



Connecting Decolonization in Africa and the US Civil Rights Movement

By Naaborko Sackeyfio-Lenoch

African Americans and Africans 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 not just a few brief events. It 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 across many territories on the African continent. Africans were fighting to gain freedom and independence from European colonial rule. The two struggles mirrored each other. Many Africans and many African Americans in this period embraced the idea that Africans and their descendants in other parts of the world had shared histories of oppression. Those historical bonds produced a spirit of racial solidarity—a feeling of unity and of sharing common interests.

In 1957, Ghana became the first country in sub-Saharan Africa to gain independence from British colonial rule. Naturally, the West African nation's independence served as a beacon for Black freedom struggles across the African continent and the African diaspora. (A *diaspora* is a group of people who have been scattered to places outside of their homeland.) It inspired African Americans and motivated their efforts in the civil rights movement. Ghana's independence was followed by other sub-Saharan African nations including Nigeria in 1960 and Tanzania in 1961. These exciting developments encouraged African Americans to see their struggle for racial liberation in more international terms. American Blacks began to connect their own fight for civil rights in the United States with the independence movements that were sweeping Africa and other parts of the world. Each victorious rebellion against colonialism in Africa directly influenced the civil rights movement. Each seemed to guarantee the future successes of the civil rights movement. The collapse of colonialism marked a new connection between Africans and African Americans.



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 of the leaders of independent African nations were inspired by the struggles of Black people in other parts of the world, particularly the United States. Several Africans who would become leaders of independent African states had 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, Nkrumah was politically active. He visited Harlem and other Black communities, and his experiences strengthened his understanding of the oppression experienced by African Americans.

Nkrumah came to view the condition of African Americans as part of the larger African diaspora and 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. When Martin Luther King Jr. and several other African American leaders traveled to Ghana, the country's independence took on greater significance for the civil rights movement. King was, of course, a central figure and spokesperson for the civil rights movement in the United States. Nkrumah embraced King's use of non-violent resistance against racial oppression. King's visit to Ghana strengthened his belief that racism in America and political oppression in Africa both had their roots in European colonialism.

El-Hajj Malik El-Shabazz, more popularly known as Malcolm X, was a leader in the Black Nationalist Movement and the Nation of Islam in the United States. Malcolm X also visited several African countries, including Ghana. Those visits informed 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. Both leaders were central in reaffirming 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

The desire to repatriate—to move back—to Africa grew strong for many African Americans. 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 and connect with their African brothers and sisters. Nkrumah's call for unity inspired many African Americans to move to Ghana. The country also offered refuge for Black people who wanted to escape America's continuing racial problems.

The African Americans who moved to Ghana contributed a broad range of skills and talents. They included medical professionals, lawyers, teachers, librarians, artists, writers, intellectuals, engineers, and businesspeople. Several very well-known people moved to Ghana. Among them were activist and writer W. E. B. Dubois and writer Maya Angelou.

Ghanaians embraced the African American arrivals, despite some cultural differences. While integrating into Ghanaian society, these African Americans remained connected with the US civil rights movement. For instance, they staged a demonstration at the American embassy in the Ghanaian capital city of Accra to support the historic March on Washington in August 1963. 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 eased international connections 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 Ghanaian government abandoned his Pan-African ideals. However, political instability did not destabilize these connections, which remain in place to this day.

Into the 21st 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 renewed their historical expressions of solidarity with the plight of African Americans. In 2020, the death of George Floyd sparked national and global protests of the killing of unarmed African American men and women. 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. The country welcomed these African Americans to the country's shores. They encouraged the visitors and other African Americans to settle in Ghana and reminded them that they are all "brothers and sisters."

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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 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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