

“Greenwood: A Black Nationalist Perspective”  
by Mba Mbulu

The events of what happened in the Greenwood community of Tulsa, Oklahoma, in the months of May and June of 1921, generally go something like this:

Following World War I, Tulsa boasted one of the most affluent African American communities in the country, the Greenwood District, also known as “Little Africa” and “Black Wall Street.” The area was a community within the predominantly white city of Tulsa, OK, and was home to several prominent Black businessmen.

The South was still reeling from the failed Civil War and Reconstruction measures, and furiously enacting Jim Crow Laws. The Oklahoma territory had been established for resettlement of Native Americans from the Southeast, some of whom had owned slaves. Other areas had received many settlers from the South whose families had been slaveholders before the American Civil War. Many of the settlers were relatives of Black Americans who had traveled on foot with the Five Civilized Tribes along the Trail of Tears. Many Black residents had been adopted by Indian tribes after the Emancipation Proclamation; thus, they lived freely in the Oklahoma Territory.

Red brick buildings sprang up along Greenwood Avenue, occupied by businesses owned by a thriving Black middle class that only grew during an oil boom in the early 1900s. To the African American community, Greenwood was everything the South was not. Theaters, night clubs, churches and grocery stores thrived in the Greenwood District. There was affluence and education in Greenwood not seen anywhere else in the country. The schools were superior to those of the white areas, and many of the houses had indoor plumbing before those in the white areas did. Some said a dollar would circulate up to 19 times before leaving Greenwood, a byproduct of the segregation laws which kept Blacks from shopping anywhere else in Tulsa, but also united the community financially. It was only a 1-square-mile area on the north side of Tulsa, but for Blacks in the 1900s, here was an area where African-Americans finally had a chance to make something of themselves, escaping the harsh racism of a nation that deprived them of even the most basic dignities.

This all came to a terrifying end on May 31 and June 1, 1921.

Experts and historians may have differing accounts of what happened, on the morning of May 30, 1921, between a Black man named Dick Rowland, a shoe shine, and Sarah Page, a white elevator operator at the Drexel Building in downtown Tulsa.

Few people were working on May 30, 1921, Memorial Day, but a scream was heard and witnesses saw Rowland rushing away from the building. There is speculation that the two were lovers, something that would have landed both in

serious trouble, but nothing was ever confirmed. The details of what followed vary from person to person, but circulated among the city's white community during the day and became more exaggerated with each telling. Tulsa police arrested Rowland the following day and began an investigation. The Tulsa Tribune , ran the headline, "Nab Negro For Attacking Girl In An Elevator," an inflammatory report that spurred a confrontation between Blacks trying to prevent a lynching and white armed mobs around the courthouse where the sheriff and his men had barricaded the top floor to protect Rowland. Shots were fired and the outnumbered Blacks began retreating to the Greenwood Avenue business district.

At that time, a number of African American men in other parts of the United States had been accused of sexual attacks on white women, and were subsequently put to death, usually at the hands of a lynch mob. The Ku Klux Klan had approximately 2,000 enlisted members in the Tulsa area by the end of 1921. With veterans returning from World War I and jobs becoming more scarce, envy and racial tension grew among some white citizens of Tulsa.

In the early morning hours of June 1, 1921, Black Tulsa was looted and burned by white rioters. Numerous eyewitnesses described airplanes carrying white assailants, who fired rifles and dropped firebombs on buildings, homes, and fleeing families. The government-owned planes, six biplane two-seater trainers left over from World War I, were dispatched from the nearby Curtiss-Southwest Field outside Tulsa. Other accounts, such as testimony from the survivors during Commission hearings and a manuscript by eyewitnesses and attorney Buck Colbert Franklin discovered in 2015, said that on the morning of June 1, men in the planes dropped incendiary bombs and fired rifles at Black residents on the ground. Law enforcement officials later stated that the planes were to provide reconnaissance and protect against a "Negro uprising." Governor Robertson declared martial law, and National Guard troops arrived in Tulsa. It was reported that guardsmen assisted firemen in putting out fires and taking imprisoned Blacks out of the hands of vigilantes. However, first hand accounts offered different narratives.

Survivors talk about how the city was shut down in the riot. "They shut down the phone systems, the railway. . . . They wouldn't let the Red Cross in. There was complicity between the city government and the mob. It was mob rule for two days, and the result was the complete devastation of the community." Many survivors left Tulsa. Both Black and white residents who stayed in the city were silent for decades about the terror, violence, and losses resulting from this event. The riot was largely omitted from local, state, and American history.

Generally 6 principal participants are associated with this psychotic but not surprising collection of events. These include:

(1) Buck Colbert Franklin, an attorney in Tulsa, Oklahoma, who is most notably known for defending the survivors of the Tulsa Race Riot of 1921. Franklin was born the seventh of ten children on May 6, 1879, near the town of Homer in Pickens County, Chickasaw Nation, Indian Territory (currently Oklahoma). He was named Buck in honor of his grandfather who had been a slave and purchased the freedom of his family and himself. There is speculation that the true origins of the Franklins' freedom came when Buck Franklin's father, David Franklin, escaped from his plantation and changed his name early in the Civil War. Practicing law as a young man in the predominantly white town of Ardmore, Oklahoma, he faced racial prejudice and saw major flaws in the white judicial system. In one instance, he was literally silenced in a Louisiana courtroom because of his race. In response to this, he decided to focus on practicing law within African American communities and moved to the all-Black town of Rentiesville, Oklahoma, where he would marry Mollie Parker Franklin and start his own family in 1915. Franklin later moved to Tulsa, Oklahoma, with his family in 1921.

Franklin and his family had managed to survive the riot. The Tulsa City Council, however, in the aftermath of the carnage, passed an ordinance that prevented the Black People of Tulsa from rebuilding their community. The city planned instead to rezone the area from a residential to a commercial district. Franklin led the legal battle against this ordinance and sued the city of Tulsa before the Oklahoma Supreme Court, where he won. As a consequence, Black Tulsa residents could and did begin the reconstruction of their nearly destroyed community.

(2) J. B. Stradford, a Black American entrepreneur, arrived in Tulsa in 1899. He believed that Black People had a better chance for economic progress if they pooled their resources, worked together and supported each others' businesses. He bought large tracts of real estate in the northeastern part of Tulsa, which he had subdivided and sold exclusively to other Blacks. Stradford later built the luxurious 54-room Stradford Hotel, the largest Black owned hotel in the country. Stradford also owned fifteen rental houses and an apartment building.

(3) Dick Rowland (born c. 1902), dubbed "Diamond Dick Rowland" by the white Tulsa press, was an African-American teen-age shoe shiner whose arrest in May 1921 was the impetus for the Tulsa Race Riot. When he was arrested for "alleged " attempted assault, Rowland was 19 years old. The alleged victim of the assault was a white 17-year-old named Sarah Page.

Rowland's birth name was Jimmie Jones. It is not known where he was born, but by 1908 he and two sisters were orphans living in Vinita, Oklahoma. Jones was informally adopted by Damie Ford, an African-American woman. In approximately 1909 Ford and Jones moved to Tulsa, Oklahoma, to join Ford's family, the Rowlands. Eventually, Jones took Rowland as his last name, and selected his

favorite first name, Dick, as his own. Rowland attended the city's segregated schools, including Booker T. Washington High School.

He dropped out of high school to take a job shining shoes in a white-owned and white-patronized shine parlor on Main Street in downtown Tulsa. There was no separate facility for Blacks at the shine parlor where Rowland worked and the owner had arranged for Black employees to use a segregated "Colored" restroom on the top floor of the nearby Drexel Building at 319 S. Main Street.

On May 30, 1921, Rowland attempted to enter the Drexel building elevator and, although the exact facts are either unknown or in dispute, according to the most accepted accounts, probably tripped and, trying to save himself from falling, grabbed the first thing he could, which happened to be the arm of the elevator operator, Sarah Page, then 17 years old. Startled, the elevator operator screamed and a white clerk in a first-floor store called police to report seeing Rowland flee from the elevator and the building. The white clerk on the first floor reported the incident as an attempted assault.

Rowland was arrested the following day, on May 31, 1921. Subsequent actions by white citizens in an apparent attempt to lynch him, and by Black citizens to protect him, sparked a riot that resulted in over 800 injuries and the deaths of 300 Blacks and 13 whites.

The case against Dick Rowland was dismissed at the end of September 1921. The dismissal followed the receipt of a letter by the County Attorney from Sarah Page in which she stated that she did not wish to prosecute the case.

According to Damie Ford, once Rowland was exonerated he immediately left Tulsa, and went to Kansas City. Little else is publicly known about the remainder of his life.

(4) Sarah Page, the alleged victim of the assault was a white 17-year-old. It is likely that 19 year old Dick Rowland, an African American shoe shiner who worked nearby, and 17 year old Sarah Page, a white elevator operator, knew each other before that day. The only bathroom Rowland would have been allowed to use due to segregation laws was the one at the top of the Drexel Building. Thus, he would likely have been in Page's elevator often and some have even suggested they had a romantic history, though that has never been proven.

(5) James Brooks Ayers Robertson was an American lawyer, judge and the fourth governor of Oklahoma. Robertson was appointed by the state's first governor. Passing a bar exam at the age of 21, Robertson became one of the most resourceful trial lawyers and legal counselors in the Oklahoma and Indian territories, before statehood. He also served as Grand Sire (now known as Sovereign Grand Master) of the Sovereign Grand Lodge of the Independent Order of Odd Fellows, an elite fraternity rooted in friendship, love and truth, from

1915 to 1916. As governor, he was soon faced with two national issues: prohibition and women's suffrage. He proved himself progressive when he called a special session of the white-dominated legislature that led to the state's ratification of the Nineteenth Amendment. His actions eliminated the barriers of voter registration and became a part of the national Constitution on August 18, 1920.

Robertson's administration struggled with the economic effects of a downturn in the oil industry, and nationwide recession, and the poor economy added to racial tension in the state. This postwar period was one of the worst for race relations in Oklahoma's history. To help confront this issue, Robertson created a commission on race relations composed of both white and Black members, but it did little to improve things. On June 1, 1921, Governor Robertson declared Martial Law in Oklahoma and called in the National Guard to end the riots.

(6) Ottoma 'O.W.' Gurley, a wealthy Black land-owner from Arkansas, traversed the United States to participate in the Oklahoma Land run of 1889. The young entrepreneur resigned from a presidential appointment under president Grover Cleveland to build a future in Greenwood. In 1906, Gurley moved to Tulsa, Oklahoma where he purchased 40 acres of land which was "only to be sold to colored." Displaced Black families would find refuge in Gurley's building, as the racial persecution from the south was non-existent on Greenwood Avenue. The Gurley Hotel at 112 N. Greenwood, was the street's first commercial enterprise, which his wife, Emma, managed. Gurley also owned a two-story building at 119 N. Greenwood. It housed Carter's Barbershop, Hardy Rooms, a pool hall, and cigar store. In addition to his rooming house, Gurley built three two-story buildings and five residences and bought an 80-acre farm in Rogers County. Gurley also founded what is known today as Vernon AME Church. O.W. was distinguished, humble, caring and highly educated. He and Emma lived at 112 N. Greenwood and were true pillars of the community. Collectively, they served as mentors and teachers, welcomed newcomers to Greenwood and helped preserve high standards and expectations for their community.

From a Black nationalist's perspective, of the persons generally recognized as principals, only three are historically relevant: Buck Colbert Franklin, Ottoma 'O.W.' Gurley, and J. B. Stradford. J. B. Stradford and Ottoma Gurley were important because they believed that Black People had a better chance for economic progress if they pooled their resources, worked together and supported each others' businesses. They both bought large tracts of real estate in the northeastern part of Tulsa and earmarked it exclusively for occupation by Black People. Buck Colbert Franklin, an attorney, saw major flaws in the white judicial system and decided to focus on practicing law within African American communities. What do these three individuals have in common that renders them historically important? They recognized the need to focus on Black People and Black communities, and realized Black People could be better off if they

functioned as much as possible among themselves and as little as possible within the white power social construct.

From a Black nationalist's perspective, there are three historically relevant positives associated with the course of events that led to the destruction of the original Greenwood section of Tulsa: (1) The Blacks, denied access to the white economy, thrived on their own; (2) At least some of the Black men of Greenwood were not afraid to take up arms to protect themselves against whites even when the odds were not favorable; and (3) the Blacks relied on themselves to reclaim control of their land and rebuild Greenwood after it had been destroyed by the white mobsters. What do these three positives have in common that renders them historically important? At the core of each is independent action on the part of the Blacks, a posture that gave priority to the well-being of Black People. In fact many Blacks, during slavery and coming out of the Civil War, wanted nothing to do with white people. Many moved to remote areas with the hope of governing themselves. The thing about the United States that they were attached to was the land and their investment. They seem to have not felt any unusual need or responsibility to make the people who had enslaved and abused them feel safe and secure. It seems that they viewed and valued themselves vis a vis a Black standard, not a white one, and that is noteworthy.

### The Paradox

White people across the country have a track record of unparalleled cruelty of all types against Blacks, during and after slavery. Beatings, maimings, lynchings, rapes, roasting Blacks rotisserie style, white mobsters rioting against Black individuals and property, indiscriminate incarcerations and assassinations carried out by white authority figures and agencies, etc., made it clear to every clear minded Black person in the country that white people had no intention of dealing fairly with Black People. As i just stated, many of these Blacks wanted as little as possible to do with white people, and moved to remote areas with the hope of being able to govern themselves. They demonstrated that they could not only establish and maintain the institutions they needed to make life enjoyable, they could do so at a very high level. Nonetheless, when given the choice, Black individuals in Greenwood and other communities in the United States showed a preference for white-produced goods, services, institutions and leadership over Black ones. The question Black nationalists need to answer is, "Why?" If Greenwood (for example) was as good for Black People as has been reported, and white people were as anti-Black as has been reported, why did so many Blacks inside and outside of Greenwood, when given the opportunity, forsake their own and embrace that of the whites who despise them? Why do Black individuals readily abandon their own institutions as soon as they get the opportunity to enter white ones, even when they know they are going to be discriminated against?

What is that powerful factor that pushes Black individuals away from preferring their own? Black nationalists need to answer this question; then we can package and popularize a product that will attract the Black masses.

During slavery the church, the most important social and political hub, was spiritual more so than physical, and after freedom was obtained Black individuals and groups established schools, clinics and hospitals, banks, insurance companies, clubs and other social and financial institutions that address the needs of a community. We can be relatively certain that the churches that existed during slavery did not have a profit motive and were not dominated by individuals who thought they were better than others (the white blood factor), so there was little possibility that dislike and distrust within the church would arise due to financial exploitation of some by others or unequal access and treatment. But after slavery ended the churches and other institutions took on more of a business posture, and the social institutions could have become tainted because of unequal access and treatment. If J. B. Stradford and Ottoma Gurley were anything like many of the Black business leaders in other Black communities, they were probably respected for their business instincts but disliked and distrusted because they delivered subpar goods and services at excessive prices, and paid their workers poorly. It was as if they viewed Black communities as captive markets and laborers instead of fellow victims of slavery and Jim Crow. I would suggest that the talk among Blacks in all of these communities was such that they preferred to be mistreated by owners of white institutions while receiving more bang for their money, rather than support owners of Black businesses and leaders of Black institutions who cared more about demonstrating their “superiority” and getting rich than promoting the well being of the community as a whole. For most Blacks, mistreatment by whites was accepted as par for the course, but mistreatment by Blacks that were better off financially felt like a knife stab in the back, or something worse.

It is readily conceded that Greenwood was prosperous, but what does that mean? Out of the Black population of approximately 11,000 in 1921, how many were actually experiencing a decent standard of living? Were the Greenwood residents relatively satisfied with their living conditions, or was this a case of some well-off, self-interested Black residents at the top and various degrees of dissatisfied, financially challenged Black residents below? Did the compensation the Black laborers of Greenwood receive from their Black employers compare to what they would have received from white employers for comparable work? How did the prices for goods and services in Greenwood compare with prices in the rest of Tulsa? Were the best living conditions in Greenwood equal to the best among white Tulsans, and were the average living conditions in Greenwood equal to the average in the rest of Tulsa? If Greenwood, in fact, compared favorably or just about favorably to the rest of Tulsa, and Black individuals still preferred to cater to white racists instead of Black businessmen and organizers, then Black nationalism will not be given serious consideration until We

experience some type of group psychological therapy that will help Us neutralize the psychological damage heaped on Us by slavery and Jim Crow. If, on the other hand, Greenwood was not as good for Blacks as it has been hyped up to be, then Black nationalists have to wrestle with shortcomings within Our selves, such as inadequate leadership, Black capitalist business priorities and rag-tag operations, political irresponsibility and immaturity, lack of race consciousness, ignorance of viable alternatives and a host of other factors generally associated with weak, dependency inclined groups of people. And after wrestling with them, Black nationalist have to convince the Blacks of today that those shortcomings are a thing of the past.

Firstly, let's assume that Greenwood compared favorably or just about favorably to the rest of Tulsa. Under that scenario, if Black individuals still preferred to cater to white racists instead of Black businessmen and organizers, the issue Black nationalists need to address is a mental illness one. Black nationalists need to discover how to neutralize the psychological damage caused by the cruelties of slavery and Jim Crow. We need to concentrate on mitigating the impact of factors like self-hatred, low self and racial esteem, inferiority complexes, dependency complexes, unreasonable fear of white power, etc. I dealt with this some of this in my essay "On the Way to the Nuthouse." Black nationalists need to convince Black People that We should not have to rely on white people for anything because We are just as capable of creating, building and managing as they are. Black People with clear minds have always preferred Black self-government to white power domination, and that needs to be stressed to no end.

If, on the other hand, Greenwood was like most other Black communities, it was plagued by a Black business and leadership class that functioned like mediocres, not necessarily because they were incapable but because they were more concerned about status than delivering high level goods and services to their market. They viewed Black People in much the same way white people did, and the Black masses were not the least bit happy about that. The masses didn't like the "light skin is better than dark skin" message delivered by those with white blood, but they probably would have given their allegiance and money to Blacks instead of whites if the goods and services had been of acceptable quality. Delivering acceptable goods and services to Black markets apparently was not a priority of Black businessmen and leaders, and the consequence could have been the Black preference for white goods and services that extends up to this day.

It could be that, given the circumstances, Black businessmen and leaders delivered as good a service and product as possible at as reasonable a price as possible; they certainly faced obstacles white businessmen did not have to face. What is certain is that they wanted to make it clear that they were different from the other Blacks in the community, and make everyone else feel that aura of differentness. But in the process they underestimated and alienated their market

and exposed shortcomings that proved that they were less than what Black victims of racism were looking for insofar as leadership was concerned.

So it could be that the Black masses developed a distrust of their own community leaders, and decided it was best to look to non-Black sources for high quality goods and services. For them and the rest of the world, Black goods, services and leadership were inferior goods, services and leadership. "Black" became identified as untrustworthy and less than acceptable, and sincere Black community organizers and activists have been frustrated ever since.

What the issue seems to come down to is this: Black nationalists, the ultimate activists and organizers in the Black community, must make Black People understand that self government is the best thing for Us as a people. The major obstacle Black nationalists face in convincing Black People of this is either (1) Black persons who suffer with mental illnesses created during slavery and Jim Crow and passed down to subsequent generations. These mental illnesses, most the result of the unmitigated viciousness on the part of armed and organized white individuals and groups against unarmed and unorganized Blacks, manifest themselves as irrational fear of white violence- both mob style and state sponsored-, self-hatred, inferiority complexes, dependency complexes, obsessions with receiving recognition from white people, self-rejection, etc.; or (2) Black masses who do not trust Blacks with control of anything because their experiences with Black leaders and business persons have been marked by rag-tag operations that are meant to benefit certain individuals more than the community. Black nationalists thus would have to address internal shortcomings like "better than you" complexes, lack of political astuteness among Black leaders, economic exploitation of Blacks by Blacks, lack of race consciousness at all levels of Black life, especially among the most successful and educated, etc., or (3) a combination of the two. Black nationalists need to make it clear that Black nationalist objectives are quite different from those of "successful" Blacks who have essentially adopted white power priorities, and that Black individuals will experience more self-realization when We govern Ourselves and take on full responsibility for Our own well-being.

The only real solution for Black People who presently live in the United States of America is Our own nation, Our own Republic of New Afrika. We cannot use white owned or controlled institutions to achieve real progress even if some Blacks hold prominent positions within those institutions. A Black person with a prominent position within a white business or institution is the equivalent of a driver of a car that is not his or hers. When push comes to shove the owner will give the driver directions based on his own priorities, and the driver must comply or lose out.

The United States, country and government, is owned by white people. No matter how much Black People contribute to the well-being, growth and prosperity of the United States, the fact remains that it is a white power country owned by white

people. However, part of the land, wealth and resources that make up the continental United States belongs to Black People. Black People need to take control of that land and establish the Black country and government Black People so badly need. Black People will then be the beneficiaries of Black intelligence, labor and resources, and Black People will no longer be victims of white mobs, white authority figures and white priorities.

Black nationalists must prove to the Black masses that the mental scars brought on by slavery and Jim Crow can be offset, and the shortcomings demonstrated by Black leaders of long ago no longer plague us. It could be that the Tulsa race riot was one of the consequences Black People suffered for failing to insist on self-government coming out of the civil war, even if it meant butting heads with white power USA. Let's take control of the land We have a right to, invest Our time, energy, resources and genius to make it all that it can be for Us, and let white people do what they want to with the land and government that belong to them.

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May, 2001