

MYTHS, HISTORY AND POLITICS

LM Thompson: **The Political Mythology of Apartheid;**
Yale, 1985, R38,95.

In recent years much stress has been laid on the economic rationality of apartheid. But no one can deny that it also rests on a set of myths – about the importance of race, and about the past of this country. It is those racial and historical myths that Leonard Thompson – formerly Professor of History at the University of Cape Town, he retires this year as Professor of History at Yale – is concerned with in his new book, which greatly expands an essay he wrote on the subject in the **Journal of African History** as long ago as 1962.

As an historian, Thompson is interested in showing how myths are created, and how they change over time, as the interests they serve change. He shows how certain events on the Cape frontier in 1815 and during the Great Trek in 1838 were seized upon to create the myths of Slagtersnek and the Covenant respectively. Both myths were used to serve the interests of Afrikaner nationalism: Slagtersnek primarily to promote Afrikaner resistance to British imperialism – it was viewed essentially as a story of the evil British – and the Covenant to show that the Afrikaners were a chosen people, which aided the mobilisation of Afrikaners in a single political movement.

As British power waned, an Afrikaner nationalist government entrenched itself in office, and, especially as that government saw the need to incorporate English-speakers in an Afrikaner-dominated white South African nation, an anglophobic, anti-British myth became unnecessary or even counter-productive. The Covenant myth similarly lost much of its functionality, and Afrikaner scholars have undermined much of its historical basis, one being tarred and feathered for his pains. That it survives – the Day of the Vow remains a public holiday – is, Thompson suggests, primarily because of the religious element involved in the myth.

Afrikaner nationalist mythology has from the beginning had both a liberatory and a racist aspect. Thompson argues that from the Second World War the racist element came to predominate in Afrikaner nationalist mythology. As a result of successful ethnic mobilisation, 'liberation' was won in 1948. But as Afrikaners were a minority, their 'liberation' meant oppression of a majority. That oppression was legitimated by the racist ingredient of the mythology, which became the core element in apartheid mythology. According to the racial myth,

race is the fundamental division between people; everyone can be placed in one or other unassimilable race. Ethnic distinctions are regarded as being much more important among blacks than among whites. And blacks are said to have no more historical claim to the land than whites.

RACISM DISCREDITED

As Thompson points out, the world of science for long accepted the idea that racial differences were fixed and significant. It was the Nazi use of racism that did most to undermine the idea of racial hierarchy, and to discredit scientific racism. In the world in general after the Second World War a process of deracialisation gathered momentum, and the very concept of race came to be regarded as scientifically irrelevant. In South Africa, on the other hand, there was a stricter enforcement of racism.

In recent years scholars have totally undermined the myth of 'the empty land'. But the racist mythology survives in altered form. The idea of inferiority was first replaced by one of difference. Then government realised that crude and all-embracing racism might help undermine racial domination rather than preserve it, hence the recent desegregation measures. A more sophisticated racism is limited to core elements, such as the franchise. For apartheid to go in its entirety, the very idea of racial difference would have to go. Because the racist myth ultimately buttresses white supremacy, it seems likely to be with us for some time yet.

Though he includes a considerable amount of detail on his case-studies, Thompson's exceptionally lucid style makes this an easy book to read. It is not the last word on ideology in the South African context: it does not consider the English-speaking ingredient in apartheid mythology – David Welsh, after all, has found the roots of segregation in colonial Natal – and in places it confuses ideas about the past and predictions about the future. It does not get to grips with the problems involved in weighing the strength of a mythology: the works of intellectuals, school textbooks and the speeches of politicians are all only pointers. But Thompson's book casts important light on the interplay between South African history and its present politics. □