

This opening chapter reconsiders orthodox views describing the development of societies in Zimbabwe prior to colonial rule. These societies did not all move progressively northwards leaving behind a depopulated southern frontier. They should not be treated as if they were a homogenous people who split into various groups through fission. This can be understood by an examination of their origins and identity over time, and through spatial distribution and interactions. The combined use of local sources including linguistics and ethnography renders the term 'Shona' anachronistic. It offers a description of how these people viewed themselves rather than how others perceived them. Instead of confirming 'new-comer' groups consolidated in the early 19th century, or those re-organised by the colonial state, we investigate age-old and ubiquitous indicators of the existence of autochthonous groups such as the 'Nyai' and 'Gova'. We argue that they should form the basis of any serious analysis of pre-colonial Zimbabwe. Sometimes ethnic identity did have environmental or political origins and this is demonstrated without necessarily evoking any form of 'determinism'. The emergence of leaders and their clients is carefully traced into these varied environments until a political culture of Zimbabwean chieftaincies, recognisable today, emerged. This first chapter also demonstrates how class dynamics permeated both the local and broader levels of society.