

**The article on the opposite page commenced the African History series which first appeared in the Learning Post in 1980. The Learning Post was launched by SACHED (South African Committee for Higher Education) Trust as a weekly education supplement in the Sunday Post. Written largely by Neville Alexander, it was a popular and trailblazing initiative then and is just as important and relevant in the struggle to decolonise knowledge and the curriculum today.**



Dr Neville Alexander wrote almost all of the articles in the African History series. He was the director of SACHED's Cape Town office from 1980 to 1987 after spending 10 years on Robben Island from 1963 to 1973 and six years thereafter under house arrest. He passed away on the 27th of August 2012.

The 1980s were turbulent times in apartheid South Africa. Building on the momentum and the lessons of the historic worker strikes of 1973, the student uprising of 1976, and the liberation struggles in neighbouring countries, the early 80s saw the emergence of vibrant community based organisations, student formations and the union movement. It was also a time when countless sacrifices were made in the face of state repression. Despite the killings, torture and imprisonment, resistance to apartheid capitalism was not extinguished, in fact, it increased.

It was also a time when a great deal of discussion, strategising, organising and mobilising took place. Educational issues were regarded as critical for the development of social and political consciousness to support the process of mass mobilisation. The role, purposes and meaning of education were rethought and the racist ideas and practices of apartheid education rejected.

Many young activists in the Black Consciousness and other movements prominent at the time, were concerned about representations of black history and culture, its contribution to the development of knowledge and its place in the pantheon of human development and in relation to the development of the continent. This was particularly important against the background of the racist ideas that were pervasive in the educational curriculum, in school and tertiary education texts, in the ideas of the ideologues and educators trained by apartheid and in the media controlled by capitalist media houses supportive of the apartheid state.

Regrettably even many oppressed people in South Africa were unaware of the rich and varied history of the African continent, paid little attention to it, and were themselves (like many thousands of teachers) complicit, often unwittingly, in purveying falsities and canards about the continent of Africa and its history. They too looked to Europe for models of political systems, science and development. It was against this background that SACHED launched its innovative and pioneering education-through-the-newspaper project.

People's College, a weekly educational supplement that was carried by the Sunday World emerged in 1977 as a response to the students' rejection of Bantu Education and the urgent need to provide education alternatives. In October 1977, along with various organisations, the Sunday World and its education supplement - People's College - was banned.

The Sunday World was courageously followed by the appearance of the Sunday Post and SACHED was able to negotiate its new project - the Learning Post - with the new newspaper. It was an eight page publication that carried material to support school based and other learners in a variety of subjects including Improving Reading Skills, Maths, Popular Science, Accountancy and African History, using new and innovative materials and methods in the learning process, influenced by Paulo Freire, to counter the passive, paternalist and rote-learning demanded by Bantu Education.

The African History course was based on a careful selection of learning material and provided an alternative world view. It was a new and radical departure from the narrow and limited Eurocentric history curriculum that existed in all secondary schools in the country. For the first time in South Africa, the readership of the weekly Sunday Post received

well researched articles on African History. A new world was opened to its readers and an alternative and exciting historical perspective of African history and development was created to counter predominant racist accounts of Africa's history.

The denial and distortion of African history was part and parcel of the objectives of Bantu Education, and so in providing this course on African History, the Learning Post opened up a new and different world for its readers.

Neville Alexander, who was based in the Cape Town offices of SACHED, was the chief author of the African History series. Each week he would unfailingly send the relevant text to the Johannesburg offices for editing by Helene Perold and each week for 33 weeks, a new and exciting chapter on African History would appear. There can be little doubt about the success of this initiative. Regular feedback and readership figures demonstrated that the material was read by hundreds of thousands of people, and was often used for collective learning. There were undoubtedly some challenges as this was educationally pioneering work and the political context was hostile. SACHED had to venture into active and engaging educational methodologies, content and a commitment to creating new education possibilities.

Alexander would not have wanted the material to be used simply to glorify African history. No! His intention would have been to provide a realistic account of that history, which had to be studied and examined critically for the purposes of understanding the continent, responding to the racist and sexist accounts of it and most importantly for the purposes of changing post-colonial racist and exploitative societies.

The republishing of the African History course of Learning Post comes at a time in our country when many aspects of our education system (both Basic and Higher) are under scrutiny. Students – through their recent actions – have now presented us with an opportunity to re-examine the history of Africa in the light of the struggles for the decolonisation of knowledge and the curriculum practices of education institutions. We can do this collectively and individually, by organising discussions around these issues, creating study circles for researching more of it, by sharing our understanding within our schools, universities and communities and by developing new and innovative texts that speaks to our lives, experiences, communities and aspirations.

By understanding this history, we can think about the kind of society that represents our best aspirations, and mobilise, organise and educate for better alternatives. Given that this series was written in 1980, it is hardly surprising that in making use of it for educational purposes, we can also update and correct some of the information contained in it. A much larger body of source material is now available. We believe that this historic publication can be used to stimulate greater interest in African History and make a vital contribution to the national debate on the decolonisation project.

John Samuel (National Director of SACHED, 1979-1991)

Enver Motala (Director of SACHED's Durban office, 1980-1990)

Salim Vally (Director of CERT)

#### **CAPTION**

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