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 '*amantungwa*' identity. A third tier on the geographic, political and social fringes of the kingdom comprised people labelled pejoratively as menials, down-and-outs and oddities. The term '*amalala*' 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 Bryant's view, the Lala and Ntungwa 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 Vaal River. They might even have been originally Shona. They spoke a dialect that to the ears of pure Ngunis was *ukutekela*, to speak with a superabundance of dentalisation. One cluster of pure Ngunis, the Ntungwas, arrived in Zululand somewhat later by a different route, from the west. It was from these pure Ngunis that the Zulu kingdom sprung. The Lalas 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 KwaGandaganda, occupied between about AD 600 and 1050. The site is now flooded by the Inanda Dam near Durban. Photograph: KwaZulu-Natal Museum

1   C. Hamilton, 'Ideology, Oral Traditions and the Struggle for Power in the Early Zulu Kingdom', MA thesis, University of the Witwatersrand, 1985; C. Hamilton, 'Political Centralisation and the Making of Social Categories East of the Drakensberg in the Late Eighteenth and Early Nineteenth Centuries', *Journal of Southern African Studies* 38, 2012: 291–300; J. Wright and C. Hamilton, 'Traditions and Transformations: The Phongolo-Mzimkhulu Region in the Late Eighteenth and Early Nineteenth Centuries' in *Natal and Zululand from Earliest Times to 1910: A New History*, edited by A. Duminy and B. Guest, Pietermaritzburg: University of Natal Press and Shuter and Shooter, 1989, pp. 48–82; C. Hamilton and J. Wright, 'The Making of the *AmaLala*: Ethnicity, Ideology and Relations of Subordination in a Precolonial Context', *South African Historical Journal* 22(1), 1990: 3–23.

2   Wright and Hamilton, 'Traditions and Transformations', p. 72; Hamilton and Wright, 'Making of the *AmaLala*'; J. Wright, 'A.T. Bryant and the "Lala"', *Journal of Southern African Studies* 38(2), 2012: 355–68.

3   A.T. Bryant, *A Zulu-English Dictionary*, Pietermaritzburg: P. Davis & Sons, 1905, p. 26*; A.T. Bryant, *The Zulu People, as They Were before the White Man Came*, second edition, Pietermaritzburg: Shuter and Shooter, [1949] 1967, pp. 15–20.

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