

JBF Tribute to a Pan Africanist: Cde Motsoko Pheko

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Khanya College joins Pan-Africanists all over the world in celebrating the life of Dr. Motsoko Pheko, who in his life tried to improve the lives of all Africa's people and rekindle their knowledge and interest in Africa. Dr. Pheko passed away on 19 April 2024 at the age of 93.

Motsoko Pheko was born in Lesotho on 13 November in 1933, to a relatively wealthy family. After the untimely death of his parents, he moved to South Africa and was brought up by his aunt. In 1948 when the Nationalist Party came to power and implemented its apartheid policies, he was only 15 years old. Like many of his generation, Pheko supported the struggle for liberation from oppression and exploitation. He joined the Pan African Congress (PAC), a party of radical youth who had recently broken away from the African National Congress (ANC). Pheko was involved in the PAC's Dobsonville branch, in 1959. In 1960 the PAC's anti-pass resistance campaign ended with the Sharpeville Massacre; and the party was banned together with the ANC.

The young Pheko was arrested and imprisoned for his anti-apartheid activities in 1960. After his release he went into exile, and served the PAC in various capacities, as organiser, branch chair, and country representative. He returned to South Africa in 1994 and became a Member of Parliament (MP). He was leader of the PAC from 2003-2006, but after internal disagreements, he was expelled in 2007. His Pan African perspectives – anti-colonialism, land redistribution, education and knowledge of Africa's history and struggles, amongst others – shaped his life's work and his commitment to social justice and equity for all Africa's people.

He obtained a number of university degrees from South Africa, Zambia and Britain, and worked in the United Kingdom, Zambia and Tanzania. Pheko lived many lives as activist, lawyer, theologian and academic; and authored about 30 books. An archive of Pheko's work is available at UNISA, in Pretoria.

Cde Pheko participated in Khanya College's first edition of the Jozi Book Fair (JBF) in 2009, at Museum Africa in Johannesburg. The JBF was a particular response to increasing poverty and unemployment and the poor culture of reading and writing in all South Africa's languages, especially amongst black working people in post-democracy South Africa. The JBF aims to create readers and writers, and critical citizenship, amongst those historically excluded and marginalised.

The JBF's aims resonated with cde Pheko's Pan Africanism, and the dire needs in South Africa. During his exile he was involved in publishing initiatives to make books on Africa's history and knowledge more affordable and accessible. He also founded Tokoloho Development Association, a trust. 'Tokoloho' is a Sesotho word meaning freedom. The trust promotes and publishes research into precolonial indigenous African knowledge. Pheko exhibited at the JBF as Tokoloho Publishers.

Cde Pheko was a stalwart of the JBF. He would set up his own stall, exhibiting Tokoloho's titles, and stayed for the duration of the festival. He was accessible to everyone, amongst others, fellow exhibitors, school youth and the public. He participated in every festival except for 2020, when COVID-19's lockdown obliged the festival to be online.

Cde Pheko's consistent presence contributed to the JBF's character as an African book fair 'from below', and its growth and legitimacy in a country where book fairs are largely for elites and exclude the marginalised majority. He worked with Khanya College and fellow exhibitors, authors and cultural workers to inspire a new generation, who often had no books in their homes or access to school and local libraries.

Cde Pheko was warm, respectful and humble. An organic intellectual who never lost the 'common touch', mindful of the need for Africa's working people to drive the struggle for their own liberation.

We send our condolences to Cde Pheko's family, his comrades and his friends. A giant has fallen.

Cde Pheko, we miss you, love you and we will always remember you.

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