Archaeological Contexts and the Creation of Social Categories Before the Zulu Kingdom

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Carolyn Hamilton’s and John Wright’s work since the 1980s shows that the Zulu kingdom comprised various categories of people that, in their relationship to the political centre, were either privileged and close, or subordinated and marginalised.¹ The Zulu kingdom, they argue, had a three-level hierarchy: an elite Zulu core ruled over a second tier of chiefdoms that had joined the Zulus early in their expansion. The disparate origins of these two tiers were glossed in the forging of a common ‘amandla’ identity. A third tier on the geographic, political and social fringes of the kingdom comprised people labelled provisionally as menial, down-and-outs and oddities. The term ‘omalala’ is the best-known appellation of this category, but there were others.²

Hamilton and Wright stress the contingent and situated nature of these categories of people, assembled and constructed within the process of political centralisation. By contrast, in Alfred Bryan’s view, the Lala and Ngunis were clan groups, each with a distinctive history. The Lala comprised clans that once lived in the coastal region of KwaZulu-Natal, having arrived there via the Tsonga area from north of the Vusi River. They might even have been originally Shona. They spoke a dialect that to the ears of pure Ngunis was akwalala, to speak with a superabundance of dentisation. One cluster of pure Ngunis, the Ntingas, arrived in Zululand somewhat later by a different route, from the west. It was from these pure Ngunis that the Zulu kingdom sprung. The Lala were swept away during the emergence of the kingdom and were largely lost to history.³ Various materials nevertheless entered the physical and documentary archive with the designation ‘Lala’.


the bend of the river marks the site of Kwazangqaburn, occupied between about 1800-1840 and 1894. The site is now flooded by the Nkandla Dam near Durban, Photograph: KwaZulu-Natal Museum.