

LOMOTÉY

on African values

East Palo Alto's 'Friday-born male warrior' directs 50-member council of black institutions

By **Hakim Eltope**
Special to the Times Tribune

Kofi Lomotey, or "Friday-born male warrior," as his name translates from the African Akan and Ga languages, is the president of the Council of Independent Black Institutions (CIBI) and a man whose life's journey has taken him from the streets of Harlem, his birthplace, to Stanford University, where he is finishing his doctoral dissertation in educational administration.

The council is a national umbrella organization for 50 institutions, three of them alternative schools in East Palo Alto that Lomotey is directly involved with.

Lomotey, 34, attended a New York City elementary school in Jamaica, Queens, and then went on to high school at prestigious Brooklyn Tech. He describes himself after graduation as an "unconscious" young man without any real direction. He worked at a series of Wall Street brokerage houses as a clerk by day, and at night wandered through the maze of street life, with its rights of passage centered around hanging out, the drug culture and defiance of authority.

"My sister was going with a guy who worked at Oberlin College in Ohio," Lomotey said. "He was the one who made sure my high school transcripts got there. It was the beginning of where I am today."

Lomotey's awakening at Oberlin resulted from his meeting three individuals who helped shape his course of personal development.

"They were my heroes then, and they still are," Lomotey said. "I've got their pictures hanging on my wall right now."

One of the three, Omowale (Frank) Satterwhite, now an East Palo Alto city councilman, was then director of black studies, and later associate dean at Oberlin College.

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Kofi Lomotey

Profile

Stokely Carmichael," Lomotey said. "He was close with (Amiri) Baraka, and knew (Ron) Karenga and all those guys."

Besides Satterwhite, there were two other pivotal figures: Booker Peek, a professor of education at Oberlin, and Yacubu Saaka, a Ghanaian who came to Oberlin as an instructor and also functioned as a tour guide for Oberlin students in his native Ghana during the summer of 1971. Lomotey made his first trip to Ghana with a group of Oberlin students guided by Saaka in the summer of 1973. He has since returned to tour West Africa six times.

"I took my first education courses under Booker Peek," Lomotey said. "He was responsible for getting me to see the relationship between education and the goals of liberation. It was through his education courses that I got my first teaching experience."

When Lomotey left Oberlin with a bachelor's degree in economics, he went on to Cleveland State Uni-

Please see LOMOTÉY, Page 8

LOMOTHEY

Continued from Page 1

versity, where he obtained a master's degree in elementary education and administration. He returned to Oberlin as an education instructor and worked with others to start an alternative school.

"That was the beginning of my experience in starting a school based upon an African value system. The school systems teach white middle-class values, but no one focuses on that. People don't question the pushing of values, unless they are other than white middle-class values," he said.

There are presently three alternative schools putting that "African value system" into practice in East Palo Alto.

Nairobi College, founded in East Palo Alto during the early 1970s and closed in 1975, was the only member college of the council that Lomotey heads. The curriculum at all member schools is based on seven principles called the Nguzo Saba. They are: Umoja (Unity); Kujichagulia (self-determination); Ujima (collective work and responsibilities); Ujamaa (collective economics); Nia (purpose); Kuumba (creativity); and Imani (faith).

The Nguzo Saba was formulated during the late 1960s by Maulana Ron Karenga, the black nationalist founder of US, a political action group based in Oakland. The three schools in East Palo Alto are: the Shule Ya Taifa or "School for the Nation;" Shule

Nyamsa Sua or "School for Wisdom and Knowledge;" and the Nikasemu Emu or "Total Learning."

"The parents who send their kids to our schools have taken a major step," Lomotey said. "Most parents realize that their kids are getting a second-class education in the school system, but our parents have decided to do something about it. Our kids score at least one year above grade level on the California Achievement Test. To them, most of them at least, our use of a black context, instead of a white value system, is secondary to their desire for quality education. The concepts taught in both systems are objective, but once someone teaches them in the classroom, the process becomes subjective."

Shule Ya Taifa, founded in 1981 and the oldest of three CIBI schools in East Palo Alto, was headed by Lomotey until he took a leave of absence this year in order to complete his doctoral studies at Stanford. He has also been able to concentrate on fund-raising activities for the council.

Concerning his plans after completing his doctoral studies this spring, Lomotey said: "People in the black community are concerned with credentials like everyone else. Ten years ago I decided to dedicate my life to the development of quality alternative educational institutions for black people. My degree from Stanford will give me the highest credential available through the system. The people who are and will be trained to teach in our schools will benefit from my exposure to the best pedagogical methods, but what I'll be looking for in them is a love for black children and a willingness to work long hours and study."

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Times Tribune photo by Greg Webb

Kofi Lomotey (right) runs with David Jones during a class exercise period at Shule Nyamsa Sua.