



# Connecting Decolonization in Africa and the US Civil Rights Movement

*By Naaborko Sackeyfio-Lenoch*

African Americans and Africans have long had important connections. They have supported each other in the struggles against colonialism and racial oppression.

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## Liberation and inspiration

The civil rights movement in the United States was a centuries-long struggle by African Americans for civil liberties and racial equality. Those efforts reached a peak in the 1950s and 1960s. Meanwhile, decolonization was developing in many parts of the African continent. Decolonization is the process where one country becomes independent from its historically colonial rulers. In this case, Africans were fighting to gain freedom and independence from European colonial rule.

The civil rights movement in the United States and Africa's decolonization mirrored each other. Many Africans and many African Americans acknowledged their shared histories of oppression. Those historical bonds produced a spirit of racial solidarity—a feeling of unity and of sharing common goals.

In 1957, Ghana became the first country in sub-Saharan Africa to gain independence from British colonial rule. Ghana's independence served as a beacon for Black freedom across the African continent and the African diaspora. Other African countries followed in sub-Saharan Africa, including Nigeria in 1960 and Tanzania in 1961. These exciting developments inspired African Americans in the civil rights movement. Many activists began to see their struggle in more international terms. They began to connect their own fight for civil rights with anti-colonial independence movements.



*Left: Ghanaian President Kwame Nkrumah standing beside President John F. Kennedy, 1961. Public domain.*

*Right: Nkrumah meeting Egyptian president, Gamal Abdel Nasser, 1966. © Getty Images.*

## African diaspora visions: Kwame Nkrumah, Martin Luther King Jr., and Malcolm X

Many African anti-colonial activists were influenced by the struggles of Black Americans in the United States. Several leaders of independent African states studied in the United States at historically Black colleges and universities in the 1930s and 1940s. Kwame Nkrumah, Ghana's first prime minister, was among them. During his time at Lincoln University in Pennsylvania, Nkrumah was politically active. He visited Harlem and other Black communities to better understand the struggle of African Americans.

Nkrumah saw the African American struggle for civil rights as part of a larger global human rights battle. He called for Pan-African unity—the unity of people of African descent everywhere—through his activism in the United States and the United Kingdom. Nkrumah returned home in 1947 and became the central figure in the fight for his country's independence. By the early 1950s, he and his political party—the Convention People's Party—were challenging British colonial masters. Their activism paved the way for independence in 1957.

Nkrumah invited many African Americans to join Ghana's independence celebrations. Martin Luther King Jr. and several other African American leaders accepted his invitation and traveled to Ghana. As a result, the country's independence took on greater significance for the US civil rights movement. King was a central figure in that movement. King's visit to Ghana strengthened his belief that racism in America and political oppression in Africa both had their roots in European colonialism.

Malcolm X was another important African American civil rights leader. He was a major figure in the Black Nationalist Movement in the United States. Malcolm X visited several African countries, including Ghana. Those visits shaped his views of global Black struggles. In Ghana, he addressed the Ghanaian Parliament. His speech connected the suffering of African Americans with those on the African continent. Malcolm X met with Prime Minister Nkrumah, and the two discussed ways to connect Africans and members of the African diaspora. (A *diaspora* is a group of people who have been scattered to places outside of their homeland.) Both leaders were central in strengthening the links between Ghana and African Americans.



*Civil rights leader Martin Luther King Jr. being fingerprinted by police after his arrest during the Montgomery bus boycott. © Getty Images*



*Malcolm X, 1964. © Getty Images.*

## African Americans in Ghana: Politics, identity, and nation-building

During these years, many African Americans considered repatriating, or moving back to, Africa. This was partly due to Nkrumah's visit to Harlem and several other cities in the late 1950s and early 1960s. Nkrumah invited African Americans to come "home" to assist Ghana in building their new nation-state. In Ghana, he said, they would be able to re-establish their cultural heritage. Nkrumah's call for unity inspired many African Americans to move to Ghana. Among them were such well-known people as the activist and writer W. E. B. Dubois and the writer Maya Angelou.

Ghanaians welcomed the African American arrivals, despite some cultural differences. For their part, these African Americans joined Ghanaian society. At the same time, they remained connected to the US civil rights movement. For instance, to show support for the historic March on Washington in August 1963, they staged a demonstration at the American embassy in Accra, Ghana's capital city. The demonstrators carried posters that linked their own struggle to the African revolution.

Members of this African American community in Ghana also created organizations such as the African Descendants Association Foundation and Operation Crossroads Africa. These organizations advanced linkages across countries by providing opportunities for travel to and from Africa. They also shared information about current events and the plight of both groups. Nkrumah was overthrown in 1966, and the new Ghanaian government abandoned his Pan-African ideals. However, the links between Ghana and Black America survived. They remain in place to this day.

## Into the 21<sup>st</sup> century

Today, the United States is still reckoning with its history of racism and police violence against African Americans. African nations have joined global efforts to protest this continued American racism. In particular, Ghanaian leaders have expressed solidarity with African Americans. In 2020, an unarmed Black man, George Floyd, was killed by police in Minnesota. Floyd's death sparked national and global protests of police violence against the Black community. The President of Ghana, Nana Akufo-Addo, sent his nation's national cloth—Kente—to the Floyd family. In 2019, a record number of African Americans visited Ghana to mark the date four hundred years earlier when the first slave ship landed in Virginia. Ghana's people welcomed these African American visitors. They encouraged them and other African Americans to settle in Ghana. "We are your brothers and sisters," they reminded all African Americans.

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## Image credits

**Cover image: Ghana President Kwame Nkrumah addresses crowd in front of the Hotel Theresa, October 5, in Harlem.** Nkrumah declared the 20,000,000 American negroes constituted the strongest link between the people of North America and Africa. The rally was the last official activity attended by Nkrumah before he departed by plane for home. Police estimated the crowd at 1,000 persons. © Bettmann / Contributor / Getty Images.

(Left) **Ghanaian President Kwame Nkrumah standing beside President John F. Kennedy, 1961.** Courtesy of the John F. Kennedy Presidential Library and Museum. Public domain. [https://www.jfklibrary.org/asset-viewer/archives/JFKWHP/1961/Month%2003/Day%2008/JFKWHP-1961-03-08-C?image\\_identifier=JFKWHP-KN-17275](https://www.jfklibrary.org/asset-viewer/archives/JFKWHP/1961/Month%2003/Day%2008/JFKWHP-1961-03-08-C?image_identifier=JFKWHP-KN-17275) and (Right) **Nkrumah meeting Egyptian president, Gamal Abdel Nasser, 1966.** © Keystone / Getty Images.

**Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. being arrested in Montgomery, Alabama for "loitering," September 1958.** © Charles Moore / Getty Images.

**Malcolm X, 1964.** © Truman Moore / Getty Images.



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