



East Africa's Freedom Soundtracks

By Lucy Ilado



Grassroots activism by Patrice Lumumba and Joseph Kasabuvu and a deteriorating local economy were among the reasons why the idea for a roundtable conference was first formulated in 1959 by the Congolese Labour party. The aim was to organise the independence of Belgian colonies in Africa. So on January 3rd, 1960, the Belgian government announced that it was going to convene a roundtable conference with the goal of helping the Congolese to transition from colonial rule to independence. That was when Joseph Kabasele was approached to select a few musicians who would travel as an African jazz band to entertain the Congolese delegation in Brussels. One of the songs they performed was *Independance cha cha* composed by Joseph Kabasele, also known as *Le Grand Kalle*. It is one of the most memorable songs as well as one of the first Pan-African hits.

(Lingala version)

Independance Cha-cha to zuwi ye !

Oh

Kimpwanza cha-cha tubakidi

Oh

Table Ronde cha-cha ba gagner oh!

Oh

Lipanda cha-cha tozuwi ye!

(French version)

*Independence cha-cha que nous avons
arrache !*

oh

Liberte cha-cha, obtenue !

A la

Table Ronde cha-cha ils ont remporte !

Oh

Liberte cha-cha, arrachee !

(English version)

Independence cha-cha declared!

Oh Freedom cha-cha we've conquered!

At the Round Table they won!

Oh Liberty cha-cha we've conquered!

Independence Cha Cha - Grand Kalle

Capturing, as it did, the mood of a continent throwing off the shackles of colonial domination, the song, as described by Alain Mabanckou, the Congolese-born French writer and academic, “ quickly became the hymn of the emancipation of the black continent”.

However, many of the newly independent states chose to adopt some of the symbols of statehood pioneered by their erstwhile colonial masters, including national flags and anthems. And when it came to the latter, rather than adopt the songs that symbolised liberation to their citizens, they commissioned new tunes that were more in keeping with international norms.

Just as the concept of the nation-state was premiered in Europe, so too was that of national anthems, and many today follow the conventions established there. The [Netherlands](#) has the oldest song used as a national anthem, the Wilhelmus, which was composed between 1568 and 1572 but not officially recognised as such till 1932. The United Kingdom’s “God Save The Queen” is widely considered to be the oldest national anthem and many countries, both in Europe and among her former colonies, have modelled theirs on it. Malcolm Boyd, who has analysed a great number of national anthems, described the two most common categories as hymns with a solemn pace and melody (such as “God Save The Queen”) and marches (such as the French “La Marseillaise”).

Even as Kalle’s appeal for unity was ignored in the Congo, which was quickly plunged into civil war, independence was dawning in East Africa and Kenya, Uganda and Tanzania were themselves using music to nurture and cement national traditions as well as create a sense of unity among people from diverse cultural backgrounds.

THE NATIONAL ANTHEMS OF EAST AFRICA

As David A. Butz notes, “Scholars from a variety of disciplines argue that the function of national symbols is to activate collective group membership and, as a result, to encourage belongingness and identification with one’s nation.”

Kenyan musicologist Professor Mellitus Nyongesa Wanyama of Moi and Kabarak universities, who is also the founder of the Utafiiti Foundation Research Centre, explains that in Africa, a national anthem is a patriotic song that evokes and eulogises the history, traditions and struggles of its

people. Therefore, it may vary from country to country. National anthems are also used to rally people to work together for unity and development, and may symbolise praise, devotion, or patriotism. . “An anthem should be made memorable by the use of simple words that everyone can identify with and it is usually in the [national](#) language of the country,” he says.

After independence, African governments, Kenya included, tasked the elite minds available at the time to come up with national symbols for their respective countries, which included national anthems’ tunes and lyrics.

According to Wikipedia, Kenya’s national anthem was one of the first to be specifically commissioned. It was written by the Kenyan Anthem Commission in 1963, which was composed of the following five individuals:

1. Professor Washington Ambrose Omondi, who is currently an associate professor in the Department of Music and Dance, School of Visual and Performing Arts at Kenyatta University.
2. The late George Zenoga Zake who passed away in 2008. Zake was a Kenya-based Ugandan music professor who founded the music department at Kenyatta University; he was in charge of assisting the Railway Training School choir in recording the Kiswahili version of the national anthem.
3. The late Graham Hyslop, who was an organist at the All Saints Cathedral and Kenya’s colonial Music Inspector in 1963 with a particular interest in Pokomo songs. He was also conductor of the All Saints and Alliance School choirs. He died in 1978. It was he who recorded a lullaby from Mzee Meza Maroa Galana that became the melody to the anthem.
4. Peter Kibukosya, who was once chairman of the Kenya Music Festival and who died in 1978.
5. Finally, the late Rev. Thomas Kalume, who not only translated the New Testament from Hebrew into Kiswahili, but was the first clergyman to be elected to Kenya’s parliament - as MP for Malindi North in 1969.

The team officially started the process of composing the anthem in May 1963, just before the Independence Day celebrations in December of that year. Years before, as a music expert visiting East African schools, Hyslop had recorded the traditional Pokomo lullaby, *B-e-e Mndondo B-e-e*, which Galana would later [say](#) he had “learnt and mastered as a young boy”. The song’s simplicity and originality apparently so impressed Hyslop that he took the recording back to Nairobi where it was lodged with the National Museum as part of the country’s cultural heritage. Galana described the song as “simply an adult telling a child not to fear as the sound it is hearing is of a goat bleating. The adult asks who had wronged the child and then assures the young one that he would go to fight them - the people in the farms - while the moon is shining brightly....”

In an [interview](#) published in the *Daily Nation* in December 2015, a month after the death of Mzee Galana, Prof. Omondi said the Kenyan Anthem Commission had visited various peoples at the Coast to sample and record folk tunes for consideration and possible adaptation. “Like most folk songs, there was no known composer of most of these Pokomo folk songs,” he said.

After several weeks, the commission presented three different tunes, including Galana’s lullaby. They then went ahead and composed lyrics in both Kiswahili and English. Additionally, they also agreed that the opening stanza be composed as a prayer, *O God of all creation, bless this our land and nation | Ee Mungu nguvu yetu, Ilete baraka kwetu*, following the anthem-as-hymn template established by the British. This was credited to the late Rev. Kalume.

National Anthem of Kenya

In August 1963, the tune was accepted after the Police Band played the three verses in both

Kiswahili and English to the prime minister and his council of ministers.

When the real work began, the All Saints Cathedral choir was the first to be approached to record the English version while the Railway Training School choir was asked to record the Kiswahili version. All this was done in less than four weeks. On September 4th, 1963, the respective choirs were then asked to perform the anthem at Mzee Jomo Kenyatta's residence in Gatundu.

In addition to the choirs, there was another entry, one by the late Gerishon Manani, who in 1966 founded and became the chairman of the Kenya National Folk Music and Dance Festival. Initially, Mr. Manani had secured a scholarship from the British Council to study music at Trinity College in London, from 1958 to 1963. Mr. Manani's song was titled *Kenya Taifa Letu*. After it was official that his song would not be Kenya's national anthem, Mr. Manani changed the title to *Kenya National Song of Praise*. The song was recorded in both Kiswahili and English. Sadly, the original copy cannot be traced.

After the auditions, Mzee Kenyatta requested that the commission's and Mr. Manani's anthems be merged into one. After consultations, however, it was decided that the anthems be performed before a gathering of local people who were present for the occasion. They unanimously chose the Commission's anthem.

Subsequently, that month, the Commission's English version was sung by a mixed choir from Alliance High School, Alliance Girls High School and the All Saints Cathedral, while the Railways Training School choir sang the Kiswahili version.

Subsequently, Jomo Kenyatta wrote a letter in November 1963 thanking Prof. Omondi and his team for their work; this was the only recognition the team received from the state. Interestingly, Mr. Galana would only learn that the tune he had provided to Hyslop had been selected for the anthem when it was played at the Independence Day celebrations on 12th December 1963. Like many Kenyans on that night, he and a group of friends and relatives were following the events on the radio. "We silently listened to the King's Anthem and after it ended, we prepared to hear our own new national anthem which we had been told would be sung for the first time that night," he told the *Daily Nation* in 2011. "Then the new national anthem came on air. The tune was that of my song even though the words had been changed."

Although he did gain [a measure of recognition](#), Mr. Galana would die a bitter man. "Never trust the government of Kenya, it only gives lip service to its heroes, most of whom are living in squalid conditions," the then 95-year old told a writer for the Tana River County's official website in 2013, two years before his death. "I did not hold a gun and go to the bush like Dedan Kimathi or Major Blue and others. However, I contributed the melody and the whole world acknowledges that."

Though never a part of the Kenyan Anthem Commission, when news of Mr. Galana's death reached State House, President Uhuru Kenyatta, the son of the man who had picked his tune for the national anthem, sent condolences and even gifts to the family. Most members of the Commission are today also deceased and little remembered.

A similar situation prevailed in Uganda. Before Professor George Wilberforce Kakoma, the man behind Uganda's national anthem, passed away in 2012, he had filed a case in court accusing the government of infringing on his rights to own property and for not paying him royalties for the use of his song. He claimed about \$1.9 million (equivalent to about Ush4.5 billion). Initially, the government had paid him Ush2,000 in 1963, which is less than a dollar today.

In early 1962, a committee was tasked with choosing Uganda's national symbols. Its members were

George Wilberforce Kakoma, Polycarp Kakooza, Bambi Katana, Senteza Kajubi and Wilberforce Nadiope, who later became President Milton Obote's Vice President. In 1961 the commission sent out an advertisement that was published in the *Uganda Argus*, a government-owned newspaper, for interested people to submit compositions and designs for not only the national anthem but other national symbols too.

The short-listed individuals were invited to come and showcase their work to the committee. Unfortunately their submissions were disappointing. It was then that the head of the committee, Professor George William Kajubi, asked Professor George Kakoma, a renowned inspector of schools and a music teacher, to compose an anthem. Prof Kakoma composed the melody but Peter Wyngard, Kakoma's friend who was then a lecturer at the Makerere Institute of Education, composed the lyrics. Interestingly, other members of the committee, including Rev. Kakooza and Mr. Katana, [appear to have also made submissions of their own](#). Mr. Kakoma came up with the anthem overnight and it was declared the winner in July 1962, a few months before Independence.

*Oh Uganda may God uphold thee,
we lay our future in thy hand,
United, free for liberty together we'll
always stand*

National Anthem of Uganda

In 2010, Mr. Kakoma [was awarded](#) US\$50 million (\$14,000) by the Ugandan High Court, which recognised that he, along with the Ugandan government, had joint ownership of the copyright to the anthem. The court, however, also decreed that as a condition to his getting the money (a third of the out-of-court settlement he had rejected in 2009), Mr. Kakoma had to give up his claim to the copyright. Mr. Kakoma, who died in April 2012, appealed the judgement and as of May 2016, [the case had yet to be decided](#).

THE ANOMALOUS CASE OF TANZANIA

As Professor Mellitus Wanyama explains, "The first line in the first stanza of Tanzania's anthem was adopted from South Africa's *Nkosi Sikelel' i Afrika*, which was composed in 1897 by a schoolteacher and poet, Enoch Mankayi Sontonga". Set to the tune of the Welsh hymn, Aberystwyth, written by Joseph Parry more than two decades before, the hymn [became popular in South African churches](#) and was taken up by the choir of Ohlange High School, whose co-founder was the first president of the South African Native National Congress. It was sung to close the first Congress meeting in 1912, and by 1925, had become the official closing anthem of the organisation, which had by then changed its name to the African National Congress. In 1927, a Xhosa poet, Samuel Edward Krune Mqhayi, wrote an additional seven verses, and the tune quickly spread across the continent as a liberation anthem, much as Kalle's *Independence cha cha* would 30 years later.

National Anthem of Tanzania

While the Kenyan and Ugandan anthems both invoke divine favour for their respective nations, especially in the first stanza, the case changes with the Tanzanian national anthem, which opens with *God Bless Africa*. Why is this so? And why was *Nkosi Sikelel' i Afrika* successfully adopted as a basis for several countries' anthems unlike *Independence cha cha*?

Various reasons have been advanced as to why Tanzania chose the South African song. The country had played a critical role in South Africa's struggle against apartheid. Its first president, Julius

Nyerere, had, even prior to Tanganyika's independence in 1961, been a leading campaigner against the apartheid regime, calling for a boycott of South African goods and helping to launch Britain's anti-apartheid movement. When in power, he offered unflinching support to the ANC's guerrilla fighters, who found refuge and a base for planning and training for their struggle in Tanzania. When the apartheid regime refused to issue them travel documents, it was on Tanzanian passports that ANC leaders, including Nelson Mandela, were able to travel the world.

Further, Tanzania had offered itself as a base for others fighting for liberation, hosting the forces of many movements such as the African National Congress (ANC) and the Pan African Congress (PAC) from South Africa, the Mozambique Liberation Front (FRELIMO), the People's Movement for the Liberation of Angola (MPLA), the Zimbabwean African National Union (ZANU), the Zimbabwean African People's Union (ZAPU), and the South West Africa People's Organisation (SWAPO) from Namibia.

As Thandika Mkandawire, the Malawian-born Swedish economist, [noted](#), "Up until independence, many of these nationalist movements of southern Africa used *si Sikelel' i Afrika* as their nationalist anthem." It therefore came as no surprise when Tanganyika adopted the Kiswahili version of the *Nkosi Sikelel' i Afrika* as its national anthem in 1961 and the same was retained after it united with Zanzibar to form the United Republic of Tanzania.

African music is an incredibly rich and fertile ground. The different regions produce their own distinctive musical styles. So, away from national anthems, we have other songs across East Africa that inspired the agitation for freedom and watered the seeds of nationalism in the pre-Independence and post-independence eras.

For example, in the 1960s, *Mwana wa mberi*, a traditional song that literally congratulates a mother on begetting a first child, has, [according to the late Prof. Naomi Shitemi](#), been adopted in other situations that require hero-honouring. Prof. Maurice Amutabi's [essay](#) "Cultural History of the Abaluyia: The Role of Traditional Music", notes that the song became "very popular with the nationalist fervor ... [I]t was adopted unofficially as a nationalist anthem at political rallies in Western Kenya". Following independence, William Ignosi Mwoshi, the man largely credited with popularising the song outside the Luyha community, performed it for Jomo Kenyatta at his Gatundu home, signifying victory over the colonial rule.

'Mwana wa mberi ... [Alas! The Firstborn Child!]

'mwana wa mberi beyaye

'mwana wa mberi

Beyaye 'we

Mwana wa mberi ne shiekhoyero (repeat stanza)

Mwana wa mberi ni.... (mention celebrant)

Ni.... (mention celebrant)

Mwana wa mberi ne shiekhoyero

Beyaye okhali na 'undi no!

Mwana wa mberi

'ha' undi, no?

Mwana wa mberi ne shiekhoyero (repeat stanza)

Lera tsimbande tsia wabikha

Mwana wa mberi

Khufuye omwana

Mwana wa mberi ne shiekhoyero (mention cereals & grains)

Eee omwana wa mberi

Ee omwana wa mberi ne shiekhoyero
Ee omwana wa mberi
Ee omwana wa mberi ne shiekhoyero (repeat stanza)

The English translation:

[Alas the firstborn child!
The firstborn child
Alas indeed
Indeed the firstborn child is real joy (repeat stanza)]

The firstborn is ... (mention celebrant)
Yes it is.... (mention celebrant)
Indeed the firstborn child is real joy

Alas there is no other!
A firstborn child
You have another one
Indeed the firstborn child is real joy (repeat stanza)

Bring precious grains you have stored
For the firstborn child
We shower the child
Indeed the firstborn child is real joy (mention cereals & grains)

Oh yea the firstborn child
Indeed the firstborn child is real joy
Oh yea the firstborn child
Indeed the firstborn child is real joy (repeat stanza)]

[Courtesy Prof. Naomi Shitemi](#)

In a sense, *Mwana wa mberi* inaugurated an era where music encouraged nationalistic sentiment, many times reinventing history and exaggerating the virtues and deeds of founding presidents. As repressive and dictatorial single-party regimes constrained the space for democratic expression, musicians were reduced to praise-singers in the service of the state and its rulers. As Marie Korpe and Ole Reitov noted in their article on music censorship in Africa titled "[Not to be Broadcasted](#)", "almost all broadcasting media [were] state-controlled and ... performed as 'his master's voice' during various regimes, be it in Tanzania under Nyerere, or Zaire under Mobuto". In the 60s and early 70s, Kenya's national celebrations were synonymous with live choirs performing patriotic songs. Jomo Kenyatta was a big fan and would go the extra mile to transport his favourite choirs to his Gatundu home to entertain him. Enock Ondego's *Wimbo was Historia*, composed after Kenyatta's death, recounts the arrest, trial and imprisonment of the so-called [Kapenguria Six](#) and offers a sanitised and exaggerated rendition of Kenyatta's role in securing independence.

Maisha ya Mzee Jomo Kenyatta - Ukunda Group Singers

Enjoy the acoustic and electric guitar sounds in this song *Shirikisho la Afrika* by another Kenyan singer, John Mwale, which was released in 1983. The song celebrates the coming together of East African countries to form the initial East African Community (which he believed would strengthen the Organisation of African Unity, now the African Union), which was formed in 1967, collapsed in 1977, and revived on 7th July 2000.

Shirikisho la Afrika - John Mwale

Kenyan twist dance maestro John Amutabi Nzenze composed one song as a tribute to the Kenyan founding father Mzee Jomo Kenyatta. In the song, he also speaks against corruption and encourages Kenyans to work hard for future generations. The song is titled *Kenyatta*.

Kenyatta - John Nzenze / Geoff Ridden

In Tanzania, the Atomic Jazz Band, formed in the mid-1950s, composed a song, *Tanzania Yetu*, which tells of the feats of Tanzanian leader Mwalimu Nyerere. The song was famous all through the 1960s under the leadership of band leader John Kijiko.

Tanzania Yetu Ni Nchi Ya Furaha - Atomic Jazz Band

It is rare, especially in recent times, for an artist to sing about a leader from a country other than his or her own. But Kenya's Daniel Owino (D.O.) Misioni and his Shirati Jazz Band composed a track extolling the virtues of the fallen Pan-Africanist leader Julius Nyerere titled *Piny Ema Oneno (It's the world that has seen it)*. This was among Kenya's most successful bands. Starting off as Luo Sweet Voice, it became Shirati Luo Voice Jazz around 1972, before changing its name to Orchestra D.O. 7 Shirati Jazz in 1975.

Tribute to the late Julius Nyerere - D.O Misioni

In Tanzania, the late Marijani Rajabu, who performed a musical style that was popularly known as *Muziki Wa Dansi* in Tanzania, composed a song titled *Nyerere* to acknowledge the efforts of Mwalimu in the fight for Tanzania's freedom. He also urges Tanzanians to pray for their president.

Nyerere - Marijani Rajabu

In 1979, a year after Kenyatta's death, Kaakai Kilonzo and his Kilimambogo Brothers Band offered a utopic vision of Kenya in the song *Kenya Nchi Yangu*. He followed that up with *Fuata Nyayo*, which extolled the virtues of Kenyatta's successor, Daniel arap Moi. Originally Kaakai performed in [Kamba](#), his native language, but rose to national fame after releasing his music in [Kiswahili](#).

Kenya Nchi Yangu - Kakai Kilonzo

Another famous patriotic song was *America to Africa* by the veteran Kenya singer David Amunga. In this song, he expresses his joy at coming back home to Kenya after staying for several years in the USA. It was released in 1964.

Going Back to Africa - David Amunga

Following the ouster in 1979 of Idi Amin, famously known as the "Butcher of Uganda", the song *Saba Saba* celebrated his removal from power and espoused the people's freedom from the grip of Amin's authoritarian rule.

Saba Saba

However, there were still sounds of resistance and protest. In 1984 John Owino released *Baba Otonglo*, a song decrying the poor state of the domestic economy, which so alarmed the Moi government in Kenya that the records on the market were confiscated. In 1997, the trio known as Kalamashaka rebelled against the hardships of life in Nairobi's low-income neighbourhoods with their hit *Tafsiri Hii*, and, [as Oyunga Pala writes](#), "cemented the place of Sheng and Swahili rap as the voice of the urban youth all over Kenya."

Tafsiri Hii - Kalamashaka

Similarly, in 2002, as the Nyayo era drew to a close, Kenyans were again dancing to the sounds of *Yote Yawezekana Bila Moi (All is Possible Without Moi)*, a satirical corruption of the gospel song which declared *Yote Yawezekana Kwa Imani (All is Possible with Faith)*.

A year earlier, Eric Wainaina's *Nchi ya Kitu Kidogo (Land of Bribery)* expressed the common frustration with the corrupt state (and earned him notoriety after organisers at a music festival attended by the then Vice-President, George Saitoti, tried to stop him from performing the song).

Nchi Ya Kitu Kidogo - Eric Wainaina

By the time of the 2002 elections, Kenyans were enraptured by Gidi Gidi Maji Maji's defiant *Unbwogable (unshakeable, unbeatable, unstoppable)*.

Unbwogable - Gidi Gidi Maji Maji

And a new generation of musicians are now picking up from where their predecessors left off. Artists like Juliani in Kenya are continuing to challenge and highlight the inequities of Kenyan society and the iniquity of its politicians.

Barua ya Ocampo - Juliani

One such artist is Tanzanian superstar Diamond Platinumz, who has recently released a song titled *Acha Nikae Kimya*, meaning, "It is better for me to be silent if expressing myself will land me into trouble." In recent times several people have been arrested in Tanzania for expressing themselves strongly against the government of President John Magufuli.

Acha Nikae Kimya - Diamond Platinumz

We cannot exhaust the list, but we leave you with a famous quote by Nelson Mandela who was very much in love with South African music, having been a great fan of the late Brenda Fassie. He said: "The curious beauty of African music is that it uplifts even as it tells a sad tale. You may be poor, you may have only a ramshackle house, you may have lost your job, but that song gives you hope."

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