

More than skin deep

MELODY MICERE STEWART

In the spirit of Ma'at



"To do always as much as we can, in the way we can, in order to leave our community more beautiful and beneficial than when we inherited it." Dr. Maulana Karenga's concept of Kuumba - creativity - aptly describes a host of African Americans who dedicated their lives to enhancing the community with beauty.

In ancient African cosmology, beauty was/is not simply skin deep. The way you lived your life was the foundation of beauty; good character, not good looks, was the standard of beauty. As a reflection of this idea, the Kiswahili word, Nzuri, means both the beautiful and the good - you could not be considered beautiful and have an ugly disposition. The good and the beautiful are inseparable.

African American history is filled with examples of people who exemplified both good and the beautiful, utilizing their Kuumba - creativity - to enhance the community. The creative arts provides many obvious examples, including the creativity of the artists, writers and musicians of the Harlem Renaissance era of the 1920s to the artists, writers and musicians of the Black Arts Movement of the 1960s. But we must also look at the historical struggle for equality as an expression of Kuumba.

African American creative genius is found in the conception of an "Underground Railroad," of which Harriet Tubman represents as master "conductor." Thomas Jefferson Houston was another "conductor" who helped spirit away enslaved Africans to freedom. The creative genius of his grandson, Charles H. Houston, was noted by Supreme Court Justice Thurgood Marshall, who wrote, "You have a large number of people who never heard of Charlie Houston. But you're going to hear about him, because he left us such important items..." As the architect and legal strategist of Brown versus the Board of Education, historian Columbus Salley called Houston the "legal engineer of the African American quest for justice and equality in post-Reconstruction America."

Prosecutors rethink trial

By Linda Deutsch
THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

LOS ANGELES - With the Black Panthers a distant memory on America's political landscape, prosecutors must decide whether to retry the 29-year-old murder case of ex-Panther Elmer "Geronimo" Pratt.

Savoring his legal victory after a quarter-century battle for Pratt's freedom, San Francisco attorney Stuart Hanlon was cautious in assessing Pratt's chance of release when he returned to court this week.

"The question now is whether the district attorney will appeal," Hanlon said of a judge's ruling Thursday that reverses Pratt's 1972 conviction.

His future may turn on historical perspective. It's a different world now than when FBI chief J. Edgar Hoover declared the beret-clad band of armed militants a danger to the nation.

"The country has changed," Hanlon said. "The Panthers are no longer a threat and people now don't trust the government. Way back then everybody but us fringe lunatics trusted the government. But so much has happened; people no longer trust the police or the government."

Pratt, with shaven head, wire-rimmed glasses and gray goatee, is a 49-year-old grandfather now, a figure remote from the Panther arrested in 1970 for the 1968 robbery and murder of Caroline Olsen on a Santa Monica tennis court. He always maintained he was hundreds of miles away in Oakland at party headquarters when the killing occurred.

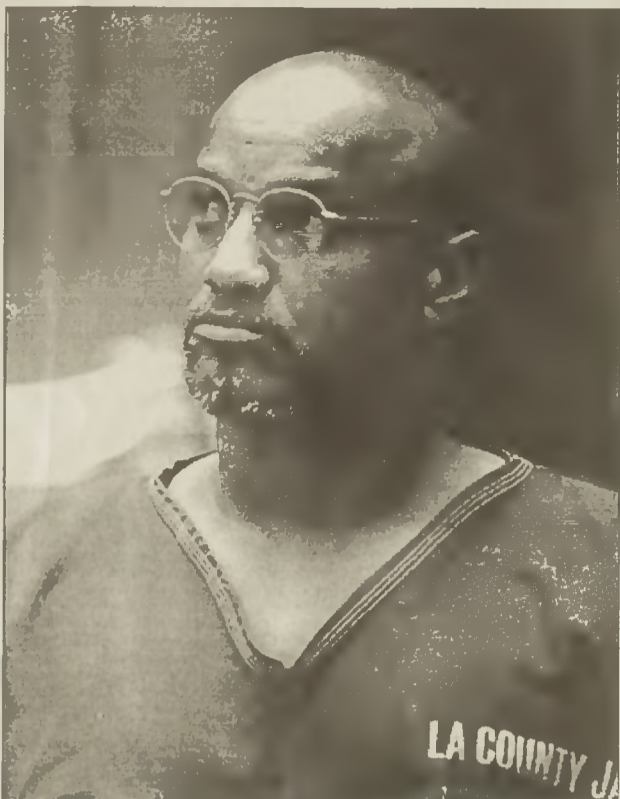
The prospect of another trial 29 years after the fact is seen by many experts as futile. Witnesses have died or been discredited. Evidence is no longer fresh.

"Are we going to go through putting the DA and the police on trial?" asked Hanlon.

"I'm willing to do it but I have better things to do and so does Geronimo."

In fact, few retrials have been held after such a long passage of time. One was the case of Byron De La Beckwith, convicted in the murder of civil rights leader Medgar Evers 29 years after two trials ended in deadlocks.

Lawyers have long claimed Pratt's conviction was political retribution against the Panthers, but only recently did they uncover proof that the chief witness against Pratt, Julius "Julio" Butler, was a police and FBI informant who infiltrated the Panthers and



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PHOTO/KEVORK DJANSEZIAN

Elmer "Geronimo" Pratt, ex-Black Panther leader, sits in Los Angeles Superior Court during a hearing whether to overturn his murder conviction on March 28, 1996. A judge granted a new trial for Pratt last week in Los Angeles, capping a 25-year legal battle.

lied about it under oath.

Orange County Superior Court Judge Everett W. Dickey ruled last week that Butler was crucial to Pratt's conviction. Butler claimed Pratt had confessed to him; Pratt denied it.

In a 13-page decision, Dickey said: "The evidence which was withheld about Julius Butler and his activities could have put the whole case in a different light, and failure to timely disclose it undermines confidence in the verdict."

Los Angeles County District

Attorney Gil Garcetti has three options: appeal the decision, pursue a new trial or drop the charges.

"It may be very tough for the prosecution to retry this case," said Laurie Levenson of Loyola Law School. "It's been a quarter of a century, and their key witness has been proved a liar."

The only eyewitness, Olsen's husband, Kenneth, is dead.

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"The Man Who Sold Hot Dogs"

I'd like to share a story that a very loyal customer recently shared with me, about the man who sold hot dogs.



Fran Farrer,
Advertising & Marketing Director

There was a man who lived by the side of the road and sold hot dogs. He was hard of hearing, so he had no radio.

He had trouble with his eyes, so he read no newspapers. But he sold good hot dogs.

He put up signs on the highway telling how good they were.

He stood by the side of the road and cried "Buy a hot dog, Mister." People bought.

He increased his meat and roll orders. He bought a bigger stove to take care of his trade.

He finally got his son home from college to help him out. But then something happened:

His son said: "Father, haven't you been listening to the radio? There's a big depression coming on. The European situation is terrible. The domestic situation is worse."

That made his father think: "Well, my son's been to college, he reads the papers, and he listens to the radio, and he ought to know."

So the father cut down on his meat and roll orders, took down his advertising signs, and.....

no longer bothered to stand on the highway to sell his good hot dogs. Sales fell fast, almost overnight.

"You're right son," the father said to the boy. "we certainly are in the middle of a great depression. There just isn't any business."

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Jeri



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