

A Police Shooting in Hawaii Has South Africans Demanding Justice

A Black man from South Africa was shot and killed in an encounter with the police in his adopted home, Hawaii. His countrymen want answers.



Lindani Myeni's widow, right, and an aunt holding the couple's daughter, greeted his returning coffin at the Johannesburg airport.

By Lynsey Chutel and Michelle Broder Van Dyke

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JOHANNESBURG — A plane from Honolulu landed in Johannesburg earlier this month and offloaded a plastic-wrapped coffin carrying the body of Lindani Myeni, a South African rugby player, aspiring singer and father.

In the airport's cargo terminal, a youth contingent from the African National Congress party waved a "Black Lives Matter" banner emblazoned with his smiling face. His widow, Lindsay Myeni, a white American from Hawaii, cradled their 6-month-old daughter and kept watch over their 2-year-old son, while Mr. Myeni's South African family held onto one another in grief.

Mr. Myeni, 29, died in Honolulu after he was shot in a confrontation with the police outside a suburban house he had inexplicably entered, and then left, on the night of April 14. Unarmed, he was wearing a traditional Zulu headband with a tuft of fur at the forehead and, his wife later discovered, he had left his shoes in his car.

In the United States, this police shooting of a Black man they described as a burglary suspect did not make national news. But in South Africa, it has become a cause célèbre, intensifying both criticism of racism in the United States and a feeling of solidarity with African-Americans.

Media outlets in South Africa broadcast Mr. Myeni's funeral and replayed the harrowing 911 call that captured his death. It begins with a terrified woman reporting an intruder and police officers arriving at the house. It ends with the sound of gunshots.

The outrage over Mr. Myeni's death comes as South Africa struggles with violence by its own police officers. Last summer, South Africans joined in Black Lives Matter protests, condemning police brutality in their own country and the failure to prosecute wrongful killings.

But the publicized deaths of Africans at the hands of American police officers have touched a special nerve here. Mr. Myeni's name is invoked alongside those of other victims including Amadou Diallo, a Guinean immigrant killed in New York in 1999; Ousmane Zongo, an immigrant from Burkina Faso killed in New York in 2003; and Alfred Olango, a refugee from Uganda killed in California in 2016.



Members of the African National Congress Youth League outside the repatriation service for Mr. Myeni at the Johannesburg airport.

“It is a sad indictment on Americans that their country continues to be associated with the senseless murder of Black people,” said Nonhlanhla Khoza, an African National Congress member who is an official in Mr. Myeni's home province, KwaZulu-Natal.

Mr. Myeni and his wife moved to the United States in January 2020.

In a lengthy telephone interview, Ms. Myeni recalled how they met in 2016 at a hostel in Durban, a city on South Africa's east coast. A professional rugby player, he was playing an away game; she was on a three-day layover during a Christian missionary trip around the world.

Mr. Myeni liked to sing, and once auditioned for the show "Idols South Africa." He was also a longtime member of Scouts South Africa, leading wilderness camps for children.

The couple married 18 months after they met, and spent their first few years in South Africa, living in his hometown.

Their decision to move to the United States, Ms. Myeni said, was driven by her career in real estate. First, they tried Tampa, Fla., but, she said, they found the inequalities between Black and white too reminiscent of South Africa and the legacy of apartheid.

"Every house we looked at, you could either be in a really poor Black neighborhood or a snobby rich white neighborhood, and neither of those fit us," Ms. Myeni said. "We wanted somewhere where people are progressing and doing well but also, is it safe for us as a mixed couple?"

Next they tried Denver. They had once spent six months there, and it was home to the Glendale Merlins, a rugby team Mr. Myeni could join while he waited for a work permit.

Even before his death in Honolulu, Mr. Myeni had sometimes felt targeted by the police in his new country. In Austin, Texas, he was arrested at a nightclub while traveling with his rugby team, a teammate said, then released without charges. And in Denver, he was stopped by the police while walking to rugby practice.

After that, his wife said, they decided to leave Colorado for multicultural Hawaii.

They arrived in Honolulu in February. While Ms. Myeni sold real estate, Mr. Myeni, an industrial mechanical fitter by trade, stayed home with their young children, changing diapers, bathing and feeding them.

"He had to do everything that went against traditional Zulu culture," Ms. Myeni said. "He totally stepped up."



The Myeni family.

Mr. Myeni came to embrace life on the island, finding strands of similarity between Hawaiian, Tongan and Samoan culture and his own.

On the day he died, Ms. Myeni said, the family toured their new home, visiting Queen Emma's Summer Palace on Oahu. On their drive back, they stopped at a roadside woodcarver's shack. There, Mr. Myeni became fixated on a large wooden fish hook, which the carver told them had once been used a weapon of war, but also offered spiritual protection. At \$250, it was too expensive for them, but Mr. Myeni was taken with it.

"Even when we went home," Ms. Myeni recalled, "he just said: 'I feel like I need spiritual protection. Can we go please go back and get the hook?'"

Feeling uneasy, she said, Mr. Myeni went for a drive to clear his head.

At 8:09 that evening, the Honolulu Police Department received a frantic call from a woman in Nu'uuanu, a tree-lined neighborhood of historic buildings near downtown Honolulu.

"Someone entering my house," the caller said.

"Do you know who they are?" asked the 911 operator.

"He says he's Linden, he's a South African," the woman responded.

The operator asked if the man has “any weapons in his hands, like guns, bats, or sticks?” and the caller replied “no.”

In the nine-minute, 47-second call, the woman sounds increasingly distraught, and two men can be heard talking in the background. The police arrived after five minutes, by which point Mr. Myeni appears to have left the house.

“That’s him!” the woman told the officers.

In body cam footage released by the police, the woman can be seen pointing to Mr. Myeni as the officers approached him and shouted: “Get on the ground! Get on the ground now!”

Mr. Myeni shouted back either “Why? Why?” or “Who are you?” twice. The audio is muddled.

After a struggle, four shots are heard — and only then a shout: “Police!”

At a news conference two days later, Acting Deputy Chief Allan Nagata said three officers had responded to what they believed to be a burglary. They used Tasers on the suspect but were unable to subdue him, he said. All three officers were injured in the altercation and had to be hospitalized, the department said.



Lindani Myeni.

“They were very brave and they fought for their lives,” Mr. Nagata said. “I was very impressed with what they did. They didn’t shoot or discharge the firearm right away. This was not a case of overreaction.”

Officials with the Honolulu Police Department said they are still investigating, and would not respond to questions about the identity of the officers, whether they had disciplinary records, or why they did not identify themselves as police before opening fire.

Honolulu’s prosecuting attorney, Steven S. Alm, said his office has opened an investigation into two recent fatal police shootings, including that of Mr. Myeni.

Ms. Myeni said she believed her husband might have mistaken the house he entered for a Hare Krishna temple next door. That may explain why he had removed his shoes and worn his umqhele, or Zulu headband. She suggested that her husband, blinded by police lights, might have mistaken the officers for assailants and sought to defend himself.

The police have not returned Mr. Myeni’s mobile phone, which James J. Bickerton, the family’s lawyer, said might contain proof he had been searching for the temple.

Ms. Myeni has filed a wrongful-death suit against the police. And before leaving Hawaii, she returned to the wood carver and bought the fish hook that her husband had been so drawn to.

In South Africa, local officials in KwaZulu-Natal raised funds for Mr. Myeni’s funeral, which was held May 8. They are among the loudest voices demanding answers from the United States.

At a previous memorial service, the dais was draped in black, green and gold — the colors of the African National Congress. Sihle Zikalala, the premier of the province, rattled off statistics on police killings in the United States and called out the names of the dead: Michael Brown, Walter Scott, Eric Garner, Rodney King, Lindani Myeni.

“What is even more tragic is that these deaths of Black people at the hands of white police go largely unpunished,” Mr. Zikalala said.

Mr. Myeni’s widow said she was not certain whether she would return to the United States.

“How would I raise my son in that community knowing that he will be a strong Black man as well, and that they fear strong Black men?” she said.

Lynsey Chutel reported from Johannesburg, and Michelle Broder Van Dyke from Honolulu.