

History discovers Africans

East P.A. school takes a fresh look

By Maria Puente
Mercury News Staff Writer

History lessons at the Shule Mandela Academy in East Palo Alto are unlike those at any neighboring school: Black Africa was the cradle of Western civilization, not Greece. The ancient Egyptians, builders of the Pyramids, were black Africans, not a mixture of different peoples. Africans invented writing, medicine and mathematics, not the Greeks. Christopher Columbus did *not* discover America.

"How could he have 'discovered' America when there were already people there?" asked student Tarajee Abdul-Mateen, 13.

Good question. In fact, it's precisely the sort of questioning the tiny academy is trying to encourage among its three-dozen students, who are learning, as Henry Ford once said, that "History is more or less bunk." Or at least history as told by white folks.

Search for roots

Alienated from public schools and inspired by a back-to-Africa search for roots, the parents of Shule Mandela students are spending hundreds of dollars a month in tuition to ensure their children get an education steeped in African language, culture and history — even if it contradicts traditional versions of history taught in most American schools.

That approach to education puts the Shule (Swahili for school) Mandela Academy, now in its 11th year, in the vanguard of a controversial movement among some African-American educators who believe an "Afro-centric" curriculum will promote higher self-esteem in black children, help them do better in school and turn them into future community leaders.

Preparation for life

Critics call Afro-centrism "ethnic cheerleading" and worry about alleged "distortion" of history. But a Shule Mandela brochure insists it offers black students "an excellent academic/cultural program to prepare them to survive in this oppressive and racist society."

Does it work? Maybe. At Menlo-Atherton High School, attended by many East Palo Alto students, six members of the junior class are Shule Mandela graduates who are taking all college-prep honors courses. Several other Mandela graduates are already in college.

"They're doing very well, their self-esteem is very high and they have a sense of pride and dignity that the

See SCHOOL, Page 3



Primary school with Africa focus

Shule Nikasemu Emu is another Afro-centric school in East Palo Alto. The school, whose name means "total learning" in Swahili, was founded in 1979.

At the moment, it has only 11 students in kindergarten through third grade, and is much more like a home school than Shule Mandela, said director Nozipo Wobogo, who runs the school out of her East Palo Alto home.

She said her students study the same things as public school students but from the Afro-centric perspective. The Euro-centric perspective amounts to "an outrageous conspiracy" to deprive African-Americans of their history and culture, she said.

"History books don't teach the truth and (as a result) our kids grow up believing they have no place in the world," she said. "We're trying to teach them where they came from, and there's no way they're going to get that in a regular school."

— Maria Puente



Above, teaching assistant Orcelia Dunn tutors A.J. Wilson, 7, and Chayah Hickman, 7, Willow School students who participate in Shule Mandela Academy's after-school program. At left, Willie Edward-Powell III, Dominique Critchlow and Kwanzaa Shakir-Mwongozi pray before their midday meal.

Paul Kitagaki Jr. — Extra

Afro-centric focus helps kids build confidence

SCHOOL, from Page 1

average black kid does not have," said Sara Boyd, a counselor at Menlo-Atherton.

Supporters of Afro-centrism say history — as taught in American public schools — was written by white Europeans, who either left out the contributions and roles of non-white peoples in the development of civilization, or deliberately lied about them.

Shule Mandela aims to provide an alternative to the traditional "Euro-centric" curriculum, said Nobantu Ankoanda, one of the founders of the academy in 1980 and now its principal. A teacher for 12 years in the public schools in East Palo Alto, she said the traditional curriculum leaves the impression that Africa played no role in the history of civilization and that blacks did not enter history until they became slaves to white men.

"We don't want our children to think that the history of Africa and Africans began with slavery," Ankoanda said. "We want to give them the skills to become independent thinkers."

On a recent school day, a group of Shule Mandela sixth-, seventh- and eighth-graders recalled the paucity of information about black history in their former public or parochial schools.

"Martin Luther King and Lincoln and the slaves and sometimes Harriet Tubman, that was it, and usually only during Black History Month," said Rabanja Sanders, 11.

"We learned about *their* history a lot," added Delora Combs, 13.

By contrast, the students said, one of their textbooks at Shule Mandela, "Celebration in Blackness," is solely about African and African-American history.

But some of the material taught in Afro-centric curricula has not been widely accepted by conventional historians.

For instance, most historians agree that Columbus was only one of a long line of explorers to wash up on the shores of the populated American continents, but few believe there is any evidence that black African sailors were among those early explorers.

Critics also say that Afro-centrists give too much credence to claims that Africans invented medicine and mathematics.

On the other hand, historical scholarship is constantly evolving, and more and more historians are beginning to accept, for example, that there is evidence at least some of the ancient Egyptians were black.

And the students themselves are aware that what they're learning may be controversial, even rejected by their teachers once they get to public high schools like Menlo-Atherton High. They say they are taught to be courteous in challenging conventional assumptions.

"You have to be prepared to back it up with research," said Combs.

Aside from history, though, students at the school also take lessons in Swahili (the language of Kenya in East Africa), African music, chanting, dance, exercise and literature. They have weekly career workshops, leadership training sessions, and occasional presentations from professionals and other role models in the black community.

And students claim they do a lot more homework in the three Rs than they ever did in public or private school.

But Ankoanda said the most important aspect of the school is its philosophy, which is based on Nguzo Saba, the seven "Principals of Blackness" that some contemporary experts on Africa believe are the common values of pan-African culture: unity, self-determination, cooperative economics, collective work and responsibility, creativity, purpose and faith.

"The school teaches kids to live

and practice these values," said Maisha Muhammad, a teacher at the Ravenswood district middle school whose youngest child attends Shule Mandela. "We want them to acquire the skills to build their own business, not just to work for someone else all their lives. And we want them to bring those skills back to their community."

Rasheedah Mwongozi, who teaches the youngest children in the school and who has taught at black alternative schools elsewhere in the state, said she has heard people say that such schools are teaching black racism or that it's unhealthy for black children to go to school just with other black children. (In fact, Shule Mandela last year had several Pacific Islander students attending, though they later dropped out for financial reasons.)

"That's not what we're about," Mwongozi said. "We want to make our children confident in themselves so that they're confident around *anybody*. We don't teach them to be inferior or superior, we teach them to be."

Over the years, Shule Mandela has had its ups and downs and has undergone several name changes. In 1989, when it was down to just a handful of students, it merged with a similar school, bringing the total to 35 students in kindergarten through eighth-grade.

Students attend classes in what was once a three-bedroom home in a East Palo Alto neighborhood where drug dealers still ply their wares.

Since the building is shared with a day-care program and an after-school leadership training program for black youth, the Shule is crowded and noisy, but also warm and inviting.

Every day, the students participate in preparing and serving a meal. Every morning they all come together for a meeting to talk about some issue of the day or to watch a video on African culture.

This week, for instance, all the students received their annual assignment to write a report on some aspect of African or African-American history.

The school survives almost entirely on tuition — \$230 per month for one child and up to \$550 a month for three children — though they also receive about \$3,000 a year in federal funds through the Ravenswood district because students include those whose test scores are low.

Officials at Ravenswood say they have cordial relations with Shule Mandela, and take no position on the efficacy of Afro-centrism. But one official noted that many black parents in East Palo Alto may be disenchanted with public and parochial schools because of its changing demographics — Hispanic students are beginning to outnumber blacks in the classes.

"They're feeling more isolated and less comfortable," said the official, who did not want to be named.

The official also pointed out that Shule Mandela students do well for the same reasons that other private-school students do well — because they are in small schools that can offer more individual attention, and because they have parents who are interested enough in their education to seek out a special school for them.

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