Gemma Ware: 60 years ago, on December 12, 1963, Kenya celebrated its independence from British colonial rule.

Newsclip

Gemma Ware: Each year the country now marks the occasion with a national holiday, Jamhuri Day, and for much of the past 60 years, one piece of patriotic choral music has been a regular feature of those celebrations. In this episode, how much one song can tell you about the politics of a new nation, and who controls what gets remembered and what gets forgotten. I’m Gemma Ware and you’re listening to The Conversation Weekly, the world explained by experts.

I’m joined by Julius Maina, East Africa Editor at The Conversation based in Nairobi. Welcome, Julius. Great to have you on the show.

Julius Maina: Thank you very much, Gemma.

Gemma Ware: So Julius, Kenya is celebrating its 60th anniversary of independence this month on December 12. Tell us, what happens in Kenya to mark this day?

Julius Maina: Yeah, so there’s lots happening, in preparation for Independence Day, which is called Jamhuri Day. Jamhuri means “Republic” in Kiswahili, a national celebration that recalls Kenya’s journey to independence, which was particularly violent. So this event is marked in cities and towns up and down the country. People will be filling up stadiums to listen to speeches and the main speech is that of the president. None of this is complete without traditional dances and choirs. This could be school choirs, adult choirs, which split through the story of independence mainly. It’s just become part of Kenya’s political culture.

Gemma Ware: There’s a big important way to end the year I guess for Kenya.

Julius Maina: It’s a big day, it’s a public holiday, everyone will mark it in their own way. Some will go to stadiums, others will go on family outings, and generally, others will feel that it’s the beginning of the festive season.

Gemma Ware: And at The Conversation in Kenya, you’ve been thinking about this year’s celebration in particular because it marks 60 years since independence. And one of the stories that you’ve been working on is about the role in this particular type of choral music that is often
played at big celebrations like Jamhuri Day this month. So, what struck you about this particular research?

Julius Maina: Every Kenyan would know about choral music as part of the political culture. What this research manages to do is to look at it with great depth and to see how it is an extension of our political culture, and how it’s a reflection of Kenyan society. And that speaks also a lot between both the citizens and their relationship with those who govern them. Cause a lot of it is praise music looking back at the past, at the heroes and heroines of the past and those of the present.

Gemma Ware: Thanks, Julius. So at your suggestion, we reached out to Doseline Kiguru, who’s a Kenyan researcher currently based in the UK at the University of Bristol, where she’s a research associate focusing on cultural and literary production in Africa and she’s been focusing in her research on Kenyan choral music. So I’m gonna start off playing you this piece of music. How do you say the name of the song? Is it Wimbo Wa Historia?

Doseline Kiguru: Wimbo Wa Historia, a song of history.

Gemma Ware: Okay, here’s the song.

Song

Gemma Ware: Okay, so tell me, Doseline, when you hear this song, what does it mean to you? What do you think about it?

Doseline Kiguru: I think I’m the wrong person to ask because I have deconstructed that song in so many different contexts. Because the song was originally meant to kind of invoke patriotism in the listener. I’m not so sure whether it still does for me. When I was young, and this is the ’80s and ’90s, it used to be played a lot in the national radio and there were not many FM stations. The national radio was probably the only radio station for most people and especially the national holidays. It used to be a very common song that would be played on the radio. And the idea was to kind of create a patriotism among the people. And especially because the tone of the song is quite sad, the singing is kind of very melancholic, it’s very sad. It’s trying to invoke a new kind of feeling like they’re people that really suffered for this country. So really we should transport that suffering into a kind of political currency that guides how we behave, that guides how we think about the history of Kenya and how those histories need to shape the things that we do today.

Gemma Ware: Doseline has spent a lot of time thinking about music like this with her colleague Patrick Ernest Monte, a music lecturer based at Kabarak University in Kenya. In 2018, they published research tracing the history of Kenyan choral music and the way it’s been used for political purposes.
**Doseline Kiguru:** Music has always been used as a tool for political resistance, starting with church music because originally church music was music that was inherited from Europe mostly from English hymns but because these are people that didn’t speak the English language at that particular time it meant there was a lot of translation from English hymns to local languages. But through that translation process, people learned that because the colonial administrators did not understand the local languages, they could use the same tune that existed in a well-known hymn, but put different words that are words of resistance.

**Gemma Ware:** So, Doseline, why is it that this form of music, which let’s be honest, is quite a Western form of music, is still being used 60 years after independence to celebrate national holidays in Kenya?

**Doseline Kiguru:** I think because as much as it’s an inherited genre, it has existed in the region for such a long time. The genre, yes, remains that if it’s inherited from elsewhere, but the content is very much local. The same way, for example, we would say that the novel is an inherited genre, but really does not mean that writers from the global south do not use the novel to write about their experiences. But at the same time, if you go further, before the state became a state in the 60s, choral music was very much present in charge performances.

The colonial aspect was significantly aided through religion, through the church. And this is the kind of music that was deemed as respectable music for Christians, for new converts. Like you could not just go in dancing like you have no care in the world with drums. So somehow this genre has existed in the region for years. So it can no longer be termed as a foreign genre that does not fit into local realities and imaginings.

**Gemma Ware:** It’s got an air of seriousness about it if it’s seen as church music. There’s some kind of solemnity to it.

**Doseline Kiguru:** Exactly. Choral music is neat to compose, to perform. There is a frame that kind of defines the beginning and the end, as opposed to, let’s say, contemporary genres in which it’s performative and it’s oral and can keep changing with every performance. And I think that’s one of the reasons why this particular music has existed all the way from the 1960s to the present. The choral music is very much defined and stuck. You’re not going to change the wording, you’re not going to change the structure of the music.

**Gemma Ware:** There’s no improvisation.

**Doseline Kiguru:** Yes, and that becomes very significant as a political tool, because you don’t want uncertainties when you’re dealing with music as a political tool. You want it to be exact for it to be effective.

**Gemma Ware:** Because choral music plays such a central role in Kenyan political culture, the government is keen to maintain control over it.
**Doseline Kiguru:** We cannot discuss political choral music in Kenya outside of the PPMC, Permanent Presidential Music Commission, that was established in the 1980s, and this was an institution that is still going on until today, that is based with curating music for the state, for national celebration days, for the radio. Over the years, this music has moved beyond the frame of the choral music and composing other genres of music, but really it started with choral music.

**Song**

**Gemma Ware:** The song *Wimbo Wa Historia* is a prime example. It was composed in 1964 by a musician called Enock Ondego, a pioneer of patriotic choral music. The song was first performed by school children for Jomo Kenyatta, Kenya’s first president.

**Doseline Kiguru:** Most of the song is about the violence of the colonial state, but upon specific individuals. Sometimes it goes further to say that they were crying, the whole nation because there was bloodshed. It’s kind of trying to write history through music, to say these are the things that happened because of colonialism. This is how our leaders suffered because of colonialism, especially Jomo Kenyatta.

**Gemma Ware:** In the decade before Kenyan independence, Kenyatta had led Kenya’s anti-colonial political movement, which later became the Kenya-African National Union, KANU. In 1952, long-standing unrest at British colonial rule erupted in violence, known as the Mau Mau rebellion or the Emergency. Kenyatta was accused of orchestrating the violence and arrested and then imprisoned. Doseline explained to me how *Wimbo Wa Historia* is Kiswahili lyrics focus on what happened to Kenyatta and a handful of other political figures in this period.

**Doseline Kiguru:** He suffered all these violences to his body, to his psyche, so it creates a hierarchy, right? It means that even if you’re talking about the history, even if that is a history of violence, we want to foreground the suffering of one particular person, right? But what does it mean when the suffering of only one person is the one that is significant enough for remembering? Does it mean that we are silencing the other stories?

**Gemma Ware:** Near the end of the song, the lyrics used the line, “Forget the past and instead build our country.” This was a phrase that Kenyatta himself began to emphasize once he’d become president.

**Doseline Kiguru:** That particular phrase was a rallying call for Jomo Kenyatta, the former president, asking people to forget the atrocities that had happened upon them. But then, what does it mean when the song says it’s a song of memory, then at the end you tell us to forget those atrocities? It’s kind of saying that we are enumerating these violences, but we are enumerating it for the purpose of forgetting, because without forgetting, then we cannot move on. As a critic, you start asking yourself, how do we forget if the song keeps singing about it?
Gemma Ware: One section of the song refers to what happened when Kenyatta, who’d been released from prison in 1961, travelled to the UK to take part in discussions about a new Kenyan constitution at Lancaster House in London.

Doseline Kiguru: But he was not the only person that went to Lancaster for the constitutional meeting. So it foregrounds the personality of the first president as the only person that was responsible for the constitutional making process. We argue that this kind of presenting the first president as somebody that suffered, not only emotionally but physically in so many different ways. It means that were supposed to revere him. He’s the person who sacrificed the most. So that means his position as a leader of government, his position as president, should not be questioned. This later became known as the cult of personalities in Kenya, where political leaders became like a cult. And the reason they became like a cult is because they had gained so many cultural capital by those false narratives about how much they suffered.

Gemma Ware: And when you talk about the violence that isn’t mentioned, what are you talking about? Give me some examples.

Doseline Kiguru: In 1952, when the colonial government imposed a state of emergency on the nation, during that state of emergency that lasted for almost 10 years, a lot of bloodshed happened all across the country, whereby people are put in camps, like taken from their farms and put in kind of enclosures. And your work is to go work in the colonially owned farms so that you have money to pay taxes. The violence went beyond being forced to work. Some people were incarcerated actually, and the inhuman conditions of that suffering have been documented by so many people. And I’m thinking about a book called Britain’s Gulag, in which it goes into actual descriptions, for example, of the sexual violations that were happening during the colonial period, the physical violations that involve cutting people’s limbs off, or even actually killing them. So when we’re talking about a sum of history that is presenting itself by saying we have a history of violence, it really glosses over the violence, except for the part where it says there was bloodshed in the country, in a general term. There was so much to talk about. That is what I’m saying. And I’m not saying that it should be a music that necessarily glorifies bloodshed, but there was no reason to foreground one person.

Gemma Ware: Doseline’s careful to point out that the composer, Enock Ondego, probably underwent some censorship of his music.

Doseline Kiguru: In Kenya, in the region and most parts of Africa, it’s very much shrouded around censorship. You are the creator, are censored by the state or at least by the institutions, but you as a creator also kind of have to keep engaging with a lot of self-censorship. So I would assume a first performance through the president is so that you make sure that the song is okay before it becomes like public performances.
Gemma Ware: Going deeper into their analysis of the music in the song, Doseline and her colleague, Ernest argue that there are some signs Ondego was subtly trying to critique the regime in the music.

Song

Doseline Kiguru: When you listen to the rhythm structures of it, sometimes the rhythm structures do not align with the local words, such that the words end up delaying the rhythm, or you don’t have to say the entire word for it to fit into the rhythm. Later, when music analysts come in to analyze this, they realized this is deliberate because he was a very good composer. He could not have deliberately not known that. This is a fact.

Gemma Ware: Did he ever write about that or talk about the fact that he was doing that?

Doseline Kiguru: He never talked about that.

Song

Gemma Ware: Whatever the message that Ondego was trying to get across in the song, it’s been used by different regimes throughout Kenya’s 60 years of independence for their own political purposes. After falling out of favor in the early 2000s, during the presidency of Mwai Kibaki, the song had a resurgence after 2013, when Uhuru Kenyatta, Jomo Kenyatta’s son, became president of Kenya.

Newsclip

Doseline Kiguru: It was kind of a shock to see all this also being replayed. The song that was probably last played in the ’90s in national airways or at least in national celebration days. Then you see it happening in 2013.

Gemma Ware: Uhura Kenyatta was replaced as president by William Ruto in September 2022.

Newsclip

Gemma Ware: Since Ruto’s election, Wimbová Historia hasn’t been heard during the official program of Kenya’s national celebration days.

Doseline Kiguru: For the last one year, we have not seen it being played. There was the December celebrations. There was the June celebrations, but it was not played, so we are just waiting to see.

Gemma Ware: But Doseline speculates that the song could still make a comeback during the Ruto presidency.
**Doseline Kiguru:** We cannot make a conclusive argument to say that it might not be used as a political tool in the coming months. If we remove the Kenyatta aspect of it, it’s about personality cult, it’s about controlling public remembering for political gain.

**Gemma Ware:** Alright, so we’re just going to wait to see whether it will be played this year at the 60th anniversary of Independence on December 12.

**Doseline Kiguru:** Yeah, we will be watching to see, yeah.

**Gemma Ware:** And how would you feel to hear it being played?

**Doseline Kiguru:** It annoys me, especially the last performance in which a young child did a cover of the original song.

**Gemma Ware:** Yeah, I’ve heard that one. It was recorded, wasn’t it, in 2018 by a singer called Leyla.

**Song**

**Doseline Kiguru:** Her voice is so beautiful. Such a young child singing such a powerful song. I was annoyed about it. So if it were to be played in the 60th celebration, I would still be annoyed, because it means that the work that we do as scholars, in terms of the creation of a new nation-state, it challenges that. It means that we are not, we are constant. There is no progress. If the nation-state, the creation of a nation-state is still dependent on memories that are insufficient, and memories that the public is urged to forget.

**Gemma Ware:** By urge to forget you mean those last few lines saying ‘forget the suffering’. Is that what you mean?

**Doseline Kiguru:** Yes, because the whole idea about creating a nation from zero is that if you are to acknowledge the violence of the colonial state, first of all, you’re going to ask for reparation. Then you realize that even the new state that came in after independence in ’63 kind of inherited those structures. So if you’re talking about reparation or at least acknowledgement of the violence that has happened, that violence did not end in ’63. This violence kept being perpetuated by the government that came after. So part of the forgiving and forgetting, I think, is also to make sure that subsequent regimes do not feel responsible for solving the crimes of that violence that happened under the regime.

**Gemma Ware:** If you’re still urging people to forget that violence, even though you are celebrating it at the same time almost, A, it’s contradictory in itself, as you say, and B, you’re saying, well, let’s not worry about justice for what happened.
**Doseline Kiguru:** Yes, because if you were to open the gates and ask for justice for the violence of the colonial state, it has to continue to the injustices of the immediate post-colonial state, the violence that has continued to define the post-colony today.

**Gemma Ware:** There have been flare-ups of political and ethnic violence in Kenya in the decades since independence, most notably in the 1990s and in 2007 and 2008, when more than a thousand people were killed, around the time of a general election. More violence also marred the 2017 election.

**Doseline Kiguru:** So if you open the doors and say, oh, we need to acknowledge those violences, we need to remember them for these reasons, then where do we draw the line and say we are only going to remember all the way to 1963? And then after that, we forget about all the other violences that continues to define the state. So, it’s a kind of protecting the status quo in terms of politics. That’s why the song becomes an important political tool. It silences people.

**Gemma Ware:** That’s it for this week’s episode. Thanks to our colleagues, Julius Maina and Kagure Gacheche in Kenya, and to Doseline Kiguru at the University of Bristol. We’ll put a link to her article on Kenyan choral music in our show notes, along with a link to a collection of articles that Julius and his team have chosen to highlight for the 60th anniversary of Kenya’s independence.

This episode of The Conversation Weekly was written and produced by Katie Flood and me, Gemma Ware, with production assistance from Mend Mariwany. I’m also the show’s executive producer. Sound design was by Eloise Stevens and our theme music is by Neeta Sarl. Stephen Khan is our global executive editor, Alice Mason runs our social media and Soraya Nandy does our transcripts. You can connect with us on Instagram, @theconversationdotcom, on X, formerly known as Twitter, @tc_audio, or email us directly at, podcast@theconversation.com. If you like what we do, please support our podcast and The Conversation more broadly by going to donate.theconversation.com, and please rate and review the show wherever you listen. It really does help us reach a wider audience. Thanks for listening.