was so great as to be embarrassing. The guilt that I felt as a member of the dominant colour group in Rhodesia which denies the majority of black people the status of social equals became even more poignant.

The data on which this book is based were collected, then, by the observation of events at this medium’s village, from visits to other important mediums and from events which I observed in the three villages where I stayed, one in the chieftancy of Chief Chiota and two in the chieftancy of Chief Nengu.
Spirits of protest

The first chapter sets the social and economic background, the second the fundamental aspects of Zezuru magico-religious beliefs. In chapter 3 I discuss spirit-mediums and the nature of their authority, arguing that this is based on the ability of spirit-mediums to express and articulate common consensus. In chapter 4 I compare the charismatic flexibility of religious organisation in Chiota with the more rigidly organised Korekore system and in chapter 5 I present and analyse an extended case which concerns the entry into spirit-mediumship of my field assistant and the effects of this both in relation to the politics of ‘low-level’ mediums of ancestor spirits in his village and to the power politics of what I have called ‘high-level’ mediums who are believed to be possessed by powerful hero spirits and whose scale of operations extends beyond the boundaries of kin group, village or chieftdom. The final chapter is devoted to an account of the decline of Christianity in Chiota and the rise of spirit-mediumship in the context of the confrontation between black and white nationalism in Southern Rhodesia.

The emphasis of the analysis is on the flexibility of Zezuru beliefs and of Zezuru religious organisation. Spirit-mediums are not portrayed as actors of social roles arranged in a neat and stable hierarchy that has been hallowed by tradition, but as essentially charismatic figures whose creative energy in sensing public opinion, forming and moulding it into support and occasionally collective political action has a continuous effect on the relations of spirit-mediums to one another and to the lay public. Religious figures do not control the use of physical sanctions to enforce their decisions, they can only maintain their authority if their claims to sacredness are believed in, although the people of Chiota are committed to a belief in the inevitable powers of particular spirit-mediums or of the spirits which they claim to represent. Spirits, in the last analysis, are the creation of society; they come into being, rise and fall from grace through the energies of their mediums who attempt to satisfy the religious aspirations of the people whom they serve and to fulfil their own vocations as prophets, diviners and healers.
I

The secular background

Spirit-mediums play many roles but in the main they are concerned with the analysis of extra-ordinary situations, especially ill-health and other misfortunes. The theory on which they draw to make their analyses attempts to explain misfortune in terms of mystical forces set in motion as a result of social disturbance.

As will be shown later in this study, spirit-mediums operate at various levels of social structure, but broadly speaking they can be distinguished as 'high-level' mediums and 'low-level' mediums. The latter operate at village level and deal with purely local problems, while the former deal with affairs which surpass purely village and lineage interests. However, even village problems are often affected by events which occur outside village limits, and spirit mediums in general have to analyse the extra-ordinary in terms not only of the social structure of Chiota, but of the wider structure of Rhodesia, itself involved in British and world affairs.

Before turning specifically to spirit-mediumship, therefore, it is essential to examine the basic secular characteristics of social life.

Chiota is denominated a ‘Tribal Trust Land’ and it is supposed that there reigns a ‘tribal order’. However, this ‘tribal’ order does not exist simply as a manifestation of the inertia of ‘tradition’, but also as a consequence of diverse political and economic forces. Chiota is not an island. On the contrary, it is very much involved in the wider polity of Rhodesia and the world outside, for its sheer proximity to Salisbury has drawn its people out of the narrow interests of village, kin group and chiefdom, into the economic interests generated by the capitalist structure of the national economy and the political interests generated by the colonial situation. It is not an exaggeration to say that the Prime Minister of England, and the British American Tobacco Corporation (BAT) enter into the consciousness of the people of Chiota as much as their chiefs and headmen.

It is the concern of this chapter briefly to lay down the fundamental socio-economic background out of which are produced the problems which the spirit-mediums analyse.

The political and administrative framework

Rhodesia is governed from the capital, Salisbury, by a legislature elected by those who qualify for the franchise. In effect most voters are white, as is at least 75% of the membership of the legislature.
**Spirits of protest**

The land is divided up into African and European areas, whereby whites and blacks are separated residentially. Of the African areas, 8,052,000 acres are set aside for ‘Native Purchase Areas’ where Africans may buy small farms, and there are 33,898,000 acres of Tribal Trust Land, where Africans live according to ‘tribal’ patterns.

Chiota is one such Tribal Trust Land situated some 45 miles south-east of Salisbury and 25 miles west of Marandellas. The area is dominated by tobacco cultivation on large European-owned farms which border Chiota on two sides. On the other boundaries are the Native Purchase Areas of Muda to the west and Chimbandwa to the south.

The region in which Chiota is situated is traditionally the home of the Zezuru, a subgroup of the Shona speaking congeries who are also to be found in other Tribal Trust Lands in Central Rhodesia, such as Zvimbio, Chiweshe, Chimamora, Chikwakwa, Seke, Goromonzi, Mhondoro, Wedza, Soswe and Mrewa. The Zezuru differ in minor structural and cultural ways from the three other major Shona speaking groups, the Korekore in the north-east, the Karanga in the south and the Manyika in the east.²

The Tribal Trust Lands are administered through the Ministry of Internal Affairs according to what the government recognises as ‘tribal institutions’. For these purposes the country is divided up into provinces and districts and Chiota falls in the District of Marandellas, which town is the headquarters of the District Commissioner (DC).

Contact between Africans and the DCs is through the ‘tribal leaders’, the chiefs and headmen. These offices represent the apex of the ‘tribal’ hierarchy and the lowest echelons of the administrative hierarchy of the colony. They are responsible to the DCs for collecting personal tax (£2 per year) and for the dissemination of government edicts and information. Chiefs are still responsible for the apportionment of land within the reserves, but their powers are largely circumscribed by the terms of the Land Husbandry Act of 1955, by which the land holdings of individuals and the head of cattle each individual may own are geared to the amount of arable land and grazing land available in each reserve.³ The judicial system also makes use of tribal institutions. Cases which are not settled at village level pass up to ward level and then to the chief. Appeal may then be made from the chief’s court to the district magistrate. Criminal cases can not be dealt with in chiefs’ courts.

In Chiota there is also an African council, with offices in the central township of Mahusekwa. The DC is *ex officio*, president of the council and the five chiefs, Chiota, Nengu, Nyandoro, Mudzimerema and Samuriwo are *ex officio* vice-presidents with voting power. The other members of the council consist of the four ward headmen (*machinda*) and then fifteen elected councillors, four from the Chiota area, four from Nengu, three from Nyandoro and two each from Samuriwo and Mudzimerema.

Apart from funds occasionally provided by the government to aid certain
The secular background

projects, the income of the Council is from rates which are collected annually, 5s per plot holder, and from cattle dipping fees which are 2s 6d or 2s per beast per year. In addition money comes in from the sale of timber and dog licences. This money is used to employ a full-time secretary and messenger, and the people who run the cattle dipping tanks and a primary school. The African councils are being encouraged to take over the running of community affairs as part of a general policy on the part of the government to establish ‘community development’ in Rhodesia. The powers of councils as laid down in the African Council’s Act (1957) are that they may do ‘any act or thing specified in the warrant which in the opinion of the Minister should or could be done by such council for the welfare, advantage and betterment of the community of inhabitants of the area’.

The council, like the DC, makes extensive use of the tribal hierarchy for executing much of its business, such as the policing of timber plantations, the collection of rates and dip fees, and the dissemination of information.

Three levels of organisation are recognised by the government, which correspond to ‘traditional’ political forms. They are the village (musha), the ward (dunhu, pl. matunhu) and the chieftaincy (nyika). This basic pattern has been well described by Holleman (1949, 1952).

The village

Present day villages are built in lines (maraini) along surveyed contours separating the higher lying arable land from the lower lying grazing land. In general they consist of four parallel lines formed by the granaries (nearest the arable land), bedrooms, kitchens and then at a distance of about 100 yards, the cattle kraals. They vary in size from 10 to 100 nuclear families each with their own kitchens and granaries which are clustered into village sections (mana), defined by their leaders (samana). The size, that is the number of nuclear families, and composition of the mana depends on the stage reached in their development cycle, but does not usually exceed a man, his wives, his married sons and their wives and children (marriage is virilocal), his unmarried sons and unmarried, divorced or widowed daughters, and perhaps their children, and maybe a sister. Although each nuclear family preserves a considerable amount of economic independence, members of the same mana do help each other in the fields and by exchanging food and small services. They are also tied together with common interest in bridewealth earned by its women and used by its men to marry in their turn.

Each village is based on a patrilineage core, to which other village members besides wives are related either cognatically or affinally; there are sometimes strangers (vatorwa). From this patrilineage is selected the village headman. He holds a court (dare) at which local disputes are first tried, and from which appeal is to the court of the subchief or chief. He also holds the lowest office of the administrative hierarchy and is responsible for conveying important messages from the chief to his people. Furthermore, he is responsible for collecting the
Spirits of protest

personal tax of the people on his book. (Village headmen are most often called ‘sabuku’, literally the owner of the book, as members of his village are entered in a book which has become the symbol of his office). The village headman also is the first person to be approached should a member of his ‘book’ require land to plough. His support is valuable in dealings with the chief, whose decision is final in this matter.

Institutionalised co-operation at village level is minimal and in such activities as ploughing and harvesting, co-operation beyond the level of the mana is based on ties of friendship and kinship, or is purely contractual (e.g. the exchange of beer for labour at beer parties).

Holleman (1952 : 12) described the ward as primarily a territorial unit with rights in land. However, under the terms of the African Land Husbandry Act (1951) this is no longer the case as each village has its own block of land, tenure of which is regulated directly by the chief.

The chiefdom

The chiefdom is the largest tribal unit, and the chief (ishe) is selected from the lineage core of the chiefdom. After Garbett (1963a) I shall refer to such lineages as ‘royal lineages’. Succession disputes are common, and result from the rather vague succession rules based on a combination of adelphic and rotational principles. Interregna may last for upwards of three years, and although the choice of successor lies ostensibly with members of the chiefdom, the new chief must be ratified in his office by the DC. He is then paid a salary by the government.

The chief’s duties, therefore, are those of a multipurpose civil servant. He holds the highest court (dare) in his chiefdom, appeal from which is to the district magistrate (in the case of Chiot a this is to the magistrate in Marandellas). He is responsible for the collection of personal tax and council rates and dip fees. He is also responsible for the allocation of land under the terms of the Land Husbandry Act, although appeal may be made to the DC through the Agricultural Officer and the chief must inform the DC of all allocations.

Shona chiefs, then, occupy the familiar ‘intercalary’ role, analysed by Mitchell (1956) and Gluckman et al. (1949), for, while being the representatives of their people to the government, they are also the representatives of the government to the people. They are as much government servants as tribal leaders. 4

The ‘tribal structure’ of Chiot a, then, with its chiefs, subchiefs and village headman, although seen by people and government as representing the continuity of ‘traditional’ pre-colonial structures, persists in its present form largely because of government policy and action whence it derives its apparent stability. The ‘tribal’ order is convenient for government administration as has been shown above, and is also convenient in political terms, as became very clear in October 1964 when, as part of its strategy to bargain independence from Britain, the Rhodesian government called together all chiefs and headmen (subchiefs) to the
The secular background

‘Domboshawa Indaba’ in order to find out African opinion on the independence issue. In the White Paper published after the Indaba, the government justified this method of testing African opinion by analysing the ‘tribal structure’ as if government played no part whatsoever in its functioning. Chiefs were represented as consensual leaders of their people and thus able to speak for them.

In fact, the chiefs depend for their positions, income and prestige on government support, and in the isolation of the ‘Domboshawa Indaba’, after an impressive display of Rhodesian armed might, they committed their people to support the Rhodesian Prime Minister in his policy of independence from Britain under a white minority government.

The people of Chiota were not surprised by this unanimous decision of the chiefs, for they are well aware of the dependence of their chiefs on government goodwill. However, they did not agree with the chiefs’ decision and, significantly, it was a spirit-medium who affirmed that had government called together the spirit-mediums rather than the chiefs, the result would have been radically different. Later in this study the coercive authority of chiefs will be contrasted with the consensual authority of spirit-mediums.

The Economic Background

Just as the ‘tribal structure’ of Chiota is fully incorporated into the administrative and political structure of Rhodesia as a whole, so is the economic system. The people of Chiota not only cultivate such crops as maize, millet and groundnuts, and tend cattle for their subsistence, they also sell their surplus on the open market. Furthermore, the relative infertility of the soil and the proximity of Chiota to Salisbury force working men to sell their labour in the industry and commerce of the capital, and also to a lesser extent on the white-owned farms which border Chiota.5

On Friday evenings in Chiota plumes of smoke rise over many villages as women complete the final process in the brewing of beer, in preparation for the anticipated arrival of the menfolk who work in Salisbury and who fill the many buses which travel the forty-five miles of well maintained road between Salisbury and Chiota. The weekends are a time of social regeneration and recreation after the workaday week of women in the fields and men in town. Beer is drunk in large quantities either for ritual purposes (rituals are held at weekends so that the men may be present) or for cash, when the women of Chiota exchange their crops for the wages of the working men.

Most Chiota men, as they reach working age, leave for the towns, particularly Salisbury, but continue to maintain close links with Chiota, returning home most weekends. This situation is made possible by Chiota’s proximity to Salisbury and the frequency of buses. The return fare is 9s. In addition, those who own cars ply backwards and forwards carrying passengers who are charged the standard bus fare.
**Spirits of protest**

The basic pattern, then, is that men spend their weekdays in town, so long as they have a job. When they lose their jobs either through old age, redundancy, or sickness, they return to their villages.

The figures of the 1962 African census give a clear indication of the rate of labour migration in Chiotas. The census was taken during the week, and thus represents the population of Chiotas with many of the working men away. Doubtless had the census been taken on a Saturday evening, the number of men would have been greater.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Date of Birth</th>
<th>1918</th>
<th>1918–1945</th>
<th>1945–</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Males</td>
<td>1,230</td>
<td>2,240</td>
<td>7,330</td>
<td>10,800</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Females</td>
<td>1,550</td>
<td>4,840</td>
<td>7,060</td>
<td>13,450</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Both</td>
<td>2,780</td>
<td>7,080</td>
<td>14,390</td>
<td>24,250</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

It will be noticed that the greatest disparity between the sexes is the age group 17–44 where there are approximately twice as many women as men present in the reserve. Although they may not all be away working, it is nevertheless reasonable to assume a rate of 50%; persons away visiting kin will be compensated for by other kin visiting in Chiotas who will of course be included in the figures.

Undoubtedly the dominant factor in maintaining this pattern of commuter labour is economic. Although other factors, such as inter-personal relations, the desire to see the ‘bright lights’ (Gulliver 1957: 58), may affect the incidence of labour migration, they do not affect the rate.

Furthermore, as Mitchell (1959) has pointed out, ‘an analysis of labour migration . . . must set out to explain not only why the men leave their tribal home, and the causes for this may be more complicated than merely economic reasons – but also why they should constantly circulate between their tribal homes and the labour centres’. Thus, in the Chiotas situation, it is important to consider not only those factors which ‘push’ men out of the reserve into the town (‘centrifugal’ pressures), but also those which ‘pull’ them back again (‘centripetal’ pressures).

Chiota men are forced into the town for economic reasons and, in order to achieve social and economic security, they are in turn forced to maintain links with the countryside so that they may return there in the event of their being no longer able to work in town. The Chiotas situation thus parallels that of other situations reported for Central Africa, notably the Lakeside Tonga (van Velsen 1961, 1964), the Mambwe (Watson 1958) and other situations in which labour migration results not in a breakdown of the rural society, but contributes to its maintenance, providing, in cash and goods, the wherewithal to sustain an ever-increasing population (the 1962 African Census predicted that the African population of Rhodesia would double in twenty years) in a fixed area which is declining in fertility.

Largely because Chiota is perceived as an ultimate security against the vicissitudes of life.