

The Meaning of George Floyd in the African Context

On 7 October 1957, a seemingly mundane errand in a Delaware restaurant became a major international incident that embarrassed the US President at the time, General Dwight D. Eisenhower.

Komla Agbedi Gbedemah, Finance Minister of then newly independent Ghana, was on an official visit to the United States when he and his small entourage made a stop at a restaurant in Dover, the capital of The State of Delaware. Gbedemah and an aide ordered two glasses of orange juice but were shocked when the waitress said they could not be served inside the restaurant because they were black, according to news reports from the time, recounted in a [2018 commemorative article](#) by Politico magazine

Gbedemah reportedly protested to the manager and showed him a card that identified him as the Finance Minister of Ghana, the first West African nation to gain independence from Britain. Gbedemah reportedly told the manager: "The [white] people here are of a lower social status than I am, but they can drink here and we can't. You can keep the orange juice and the change [from a dollar bill], but this is not the last you have heard of this."

The [Delaware State News quoted](#) the minister as saying:

"She told me coloured people were not allowed to eat in the restaurant. I paid 60 cents for the orange juice, left it there, and went away. I intend to demand an apology from the hotel chain,"

Picked up by international newswire (I guess that time's equivalence of 'going viral'), and especially after The Soviet Union repeatedly ran the story and circulated it around the

world through its propaganda news outlet, The Pravda, as an example of American democracy hypocrisy, the incident forced President Dwight Eisenhower to apologise to Gbedemah and to invite him to a breakfast at the White House.

It was to be just one of the multiple racist incidents involving diplomats from newly independent African states that would expose America's hypocrisy in 'exporting' democracy and human rights gospel to the world while denying those same rights to its black citizens. The incidents also greatly personally embarrassed presidents Eisenhower and his successor John F. Kennedy, men who wanted to end desegregation but, aware of how virulently racist their voters still were, trod carefully.

Four years later Another infamous incident would involve another diplomat from another newly independent west African country. In April 1961, William Fitzjohn, the Sierra Leonean ambassador to the US and his driver stopped at a Maryland hotel hoping to find a hot meal before their meeting at the White House. A waitress told Fitzjohn she wouldn't serve him even when he showed her his diplomatic credentials. "It was very emotionally upsetting," Fitzjohn told the Associated Press then, according to [History.com](https://www.history.com). Fitzjohn's experience became an international incident too, generating significant international publicity and prompting a presidential apology from Kennedy himself.

Throughout the 1950s and 1960s when segregation was the status quo in large swaths of the United States, according to the History Channel, African dignitaries and diplomats were "repeatedly snubbed, verbally abused and discriminated against when they spent time in the US."

The other prominent incidents included an ambassador of Niger being denied service at another restaurant, Malian diplomats being denied lodging, and countless others. They went on well into the 1960s when the Civil Rights Act was signed, and

restaurants legally desegregated in the US

Troubled that the slights were hurting America's cause in the cold war fight with Moscow for spheres of influence in the newly independent African states, some US officials warned Eisenhower and Kennedy administrations to do something about it or lose face in front of the whole world.

At one point African diplomats even threatened to leave the country, egged on by The Soviet Union, prompting Kennedy's State Department to create the Special Protocol Service Section (SPSS), a division designed to protect African diplomats from discrimination. The Section "[tried to persuade](#) business owners in the area frequented by African diplomats to serve black patrons, and real estate boards to provide housing for black diplomats and their staff. The SPSS pressured state governments and Kennedy's administration to use the law to forbid segregation. When Soviet leaders used discrimination against blacks as an example of America's double standards for democracy, it made the issue feel even more urgent."

(A story is told of how James Debois Williams Jr., then managing editor of the 'Afro-American' newspaper, would later further expose the hypocrisy of the situation, when, in an undercover investigative journalism sting he asked three of his reporters to pose as African diplomats and try to get served in several white-only restaurants. Accompanying the trio of reporters, two of whom were dressed in cutaways, top hats and pinstripe trousers, while the other wore native African dress, was the newspaper's photographer. One of the reporters posed as "finance minister" of Gabon, another, his aide and a Harvard-educated translator. Nowhere during their daylong sting were the "diplomats" refused service and after a day of unfettered enjoyment, they were whisked away in a waiting limousine. "We wanted to dramatise the stupidity inherent in a situation in which visitors from overseas are treated better than persons born on these shores," Williams later wrote in an editorial on the hoax. "Sure the whole thing

was staged", he said, but we hope that we've helped expose just how silly this question of racial discrimination really is." His argument was, if you can serve foreign black dignitaries, what's stopping you from serving everyone else?)

The humiliating abuse of African dignitaries under Jim Crow laws, therefore, helped to pressure the government to finally throw its weight behind civil rights legislation.

Black Lives Matter and Africans

Most incidents involving African diplomats in a Jim-Crow United States were at least not fatal. A handful of Africans in the US would later become statistics in that country's deadly police war against African Americans.

On February 4th, 1999, a 23-year-old Guinean immigrant named Amadou Diallo was shot and killed by four New York City Police Department plain-clothed officers who would later claim to have mistaken him for a rape suspect from one year earlier. The officers pumped into the diminutive African a combined total of 41 shots outside his apartment in the Bronx, killing him instantly. Diallo, who was unarmed, was accused by his killers for looking like he was reaching for a gun, a common refrain in many officer-involved shootings of African Americans today. His crime was simply the fact that his skin colour was of a bronze hue, a no small matter to many racist American police officers. And of course, they were all acquitted of all the charges, another near-unanimous commonality when white police officers shoot African Americans

On 27 September 2016, a – 38-year-old Ugandan refugee named Alfred Olango showed up at his sister's apartment in the town of El Cajon, California, acting strangely – confused, paranoid – and said he hadn't slept for days after losing a childhood friend days earlier. His sister, Lucy, an aide in a psychiatric facility, aware of his brother's mental health history, recognised signs of a mental breakdown and called

911. An hour later, a squad of El Cajon police responded and shot Olango four times because 'he made a gesture that looked as though he was pointing a gun.' The shooting sparked the fury of Black Lives Matter protests, but, as is always the case, no one was held accountable for the death.

With just the examples above, we can clearly see that an African man visiting or living in the United States is as much a target of police brutality as African Americans. This is because racism, in its sheer colour-coded absurdity, provides no room for nuance and context: As long as you are black in America, you are a potential candidate for a deadly police confrontation.

History of Black Africans and African American revolutionary cooperation

Despite current tensions between African immigrants and African Americans in the US (more on this later), in the 1950s and 1960s, militant African American civil rights activists looked to Africa and their fight against colonialism with hope and expectation, and vice versa.

When Ghana attained independence in 1957, becoming the first African country to get out of the shackles of British imperialism, Martin Luther King Jr, who was a special guest of Dr. Kwame Nkrumah at the celebrations, began to weep when he saw Ghana's Black Star replace the Union Jack as the flag of the nation. Nkrumah reportedly told King Jr at a private lunch held in his honour that he "would never be able to accept the American ideology of freedom until America settles its own internal racial strife." Nkrumah, who had studied for his master's and PhD degrees at the University of Pennsylvania in the 1930s had experienced raw American racism firsthand.

King saw the tide of the anticolonial struggle in Africa as a sign of hope for the African American Civil Rights Movement. At the same event in Accra, when Vice President Richard Nixon

who had led an official American delegation to counter Soviet influence over the newly independent state, crossed paths with King Jr, it was reported that King told the Vice president, "I want you to come to visit us in Alabama where we are seeking the same kind of freedom Ghana is celebrating." Nixon, a closeted racist himself had only offered a muted response, according to a [2007 recount](#) of the story in the San Francisco Chronicle by writer G. Pascal Zachary

Many African Americans, notably led by W.E.B Dubois, would flock to Ghana to rediscover themselves and experience the thrill of living as free men.

Malcolm X eloquently describes what this period was like in his autobiography when he wrote of his pilgrimage through West Africa in 1964:

"I simply couldn't believe this kind of reception given to me five thousand miles from America! The officials of the press had even arranged to pay my hotel expenses, and they would hear no objection that I made. I can only wish that every American black man could have shared my ears, my eyes, and my emotions throughout the round of engagements which had been made for me in Ghana. And my point in saying this is not the reception that I personally received as an individual of whom they had heard, but it was the reception tendered to me as the symbol of the militant American black man, as I had the honour to be regarded."

Addressing the multiple receptions he received in Ghana, Malcolm stressed the connection between African anticolonial struggles and the struggle of African Americans back in the US

"I stressed to the assembled press the need for mutual communication and support between the Africans and Afro-Americans whose struggles were interlocked...I said that the 22 million Afro Americans in the United States could become for Africa a great positive force-while, in turn, the African

nations could and should exert positive force at diplomatic levels against America's racial discrimination. I said, "All of Africa unites in opposition to South Africa's apartheid, and to the oppression in the Portuguese territories. But you waste your time if you don't realise that Verwoerd and Salazar, and Britain and France, never could last a day if it were not for United States support. So until you expose the man in Washington, DC, you haven't accomplished anything."

In the 1960s, many post-independence African leaders protested vocally at the racist brutality white America meted out to its black citizens.

During the Birmingham riots in early 1963, for example, new charismatic Ugandan Prime Minister Milton Obote, according to a recent article in the Washington Post, [wrote an open letter](#) to President John F. Kennedy noting that "nothing is more paradoxical than that these events should take place in the United States at a time when that country is anxious to project its image before the world screen as the archetype of democracy and the champion of freedom." Obote, who had had a successful visit with JFK at the White House only a few months earlier, and was, like Kennedy, young, shrewdly smart and charismatic, rebuked Kennedy's timid pragmatism in handling race relations in his country.

Dr Kwame Nkrumah was received literally like a Rockstar by Black America whenever he visited the country after Ghana's independence. At one rally, 100,000 African Americans packed a Harlem stadium to hear him speak.

Black newspapers swooned over his first visit to the US as Prime Minister in 1958.

At independence a year earlier, the *Pittsburgh Courier*, perhaps the most influential African American newspaper of the time, published a 32-page "salute to Ghana." In a front-page editorial, the Courier observed, "When we, American Negroes,

shake hands with Ghana today, we say not only 'Welcome!' but also, 'Your opportunity to prove yourself is our opportunity to prove ourselves.'

The paper, along with smaller black-owned newspapers continued the lovefest on Nkrumah's visits to the US:

Swooning headlines such as these, cited in the book "Proudly We Can Be Africans: Black Americans and Africa, 1935-1961 By James H. Meriwether", were the order of the day.

- *Nkrumah, Visiting U.S, Given Big Welcome: Pittsburg Courier, 26 July 1958*
- *Nkrumah Hailed in Washington: Baltimore Afro American, 2 August 1958*
- *Nkrumah Gets Plush Welcome to Capital: Atlanta Daily World, 25 July 1958*
- *100,000 Harlemites Welcome Nkrumah: Baltimore Afro-American, 29 July, 1958*
- *Program for Harlem Lawyers' Association and Harlem Citizens' Committee Reception in Honour of Dr Kwame Nkrumah: Chicago Defender, 21 July 1958*
- *Nkrumah Tells Rally in Harlem Negroes Form U.S.-Africa Bond; Says American Leaders Are Becoming Aware of 'Tremendous Advantage' : The New York Times, 30 July, 1958*

All these overtures would of course later fly in the faces of Africa's post-independence leaders as they themselves became more autocratic as the post-colonial nation-building project became more complicated, and as they increasingly became America's client states in their dependence on American aid and, later, counterterrorism funding. But there is no denying that at least in the 1960s, America's civil rights struggle was perfectly in sync with pan-Africanism and anticolonialism.

So what happened?

Tensions between Africans and African Americans in the US

Tensions between African immigrants and African Americans have attracted significant media coverage in the US of late. This is confusing to the uninitiated. It would almost look obvious that since African Americans and Africans are descended from the same root of African cultures, are of the same racial classification; they would naturally adapt and co-exist in harmony. But this is far from the case. There are several reasons behind this, ranging from cultural, historical, economic to academic considerations.

Several academic [dissertations](#) have explored this conflict and examined stereotypes, conflicts and grudges between the two groups and how they impact their co-existence and adaptation to each other. Some of the theories claim that at the heart of African Americans' uneasiness with recently arrived African immigrants, is the feeling that the latter are respected more than black Americans, all the while benefiting from reparations meant to right evils of America's past.

This shouldn't surprise anyone. After all Barack Obama himself, in his early political ascendancy in Chicago was dismissed by his political rivals as 'not black enough' because his story (black father from Kenya, white mother from Kansas) is not the archetypal, slavery-entrenched story like that of most of his African American peers.

Of concern also is the fact that educational attainment among African immigrants is way higher than other subgroups. A report by the Pew Research Center found that 69 per cent of sub-Saharan African immigrants in the United States have some college education, with some 48.9 per cent of all African immigrants holding a college diploma. This is more than double the rate of native-born white Americans and nearly four times the rate of native-born African Americans. This has led to accusations by some African Americans that Africans 'take their jobs' and opportunities at their expense.

When it comes to police brutality, however, there's nothing like nuance from the racist police, so the two groups would do better to stick together.

Currently, when it comes to Africans on the African continent, there's very little known about African Americans' struggle with racism in America and Europe. The George Floyd killing, while it attracted a handful of protests mostly by elite Africans, wasn't much of a story in local publications. A Ugandan TV station even embarrassingly flunked what it thought was a tribute to Mr Floyd when it made its presenters [wear 'All Lives Matter' T-shirts](#) on air!

Whereas official reactions from African governments have mostly been muted (The head of the African Union Commission issued a statement), Ghana took the lead with President Nana Akufo-Addo issuing a statement condemning the killing, sending a message of condolence to Mr Floyd's family and having Mr Floyd's name permanently mounted on the wall of the Diasporan African Forum at the W.E.B. Du Bois Centre in Ghana's capital, Accra. A ceremony of remembrance was also organised by the Ghana Tourism Authority, in memory of Mr Floyd.

Other than Ghana's official actions, why was Mr Floyd's death unremarkable in Africa?

There are many reasons.

African governments' own brutality against their own citizens is one. It would have been utterly hypocritical if the Ugandan government for example, had issued a statement. The country's 'Public Order Management Act' is a repressive law that literally makes it impossible for any protest to take place. A small Black Lives Matter Protest in Kampala, attended by no more than a dozen people, half of them mixed-race children of American diaspora families living in the country, was quickly stopped by the Uganda police. Protestors have routinely been shot dead by the country's dreaded military police. While the country has yet to register a coronavirus death, 7 people have been shot to death apparently for violating presidential orders on containing the pandemic.

The fact that police shootings are common may have therefore made most Africans view Floyd death as 'normal.'

Also important is the fact that the solidarity of the 1960s between the African Independence revolutionary movement and the Civil Rights Movement of that time no longer exists. African regimes have become more despotic and brutal to their own citizens; oversee poverty-stricken populations while they swim in stolen public money, hence cannot comment on America's police racist brutality and economic inequality without looking hypocritical. Similarly, most African Americans have very little interest in Africa and view African immigrants in the US with a jaundiced eye. Thirdly, most ordinary Africans on the African continent have enough troubles of their own to care about what is happening to African Americans in America. Only a small elite of well-travelled Africans, academics and social justice activists understand the African American struggle well. Most poor Africans have never (and most don't think will ever) visit the United States, so they are detached from the struggles there.

Many African governments currently heavily depend on American aid and are careful and fearful of criticizing the country, especially with the very easy-to-annoy Donald Trump in the

White House. When Trump [called](#) African countries 'shithole' causing worldwide revulsion, some African presidents even [defended](#) him. When he controversially moved the American embassy from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem, African nations which had earlier unanimously voted for a UN resolution condemning the move immediately changed course when Trump [threatened](#) to withhold aid.

All these are sad facts that need to change. Because as Dr. Martin Luther King Junior once said in his 'Letter from Birmingham Jail', "Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere. We are caught in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied in a single garment of destiny. Whatever affects one directly, affects all indirectly."

This is especially true for Africans in Africa and African Americans, two peoples who share so much more than just a common origin, but also the struggles that still define their daily existence.