

## ARTICLES

# EDUCATING THE NATION ABOUT UNION – WHOSE HERITAGE?

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“Heritage is our collective treasure, given to us and ours to bequeath to our children.”  
(MacMillan, 2009)

### ***Abstract***

On the 31st of May 2010, South Africa, as a geopolitical creation, had been in existence for a century; a momentous occasion for the country. However, the day passed with little acknowledgement of this event. The question that needs to be asked is why? Surely, the centenary of the geopolitical creation of a country should be commemorated as it is a time to reflect where the country has come from? Thus the focus of this article is the lack of commemoration of Union in 2010 and History Education. The centenary of Union was not commemorated and this phenomenon needs to be unpacked and understood. The Union forms part of the heritage of all South Africans but this it not deemed so by the state. In terms of education, the history of Union will be forgotten as it is not studied and the importance of the creation of South Africa as a geopolitical unit will fall by the waste side. Therefore, the purpose of this article is to unpack the notion of heritage and Union, its exclusion from the National Curriculum Statement (NCS), the non commemoration of its centenary, the significance of Union to society and its recent inclusion into the new Curriculum and Assessment Policy (CAPS) document.

**Keywords:** Union of 1910; Heritage; Commemoration; History Education; South Africa; Nation building.

### **Introduction**

On the 31st of May 2010, South Africa, as a geopolitical creation, had been in existence for a century; a momentous occasion for the country. However,

the day passed with little acknowledgement of this event. The question that needs to be asked is why? Surely, the centenary of the geopolitical creation of a country should be commemorated as it is a time to reflect where the country has come from?

The power of the state and the discourse that it promotes regarding Union is so overwhelming that people are not interested in hearing about something which the Department of Education (DoE) has not included in the NCS – History (2003). There are gate keepers who constantly enforce the will of the state. Perhaps, people simply toe the line as to not challenge the state and thus purely accept what is given to them. I also came to the conclusion that people do not wish to hear about the Union and thus it is forgotten or perhaps it has been forgotten as the state has removed it from the National Curriculum Statement –History (NCS-History) as well as any public recollection of it namely the previous public holiday which took place on 31 May. The purpose of this paper is to understand this phenomenon of the all powerful state and the silences it enforces in History Education with the unintended support of self appointed gatekeepers.

It is easy to see why the current dispensation would exclude Union as it can be seen as the history of the ‘white oppressor’ however, one has to question the power of this ideology when educators will not allow alternative views to that of the state.

Image 1: The Market Square in Johannesburg were crowds await the result of the first Parliamentary election of the Union of South Africa held on 15 September 1910. The Government Party won even though Louis Botha lost his Pretoria East seat. © Museum Africa



Source: South African History Online (2011) Gathering crowd in Market Square in Johannesburg. [Online image]. Available from: [http://www.sahistory.org.za/pages/governance-projects/liberation-struggle/1\\_1902\\_1910.htm](http://www.sahistory.org.za/pages/governance-projects/liberation-struggle/1_1902_1910.htm)[Accessed on 2 June 2010 ].

The implication of this is that often histories, especially in this case, the history of Union, are excluded so as to be silenced because it is not seen as important to the future of history teaching and learning. This paper will look at the Union of South Africa in 1910, its exclusion from the NCS, the non commemoration of its centenary, the significance of Union to society and its recent inclusion into the new CAPS document (DoE, 2010:8).

## **Defining Union**

Throughout History, the concept of Union has been evident and therefore multiple perspectives exist of the concept. In many instances, the notion of Union has shaped or affected the political landscape, economic growth as well as social dynamics of a country or countries involved. However, the role of Unions and Unionism or unification cannot be forgotten. Union is all about unifying whether nations, provinces or people. While today the term may have a different meaning, Union in all its forms and meanings needs to be regarded as important; for it not only shaped our past but most certainly has a hand in our present and future.

The Soviet Union, which was established in 1922, consisted of Russia and 14 other Soviet Socialist Republics which formed the world's largest country, occupying one seventh of the total land surface. The amalgamation of these several states placed huge strain on the Cold War efforts of the United States. The benefit of such unification was widespread as intensive restructuring of the economy, industry and politics took place. Thus, Union in this context can be defined as "a political unit consisting of a number of states or provinces with the same central government". (Soane & Stevenson, 2006, 1578)

Trade Unions were crucial to the Marxist notion of 'workers of the world unite.' In an attempt to promote awareness of the daily struggles that the proletariat went through and to achieve international cooperation, Marx gave great importance to Trade Unions. The Trade Unions were an anathema to the ruling of the capitalists or the bourgeoisie. Without the introduction of these Trade Unions, the working class of today would most probably not be as well represented as they are.

The African Union is an intergovernmental organization which promotes political and socio-economic integration for the continent of Africa, among other things. The purpose of this Union is to ensure that the people of Africa benefit and become better off as a result of the work that Union is doing. The

notion of Union can be seen as one which sets out to benefit its people.

The Union of South Africa in 1910 was a momentous milestone in South Africa's History as this marks the birth or creation of South Africa as an independent country from direct Imperial Rule. The Union geographically integrated South Africa while the "... change in 1994 was one – that for the first time – unified all the people of South Africa." (Ashton, 2008, 6)

Image 2: A Postage stamp of the Union of South Africa with the head of British King George, ca 1910



Source: Shutterstock (2003) Postage stamp [Online image]. Available from: <http://www.shutterstock.com/pic-43576087/stock-photo-union-of-south-africa-circa-postage-stamp-of-the-union-of-south-africa-with-the-head-of.html> [Accessed on 2 June 2010].

Image 3: A picture postcard commemorating the Union



Source: Orange Free State Study Circle (1953) Picture postcard of the Union [Online image]. Available from: <http://www.orangefreestatephilately.org.uk/edwardian.aspx> [Accessed on 2 June 2010].

### **Significance of Union; 100 years on**

On the 31<sup>st</sup> May 2010, South Africa had been a Union for a century; a momentous occasion for any country. However, the day passed with little acknowledgement of this event. The question which needs to be asked is why? Surely, the centenary of the geopolitical creation of a country should be commemorated as it is a time to reflect. What did the Union mean to people in 1910? It unified all people under one geographical and political umbrella. It must be pointed out that none of this has shifted; South Africa still finds itself under one geographical and political umbrella. The consequences of South Africa becoming a Union are evident in South Africa as a country today; the Republics disappeared and the British colonies were dissolved and a unitary state came to the fore.

Partington's (1980:112-116) five criteria for historical significance theorises why the commemoration of the centenary of the Union is significant.

Firstly, the importance of the event to the people in the past is considered. The Union was important to the people in the past as it freed them from Imperial Rule and allowed them to govern themselves as one unitary state; it was their struggle for freedom.

Secondly, the profundity of how deeply people's lives have been affected by the event is taken into account. The Union deeply affected peoples' lives not only in the past but also in the present as South Africa as it is known today may never have come into existence had it not been for the unification.

Thirdly, quantity is analysed; how many lives have been affected by the event? The Union affected everyone living at the time, politically, socially and economically.

Fourthly, the durability of the event is deliberated; for how long have people's lives been affected by the event? The durability of the Union is still affecting people's lives one hundred years on.

Finally, the relevance of the event is questioned in terms of the increase understanding of present life. It is this relevance that is being contested presently.

Without commemorating the Union of South Africa, we are denying the fact that it was the war-seasoned Generals Smuts, Hertzog and Botha who "laid the foundations and frameworks that have enabled the evolution of a complex and dynamic country with a thriving economy and a vibrant society."

(Mabogoane, 2010) If it were not for them, South Africa would not have existed the way it does. Mabogoane (2010), who is a journalist for the *Business Day* Newspaper, further notes that, “even black and other movements owe their existence to the creation of the state by these men [as they] benefited from these inheritances without the commensurate initiatives of blood and sweat, hence their estrangement and non appreciation.”(Mabogoane, 2010)

It is therefore, understandable why the commemoration of Union has had such a weak grip on the populace. No one likes to be reminded that much blood and tears were shed to shaped present day South Africa but what needs to be remembered is that in different times all South Africans shared those deadly experiences and fought together for a unified land away from Imperial oppression. However, commemoration of Union in the past was also not very popular. In a round table discussion and forum on “Contrasting Centenaries: 1910 in Comparative Perspective” earlier this year, Grundlingh (2010, May 31) noted possible reasons for the non commemoration of Union in the past.

Firstly, the Afrikaners viewed union as something that was not of their own making and it reminded them of their dependent relationship with the Imperials.

Secondly, the Union coincided with the Queen’s birthday (31 May) which was then a public holiday. This did very little to endear the occasion for the Afrikaners.

Thirdly, the African people were even less inclined to celebrate Union as this reminded them of the emasculation of their potential voting rights. Despite the fact that Union was seen as a ‘white’ creation, it did eventually lead to the formation of the ANC in 1912.

Finally and most importantly, there was never a move to popularise the commemoration of Union. Unlike, today where South Africa has a Department of Cultural Affairs, those cultural entrepreneurs of the past never attempted to organise grand scale commemorations of Union. It must be mentioned that there were subsequent efforts to raise the profile of Union but none were very successful.

Tyson (2010:21), a journalist from the *Business Day* Newspaper, notes that the centenary is a historic event which could have united all South Africans sharing a “combined History.” This ‘combined History’ is also known as a shared heritage. The notion of a shared heritage is possible if all people accept who they are and where they come from as this shapes their identity. In turn,

their heritage; the History of their people also influences who they become. Tyson (2010:21) further talks about “a common citizenship” that came about in 1910 where all citizens stood together in a unitary state. However, a shared heritage is not without its challenges as there are things among us, explains Tyson (2010:21) that are seen as intolerable such as ‘net vir blankes’ and racist Zulu songs.

The reality is that these things are part of South Africa’s History and needs to be integrated into a shared heritage. A shared heritage is important as it signifies that South Africa is a geopolitical state created by Union, that all the people of South Africa are affected by Union as one people, that all people have the same political and economic opportunities, and that South Africa functions as a unitary state which broke the roots that were set in 1910 although there were dire impacts on other people. While a unitary state was created, I am not denying that in the process people were marginalised and oppressed as that is a fact. What I am emphasising is the fact the one cannot deny that the Union took place.

### **What is Heritage then?**

Heritage is a concept that is highly debatable in terms of its interpretation as it is understood and interpreted in different ways with each definition having its own specific emphasis. The United Nations Educational Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO) defines heritage as “the product and witness of the different traditions and of the spiritual achievements of the past and ... thus an essential element in the personality of peoples” (Davison, 1991). Therefore, it can be deduced from this definition that heritage is a vital part of society in order for individuals to understand the diverse people around them. The Concise Oxford English Dictionary defines heritage similarly as, “valued things such as historic buildings that have been passed down from previous generations ... of special value and worthy of preservation”. (Soane and Stevenson, 2006:667) while Nkwenti (2010:5) notes that heritage is not limited to tangible resources such as artefacts in museums or monuments or even books. Heritage can also be found in intangible forms such as songs, indigenous knowledge, oral History and memory. Such heritage needs to be preserved for future generations. (Dondolo, Mrubata & Prosalindis, 2002) Therefore, heritage could be seen as the celebration of the inheritance of a people whether tangible or intangible. Therefore, heritage could be seen as the celebration of the inheritance of a people whether tangible or intangible.

The National Curriculum Statement (NCS) is a policy employed by the Department of Education which stipulates what content should be taught in each grade and the assessment standards which should be followed. The NCS states that learners should be “able to engage critically with issues around heritage”. (DoE, 2008:11) While there is nothing wrong with this statement, the problem lies with the content included and excluded. The content prescribed filters down into the content found in the textbooks used to teach History in the classrooms. Textbooks are powerful tools for society. They signify particular constructions of reality and reflect the values and aspirations of society. (Apple & Christain-Smith, 1991; Foster & Crawford, 2006; Sleeter & Grant, 1991) Therefore, textbooks used are in essence constructs of reality told from a particular perspective and thus certain histories are excluded and silenced. Furthermore, this brings to the fore, the idea that if certain histories are silenced then in essence certain heritages are silenced as well.

The dilemma with the Union of South Africa is that it can be argued to be ‘white’ heritage or the heritage of the oppressor. While these points carry some merit, in light of South Africa’s divided past, it should be viewed as a shared heritage. In 2009, Deputy President Motlanthe, an ANC member, addressed the nation at his presidential inauguration and noted the following about the Union of 1910 (Motlanthe, 2009):

... the false dawn of a hundred years ago ... based on racial oppression and exclusion. We assert that the fear, insecurity and loathing that 100 years ago generated an exclusive and illusory peace among colonial masters.

Is Motlanthe saying that whites are colonial masters and are whites still viewed in the same light today? The discourse of Union is perceived to be about certain people inhabiting the country and not about Union itself.

It is no wonder that the centenary was not commemorated as it is viewed in this light. This framing of the past must affect any undertaking to reconstruct and understand Union. Wassermann (2010:20) points out that something is only called heritage when: “we identify with it and see that it helped to make us who we are today. So we construct our own heritage out of the past in ways that make sense or are useful to us e.g. remembering the heroes amongst our ancestors, and not the failures.”

The heritage of the Union shapes who South Africans are; helps form their identity. Public commemorations, museums and archives reinforce the past and in turn identity. If something is important enough to remember then surely it affects who we are? With the History that South Africa has, it is

time that truths are not shied away from even if they do not spell out a pretty picture.

### **Reflecting on Union**

South Africa has been fully democratic for the last 16 years and has a rich and politically tense History. However, the constitutional History of South Africa becoming a state does not begin with the 1994 election but rather in 1910 when South Africa became a Union. This History of the Union of South Africa is not part of the prescribed History taught in schools thus it is silenced. Instead of a 'shared' South African History curriculum there is a National Curriculum which is prescribed by the Department of Education in the NSC document, which in turn affects what is taught in schools and what is found in History textbooks. This is the official History of the country. This official History is merely a version of the truth the government wants its people to learn about and understand. Therefore, sees fit to exclude and include sections of History as long as it agrees with their political ideology and framework. (Crawford, 2006; Foster & Crawford, 2006; Sleeter & Grant 1991) Historical exclusions are rife in many textbooks. It must be mentioned at this juncture, that this is a global issue; governments around the world have a say as to what History is taught in schools. History textbooks as "...ideological tools aim at shaping learners to view the world through the lens of their government's ideology." (Crawford, 2006; Foster & Crawford, 2006; Sleeter & Grant 1991) Moreover, History textbooks are political in nature and thus governments use them to propagate their political ideologies and agendas. This explains, why in most countries, official knowledge in History textbooks are controlled by government. Pingel (1999) observed that History textbooks have been manipulated to glorify and justify the existence of certain political parties or ideologies at the expense of others.

For instance, in Russia during the Communist rule, History textbooks were deliberately distorted to portray the ideologies of Leninism. In China, following Hong Kong's return to China in 1997, existing textbooks had to be revised to conform to Chinese principles. Zimbabwe is another example, where the textbooks are sanctioned by the government to portray the work of the government in a positive light; there is no mention of the land distributions and the international sanctions are blamed for the disasters that have occurred in the country (Jobling, 2006).

The National Curriculum Statement (NCS) states that, “[the] study of History builds the capacity of people to make informed choices in order to contribute constructively to society and to advance democracy.” (DoE, 2008, 9) How can people make informed choices if they are provided with a sanitised version of History? The NCS further encourages teachers to teach learning outcome 4 – heritage. This outcome introduces learners to concerns and debates around heritage, public representations of the past and how it is memorialised. The exclusion of the Union of South Africa in 1910 illustrates how this section of History does not fit into the ‘struggle-for-freedom’ paradigm that is ever-present in NCS today. For instance, the struggle for freedom from the absolute monarchy in the French Revolution, or the struggle for liberation in the America from Imperial Rule, however, the Afrikaner struggle for freedom from Imperial rule is not mentioned. Several problems arise when historical exclusions take place in textbooks.

The NCS has a national policy which has a political undertone which does and will affect the education of the learners in South Africa. Learners are only being exposed to one side of the proverbial coin. In order to gain a holistic understanding of what really took place in the past, they must be presented with both sides of the coin and then left to make their own, informed conclusions. The official History taught also has an impact on the lives of all South African’s daily when it comes to commemorating events and historical figures as only certain events and historical figures are remembered. The Union of 1910 does not ‘fit’ into the ideology of the NCS.

The silence of South Africa becoming a Union in 1910 has not only been in textbooks but also in the lives of the people of South Africa. The public domain (media publication (especially *The Business Day*), historical foundations and the odd academic), commemorated the centenary and alerted the general public of the importance of this event and day. In this instance, this reporting can be deemed as unofficial History. “Unofficial History emanates from a variety of sources and takes a variety of forms ... whereas renditions of official History texts are performed in the public sphere (e.g. at school and at commemorative events)”. (Wertsch, 2000:39). In other words, the voice of the state is so powerful that it drowns out all others and in turn silences. In many instances, the power that lies with the state remains unquestioned and unchallenged as the state possesses the authority. The problem also lies with the people of the country as they allow the silences to occur. The official silences of the government are so overpowering that everyone is silenced in terms of

Union. For instance, a symposium to commemorate the establishment of the Union of South Africa will be held later in the year at the Voortrekker Monument however, not one of the papers or key note speakers address the issue of the Union itself.

There is not a huge disparity between the educational discourse and the public discourse in general as what is mostly published is in line with what is prescribed. There is however, a disparity surrounding the centenary of the Union of South Africa. The silences resonate into the public domain and these silences can account for the lack of commemoration. These silences usually fall in line with the minority voice of the population.

The non-commemoration of the Union of South Africa is an official silence from the government but endorsed by the NCS and subsequently the textbooks. Why do these silences occur?

The current dispensation called for a revision in textbooks and thus a number of sections were silenced as they were constant reminders of the previous regime. Trouillot (1995:70) notes that, “Historical narratives are premised on previous understandings, which are themselves premised on the distribution of archival power.” Therefore, the power lies with the one who writes History. The representations of History are often unevenly represented which compounds the problem further.

In terms of the commemoration of the Union, it did not fit into the outcomes that the current dispensation had in mind. However, with the introduction of the new curriculum, Curriculum and Assessment Policy document (CAPS), the Union is included in the Grade 11 History Curriculum. (DoE, 2010:8) Why has this shift occurred? Perhaps introspection and reflection has taken place and it has been seen that in order to produce learners who value citizenship, they need to understand what this means by looking at citizenship from the union in 1910 until now. CAPS state that “History is about learning how to think about the past, and by implication the present, in a disciplined way. History is a process of enquiry and is about asking questions of the past: What happened? When did it happen? Why did it happen then? It involves thinking critically about the stories people tell us about the past and what we tell ourselves”. (DoE, 2010:3)

This notion of shifting is also evident in an article written by Motlanthe on the 31<sup>st</sup> of May. He notes that, “in appreciation of this history [Union of South Africa in 1910], we take cognisance of the fact that current challenges

cannot be understood unless we look back to where we came from.” (Motlanthe, 2010) After stating that the Union was a false dawn, Motlanthe asserts that the same history needs to be appreciated and acknowledged. Perhaps, the notion of shifting ideologies stem from the transition towards togetherness and unity. For the same reason, the discovery of minerals in the Witwatersrand has also been included in CAPS to mark how this event enabled the South Africa to exist the way it does today. Now that the Union of 1910 has been included in the new curriculum, does this mean that we will view it collectively in a positive light?

### **Conclusion**

Ironically the University of KwaZulu-Natal commemorates its centenary this year as well. With a rich history, UKZN’s establishment in 1910 marked the beginning of a way forward for tertiary education. People have managed to transcend beyond the fact that despite UKZN’s creation in 1910 and accepts that it is flawed and embraces a hundred years of academia (excellence).

Trouillot (1995:70) observes that, “History is the fruit of power, but power itself is never so transparent that its analysis becomes superfluous. The ultimate mark of power may be its invisibility; the ultimate challenge, the exposition of its roots.” Therefore, the onus rests on us to ensure the History we teach our learners and students or the papers, articles or books we write always question the truth the History presented to us. Voicing an opinion may aid in preserving the heritage of the silenced.

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