Introduction

Chindunduma is a school in north-eastern Zimbabwe built after Independence to enable many of the young women and men who had left their homes to join the armies of liberation and fight for the freedom of their country to complete their interrupted education. In July 1981 a group of these young ex-guerrillas were describing and reliving some of their experiences of the war. They spoke of their life in the guerrilla camps in Mozambique and of the campaigns in which they took part inside Zimbabwe, of the lessons in politics and development they had received, of their fears and their triumphs, their setbacks and their rewards. And time and again they spoke of the help they had received during the war from their ancestors. As one young man recounted:

> I didn't believe all the things my father used to tell me until I was in the bush myself. Then – well, you just had to believe. One time we had no tobacco, nothing to smoke. One of the boys went into a trance. He said that his father's brother had sent us some. His father's brother had died a long time before so we asked him how this would happen. He said that the tobacco would be brought to us by a snake. Then the boy came out of trance, went looking in the bush and found the snake. The body of the snake was all curled up but there in the middle was a lump of tobacco. The boy clapped to the snake very politely and the snake uncoiled itself. Then he took the tobacco and we all had a smoke.[1]

Many ex-combatants tell similar stories of how long-dead members of their families had assisted them and led them to sources of food or other supplies. But these ancestral spirits and their mediums performed more crucial tasks as well:

> At one time there were many deaths in our camp. We used to bury up to eight in a single day. So we went to see this spirit medium who lived nearby. He told us that we should not bathe in the rivers. We should build a bathing hut

far from the river and carry water to this place in tins. The medium told us that when we got back to our camp a certain child would have died but that this would be the last one who would ever die from this cause. And he was right. This is just what happened.[2]

Many of the so-called *Chimurenga* songs – the songs of the war of liberation – that were sung by guerrillas and peasants celebrate the role of the ancestors. For example:

Isu nemidzimu yedu	*We and our ancestors*
takabatana	*worked together*
muno muhondo	*here in the war*

The especially important part played by the *mhondoro* (royal ancestor) spirits as protectors of the land and bringers of the rains is also recognised in popular song. In this one a number of senior *mhondoro* are celebrated together:

Takapinda nekuGaza	*We entered [Zimbabwe] at Gaza*
kusunungura Zimbabwe	*in order to free Zimbabwe*
Ambuya Nehanda	*Grandmother Nehanda*
Sekuru Chaminuka	*Grandfather Chaminuka*
Mwene Mutapa	*Mwene Mutapa*
Mulambo	*Mulambo*
midzimu yehondo	*the ancestral spirits of war*

What are we to make of a guerrilla war fought to liberate a colonised country from its oppressors, whose leaders professed a socialist ideology and a commitment to leading Zimbabwe into the modern world, when the fighters themselves describe their experiences of the war in these terms? The students of Chindunduma come from all over Zimbabwe and they are not exceptional. Reports from many of the Shona-speaking areas describe the peasants' and guerrillas' experience in strikingly similar terms. According to Frantz Fanon, one of the major theoreticians of African liberation, beliefs of this kind are quite simply not supposed to persist:

> After centuries of unreality, after having wallowed in the most outlandish phantoms, at long last the native, gun in hand, stands face to face with the only forces which contend for his life – the forces of colonialism. And the youth of a colonized country, growing up in an atmosphere of shot and fire, may well make a mock of, and does not hesitate to pour scorn upon the zombies of his ancestors, the horses with two heads, the dead who rise again, and the djinns who rush into your body while you yawn. The native discovers reality and transforms it into the pattern of his customs, into the practice of violence and into his plan for freedom.[3]

The youth of Zimbabwe have certainly grown up in 'an atmosphere

of shot and fire' and many have spent a good number of years with 'gun in hand . . . face to face with . . . the forces of colonialism'. And yet far from pouring scorn on these 'outlandish phantoms', their ancestors, they seem to believe in them as strongly as their fathers and their fathers before them. In fact all categories of participants in the war – guerrillas, those who joined them in the bush, those who stayed in the villages, those who fled to safer places – maintain that their ancestors protected and advised them either in dreams or by means of signs that gave them warnings and instructions. Even the future prime minister of Zimbabwe, Robert Mugabe, was himself assisted in his escape from Zimbabwe by an ancestor of the family which had given him shelter. The introduction to a volume of his collected speeches relates that the 'next two days were fraught with potential peril. Mugabe and Tekere were staying with Chief Tangwena. Mrs Tangwena had a spirit medium who advised them to leave the following day by the mountain route.'[4] Mugabe did so and after a long and arduous journey arrived at a village on the Mozambican side of the border.

It was not, however, only members of the resistance who believed that the ancestors had taken an active part in their struggle. Many Shona members of the government forces – soldiers, policemen, local government officers – also relate accounts of timely warnings and miraculous escapes which their ancestors engineered. However, it was only within the guerrilla army that this belief in the participation of the ancestors was elaborated into a system of ritual practices believed to place the combatants under their protection. While on active service within the borders of Zimbabwe, the guerrillas were not allowed to have sexual intercourse, they were not allowed to kill wild animals in the forest and they were not allowed to eat certain foods. These ritual prohibitions were imposed on them by the spirit mediums. It was believed that by observing them the guerrillas could protect themselves from the dangers of war and increase their chances of victory.

As we shall see, the fact that the majority of the guerrillas observed most if not all of these ritual prohibitions did not prevent them from taking part in the programme of peasant mobilisation or of political education that their political party put into action. We shall also see that these beliefs and practices were not invented by the guerrillas nor by the spirit mediums but were part of a wider pattern of beliefs and rituals that had existed for some hundreds of years. And, finally, we shall see how these ancestors who had protected their descendants during the war were celebrated and applauded at the ceremonies that marked the achievement of Independence. Their faces beamed out from banners hung all over the cities, their names were praised in speeches made by political leaders. In the first months of the new era, the most important of the Shona ancestors were installed, in effect, as the protectors and

advisers of the new state of Zimbabwe.

Although this book deals with political and religious processes that are working themselves out at the heart of political life in the capital city today, it is based on research in one of the more remote corners of the country, an area in the extreme north known as Dande. This book is a study of the interaction of the ideology of the peasants of Dande with that of the guerrillas who lived among them between 1971 and 1979. I describe in some detail how these peasants viewed their world and how their society was organised, what the guerrillas intended to achieve within it and how far they were successful. Throughout, all events, symbols and processes – the whole of Zimbabwe in fact – are described from the point of view of Dande. I make no attempt at a complete analysis or description of the guerrilla war. No more detail of individual battles appears than is necessary to provide background from time to time. I deal only with the Zimbabwe African National Union (ZANU) and ZANLA, its guerrilla army, and not at all with their counterparts, the Zimbabwe African People's Union (ZAPU), and its army, ZIPRA. There is no reference but the most glancing to the major contribution made to the struggle by the Ndebele people or to that of any of the other minority ethnic groups of Zimbabwe. The reason is simply that they were not represented in Dande, where I lived for almost two years collecting the materials I present in this book.[5]

One final point. The purpose of this book is not primarily to describe *why* the peasants of Zimbabwe offered resistance to the Rhodesian state, though I deal with this at some length. Rather my intention is to describe *one of the forms that this resistance took*: the remarkable act of 'co-operation' between ancestors and their descendants, the dead and the living, the present and the past. In this account, it is neither the guerrillas nor the politicians who occupy the centre of the stage. It is the relationship between the guerrillas – the bearers of guns – and the religious leaders of the peasants – the mediums of the *mhondoro* spirits – the bringers of the rain.

The book is divided into four parts. Part I introduces the main events and the territory in which they took place. Chapter 1 contains an account of the first meetings between guerrillas and spirit mediums in the Zambezi Valley. Chapter 2 is an outline of the political, economic and kinship organisation of Dande, the background against which the rest of the book plays itself out.

The first two chapters of Part II deal with the range of religious experience that exists in Dande. The spirit mediums get most attention. I describe how people become mediums and how they live their lives after that. Chapter 5 is a detailed analysis of the mythological histories of the senior ancestors and of the ritual practice of their mediums. Here I dismantle and explore the basic concepts out of which political and

religious ideology are constructed. I begin to show how these can be put together to form small-scale chieftaincies, large-scale political parties or the ideological apparatus of a state. Chapter 6 completes Part II, describing the integration of 'strangers' by their participation in the rituals of the *mhondoro* spirit mediums.

In Part III we move from Dande society itself to the war that took place within it. Chapter 7 contains an outline of the causes of the war together with a range of accounts by residents of Dande of their individual experiences of guerrillas, mediums, mobilisation, political education and so on. Chapter 8 takes a fresh look at the incidents described in Chapter 1. It shows how, as a reaction to colonialism, the authority of the spirit mediums rose while that of the chiefs fell, thus leading to the co-operation between these mediums and the guerrillas. Chapter 9 is a discussion of the protective behaviour that the guerrillas practised on the mediums' instruction, drawing on the materials laid out in Chapter 5 to explain them. In Chapter 10 all of these themes are drawn together in a detailed account of some of the actual battles – military, political and ideological – that were fought between mediums, chiefs, guerrillas and the local representatives of the state.

Part IV carries the analysis begun in Chapters 5 and 9 into the present day with, first, a discussion of the relationship between the newly elected village committees and the ancestors and, secondly, a brief assessment of the place of the ancestors in the ideology and the symbolism of the new nation state.

NOTES

1 From an interview conducted by Nicholas Wright at Chindunduma in July 1981.
2 ibid.
3 Fanon (1967, p.45).
4 Mugabe (1983, p. xiii).
5 A description of how these materials were collected can be found in the Appendix on p. 230.