

# Manufactured myths are 'hostile to democracy'



*WHITEWASH: The betrayal by the British of the Xhosa chief Hintsa, who was seized after he entered the British camp for peace talks, is erased in this contemporary depiction of Hintsa's supposed capture by Colonel Harry Smith.*

**PENNY ENSLIN argues that nation building is not a defensible approach to education after apartheid.**

Apartheid abused the concept of culture for cynical racist ends, but it remains true that South Africans cannot be described as culturally homogeneous or sharing distinctive characteristics. There are elements of culture which are shared, but deep divisions make it clear that many do not share a sense of belonging with their compatriots. Loyalties tend to be factional rather than embracing the whole society.

But we should not make too much of the idea that for a society to be a nation it must demonstrate a set of natural or objective features. As Ernest Gellner argues in *Nations and Nationalism*, nations are created by nationalism. Rather than emerging spontaneously, nations are invented as a result of

bureaucratic incorporation or of mobilisation by intellectuals and liberation movements.

A feature of this process of nation building is the manufacture of a national myth. Where there are deep divisions in a society myths of considerable proportions and imagination would have to be manufactured if its members were to see themselves and each other as belonging to one nation.

The question which arises, therefore, is whether education should include the manufacture and teaching of these national myths and inventions as part of a process of nation building.

Christian National Education (CNE) is a painful example of schooling aimed at nation building. Instead of developing rational reflection and critical thinking, CNE set out to promote a myth which declared that God had allotted the land in South Africa to Afrikaners, or whites, and that historical events, including the appropriation of this land, were God's will.

**E**DUCATION for nation building has been proposed as a way to create a unified South African people. But it would be incompatible with education for democracy.

Before examining this assertion it is necessary to look first at how realistic the idea of a common nationhood is in a society as divided and diverse as South Africa. While some of the features that make a nation, such as occupation of an historical territory and political autonomy, are either present or imminent, others are simply not applicable.

Although it is probably true that many South Africans share a common loyalty to the political community, our history is only partly one of living together. It is also a history of colonialism and conquest, of conflict, expropriation, oppression and exploitation. As a result, members of the society have very different sets of memories and myths, where some members are depicted as enemies rather than compatriots. It is difficult to locate a common nationhood here.

## Manufactured myths

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For those who embraced the nation-building myths of CNE, reasons or evidence for these beliefs were not relevant and critical scrutiny of them was not encouraged.

However, the development of rationality should be central to education, and students should be encouraged to exercise rational skills. While this does not mean that education is only about learning to engage in rational enquiry – education also legitimately promotes imagination and creativity – it does imply that education should not encourage students to embrace false beliefs.

Indeed education, and particularly education for a democratic way of life, must expose false beliefs, especially the myths that political and cultural entrepreneurs would have students embrace. This could occasionally require that students and citizens publicly renounce the nation's deeds and values.

But loyalty to the nation is expected of its members. While nationhood is often expressed as a demand for autonomy for the nation, this does not usually imply autonomy for its members. Although nationalists typically claim that every nation is unique, individual members of the nation must surrender their individual uniqueness in order to belong to the organic whole, identifying with and celebrating a given heritage.

### ***'Christian National Education is a painful example of schooling aimed at nation building'***

Nationalism offers little by way of inspiration to democratic deeds and procedures, and nothing to prompt debate. It serves a purpose in liberation struggles, but offers little thereafter.

Informed by a sense of history which is a combination of forgetting and retrospective mythologising, nationalism does not foster the exercise of reason or the informed, critical imagination and questioning of authority which should be developed by education. Nation building would pre-empt the exercise of democratic reason by discouraging open-ended public debate on alternative political possibilities, and exploration of proper rational grounds for action.

The related ideals of education and democracy are incompatible with that of the "nation". Nation building is not a defensible approach to education after apartheid.

**Penny Enslin is head of the Education Department at the University of the Witwatersrand.**

# SA in grip of 'borderline syndrome'

**The debate on nation building has overlooked the analogy between the role of good parenting in creating a healthy individual identity and the role of leadership in creating a coherent national identity.**

**SHAUNA WESTCOTT spoke to Theo Schkolne.**

**I**F THE South African community were a large extended family and its leaders were concerned parents, the problem that family therapy would have to address would be "borderline syndrome". So says Theo Schkolne, graduate of Duquesne University in the United States and McMaster University in Canada.

In individuals, "borderline personality" is indicated by a shaky and non-coherent identity, dramatic shifts in mood and a great potential for self-destructiveness. In the case of a collective, a diagnosis of "borderline syndrome" would be made on the basis of the volatility of emotion in the collective, the absence of a central, unified community core and collective self-destructiveness.

"I think that in South Africa, in this time of transition," says Schkolne, "the volatility of emotions focuses largely around fear, paranoia, mistrust, entitlement and the unresolved experience of woundedness."

In individuals, the causes of borderline personality lie in grossly inadequate parenting – what Schkolne calls "a profound failure in early nurturance and containment, where a sense of coherent identity is consumed by the needs of the parental figure or through forms of early deprivation".

If the analogy between parents and political leadership holds, it is not difficult to see how the barbarism of the apartheid order, and the wholesale neglect and cruelty emanating from institutions that should have provided care, sowed the seeds of the societal damage that now threatens the future.

According to Schkolne, even after the official death of apartheid, leaders are still failing in the essence of their task.

"Leadership in this country still seems to be grounded in the articulation of special interest needs. Even though this is legitimate in terms of past discrimination, it prevents

them from fully encountering the diversity of cultural and human needs and experience. If we see the various diversities in our society as a family, then the parental figures are not providing real containment for all that diversity of needs.

"Containment, a sense of safety, is what leadership should be offering; providing our diversity of communities with common ground. Instead, they dwell too much on the idea of entitlement. While this is legitimate, it may create a sense of fear in others of being dispossessed or relegated to the role of outsider.

"The real task for leadership is to build the sense of national identity that we have never had because of our history of separation and division. A national identity must be based on the celebration of unity within diversity. The challenge for leadership is how to articulate that – because that is containment."

Schkolne stresses that a sense of collective identity should not be confused with the prejudiced stereotyping that assigns to outsider groups – Afrikaners, Zulus, gays, Jews, scapegoats of any sort – characteristics that encapsulate and separate them from others.

"The characteristics of the national personality, as modelled by leadership, should include respect for difference and diversity, and a search for all those things that are common in people's interests, needs, values and views. This commonality is obscured when people are set up against each other in a competitive way."

Can a society suffering from borderline syndrome hope for recovery? That depends on the leadership, says Schkolne. Leaders need to find and provide "those transcendent values that truly don't relate to majority or ethnic power but rest on the common threads". Such a commitment will foster the development of "a solid national identity