

# Nigeria Reverts to Its Old Colonial Anthem

## *The song represents the patriotism present at its independence.*

By  
Bruce Gilley  
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Nigeria ditched its indigenous national anthem in May and restored the old colonial one. The decision by the country's National Assembly to revive a song written and composed by two white British women has caused predictable meltdowns in polite society. But it is the latest evidence that the shine is off decolonization.

The British assumed colonial rule over the first part of the territory that is now Nigeria in 1861. As the peaceful and carefully planned shift to Nigerian independence in 1960 approached, contests were held to decide the lyrics and music of the national anthem. The winners were a British social worker temporarily living in Nigeria and a piano teacher from London. Both women were white, but nobody seemed to care. As a Nigerian commentator wrote in 2009, "our national anthem 'Nigeria we hail thee . . .' opened me and I believe millions of Nigerians up with pride and the feeling of patriotism."

After a few years, Nigeria collapsed into a vicious civil war. Three decades of dictatorship followed. In 1978 the military government decided to swap out the "colonialist" anthem for a new one. Five poets and one police-band musician delivered a clunky, unmemorable tune called "Arise, O Compatriots," with no refrain and Soviet-sounding lyrics like "The labor of our heroes past shall never be in vain."

As corruption and misgovernance continued to plague Nigeria even with a return to democracy in 1999, the original anthem became a reminder of how far short the country had fallen from the feelings of nationhood and unity present at the country's independence. By reinstating it, legislators hoped to move Nigeria closer to those ideals. "This anthem, with its familiar lyrics and stirring melody, evokes a sense of nostalgia and patriotism," said Philip Agbese, deputy spokesman for the Nigerian government. Senate leader Opeyemi Bamidele similarly said that the original anthem "played quite a significant and crucial role in shaping Nigeria's national identity" and "was symbolic of Nigeria's rich cultural heritage."

Critics of the move aren't in short supply. One of the poets responsible for the 1978 anthem complained to a local newspaper that "Nigeria, the hitherto giant of Africa that led the liberation struggles of Africans to defeat apartheid and colonialism, is now reduced to a midget crawling back and crying 'mama' to her colonial master."

For most Nigerians, the old anthem is completely new. Only 5% of the population is 60 or older. At a World Cup qualifying match in early June, the Benin Football Federation played "Arise, O Compatriots," despite the decision to revert to "Nigeria We Hail Thee." While this move elicited censure from the country's national soccer federation, the players didn't seem to care. They sang along to the anthem that they've known their entire lives.

The anthem change bears on a serious question for Nigeria. Can it push the reset button and inspire its young people to feel the patriotism and unity developed in its colonial period? That would be something to sing about.

*Mr. Gilley is the 2024-25 Presidential Scholar in Residence at the New College of Florida and author of "The Case for Colonialism."*