

# WHOSE MUSIC AND DANCE TRADITION? THE KENYA MUSIC FESTIVAL FOUNDATION AND ITS AUTHORITIES

DE QUEM É A TRADIÇÃO DE MÚSICA E DANÇA? A FUNDAÇÃO DO  
FESTIVAL DE MÚSICA QUENIANA E SUAS ATORIDADES.

**Mukasa Situma Wafula**

**ABSTRACT:** Kenya is a multi-ethnic Nation with a variety of music, dance and performing traditions. It is of utmost importance for the governmental instances to consider this diversity while demonstrating unity in the country's identity. The Kenya Music Festival Foundation fulfills this role by presenting cultural diversity in this unique event. The paper will address the main actors of this complex festival, showing that different authorities are able to present and support safeguarding of traditional music, but are also responsible for changes and for new goals of the musical repertoire itself. Having been started in 1927 as entertainment for White settlers, the festival has grown over time to exhibit a unique blend of Kenyan culture. The festival exhibits Western Classical music, Kenyan (and broader African) music and dance, instrumental music and elocution. This paper focuses on music with Kenyan and by extension African origin, with a view of showing how the institution has been responsible for conserving the music as well as exemplifying dynamics of the same, through the concept of festival that draws material from traditional contexts, appropriates them into a model befitting aspirations of the festival, and develop it over time. To achieve this, the presentation reviewed videos of performances over the years. More so, review of the classes of music that have been performed over time, where an assessment of motivation for the changes in the classes were assessed. This paper conjectures that certain authorities are responsible for the dynamics of this unique event. A discussion on the players and how they influence the festival was an essential part of this paper that helped in determining the success story of this unique festival, which lately has been described as the largest cultural event in Africa.

**Key words:** Kenya; Kenya Music Festival; Traditional Music; Western Music

**RESUMO:** O Quênia é uma nação multiétnica com uma grande variedade de tradições musicais, performáticas e de dança. Para as instâncias governamentais, é de primordial importância considerar esta diversidade ao demonstrar a unidade identitária do país. A *Kenya Music Festival Foundation* cumpre essa função apresentando a diversidade cultural do Quênia neste evento singular. O presente artigo investiga os principais atores deste complexo festival, mostrando que diferentes autoridades envolvidas não só promovem a salvaguarda da música tradicional, como também provocam nela importantes mudanças em seu repertório. Iniciado em 1927 como forma de entretenimento dos colonizadores britânicos, o festival hoje se tornou um dos maiores expoentes da cultura musical do Quênia, exibindo música clássica ocidental, músicas e danças africanas, bem como música instrumental e oratória. O presente artigo visa demonstrar como essa instituição foi capaz de conservar e desenvolver a música tradicional do país em questão.

**Palavras-chave:** Quênia; Festival de Música do Quênia; Música Tradicional; Música Ocidental.

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Mukasa Situma Wafula <sup>1</sup>

## Background information

According to the KMF syllabus 2016, the Kenya Music Festival (KMF) was established in 1927 by British Settlers. Previous studies by Kidula (1986) and Musungu (2012) indicate that the objective of the festival then, was for the British settlers to perform Western Classical Music as a form of entertainment for their families. In 1941 a body was setup to find ways of how to promote local music in the country. One of the ways was through the festival that had been established. By 1952 the committee had worked towards incorporating Africans and African music in the festival (HYSLOP 1955). At this point in time this became the Kenya Music Festival, which had three branches in Kenya (West, Coast and Nairobi regions).

Kidula (ibid) reveals that in the 1950s the festival had only two items for competition, that is, the Western Set Piece and the African Folksong. The aim of this was to expose the African to Western music through the set piece and the “folksong” in order to promote African music. An important person in the development of KMF agenda was the then Music and Drama officer for the Kenyan colony, Graham Hyslop. He is noted to have developed the idea of how KMF was to be run including “recreating” of the African music/“folksong”. While Hyslop (ibid) refers to this as African music, Kidula (ibid) calls it “folksong”. This category, African music/“folksong”, introduced into KMF at this prototype stage, forms basis of this paper that seeks to demonstrate how it has over time been transformed to reveal itself with varied identities. While focusing on its performance practice and how it has survived over time, of essence is to show how different authorities have shaped its metamorphosis. Based on the reference to it as African music/folksong, it is important at this point to draw back and review the concept of music in African contexts, to demonstrate why the terms have been interchangeably employed and its impact on the transformation of the genre.

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<sup>1</sup> University of Music Franz Liszt Weimar, Germany. [m\\_wafula@yahoo.com](mailto:m_wafula@yahoo.com)

## Concept of Music in African Context

To understand the concept of music, five (5) people from different ethnic communities were engaged to find out what they refer to as song, dance, instrument and music. The following were some of the responses gathered;

Community	Song	Dance	Instrument	Music
<b>Kikuyu</b>	<i>Ruimbo</i>			
<b>Bukusu</b>	<i>Kumwenya</i>	<i>Bukhino</i>	<i>Bukhana</i>	
<b>Luo</b>	<i>Wer</i>	<i>Miel</i>		
<b>Gusii</b>	<i>Ogotera</i>	<i>Ogotenga</i>		
<b>Kamba</b>	<i>Wathi</i>	<i>Sunga</i>		

From the table above, it is evident that the communities have words that refer to song, yet not quite clear when it comes to dance, instrument and worse, music. Interestingly, all the respondents could not tell the terminology for music, but whenever a song was sounded, they said that is music, where in the song instruments and dance accompaniment were evident. It could be assumed that to these people song is music and music is song, although it carries in it other performing arts. Further interrogation to determine whether such concepts as melody, rhythm and harmony existed, proved very strange to them, and therefore had no words that referred to them, instead they said all that was song.

A review of performances from different ethnic communities showed that the above components were never separated whatsoever. Where, when they refer to performing a song, they still dance and play instruments; when they play an instrument, they sing and dance; and when they dance, they sing and play instruments. Perhaps that is why the Bukusu community asserts that a *Litungu* player, sings a song on the instrument (WAFULA, 2012). These revelations point to what Senoga-Zake (1986) and Nketia (1988) both concur that hardly is an African song performed without dancing. And that in as much as there is evidence of contemplative music that is not designed for dance or drama in Africa, in restricted contexts, it is prevalent that the music still stimulates motor response. Notably, none of the components are supplementary, but complement each other to result in a culturally meaning discourse, that serves artistic, aesthetic and utilitarian functions. This resultant performance is what is referred to as music, which may well be conceived as a concept but not an object. Besides its conceptual consideration, performance of song in an African context is essentially determined by the prevailing occasion, which also determines where it takes place. Notably, all members of the community in attendance are

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eligible for participation in music making at such functions, in as much as each occasion has also well-defined songs, instruments, dance and manner of performance.

Based on the foregoing submissions, this paper conjectures that introduction of African Music, to KMF may have had difficulties in determining the terminologies of the respective aspects of music and music at large. Such difficulty are attributed to the fact that the festival has a strong background of Western Classical Music that has well defined terminologies and concepts. Perhaps such difficulty qualifies why the category is referred to as “folksong” and “African music” interchangeably. Apart from the terminological difficulty, is how the music was to be practiced in a festival concept that seemingly is different from the traditional contexts that are largely based on function as the core to performance. A fundamental practice is that traditionally music is performed as a composite, yet being subjected to a festival concept which is founded on separation of respective arts as it is in Western Classical music. The foregoing information on the concept of music thus provides an essential ground for interrogation of African music in the Kenya Music Festival.

### **African music in KMF**

As previously discussed, African music was introduced in KMF in 1952, where a “folksong” was performed. Kidula (1986) alludes to the fact that Hyslop (ibid) formulated what came to be referred to as the African ‘folksong’ in Kenya; defined as the solo and ensemble articulations of song, instrumental pieces and dance by indigenous peoples of Kenya, recognized as having no borrowings from other, non-African civilizations, such as Western, Eastern or Arabic civilizations. Perhaps this was formulated in view of the foregoing discussion on the difficulty of defining music, the distinction between song, dance and instrumentation notwithstanding. It can be claimed that Hyslop recreated the folksong to uniquely suit and work for choir singing in this festival. It may be further argued that he created new distinguishable idioms that shares in origin of African songs yet not in context with the social setup of the same origin.

For the sake of KMF, Hyslop (1955) gives characteristics of African folksong as; the most suitable African songs are those sung by leader and chorus, in vernacular language hence rhythm and melody are of less interest than text. Given that some African songs are short; one may join one or two songs in a ternary format, as it is in Western classical music. The song should be devoid of any harmonies especially that do not exist in the culture of choice. Instrumental accompaniment may add color to the song, where traditional rattles, drums, stringed and wind instruments may be employed. It is preferred that accompanying dance should not be elab-

orate hence leg tapping, hand clapping and use of ankle bells would be most natural. The song may also make use of dynamic contrasts especially towards the end, with a kind of crescendo.

The above explanation of the folksong governed how it was performed for a long time. Changes have been noted over time, where the song came to be accompanied by respective cultural dance styles and movements. More so, that not just a drum was used to accompany the song, but relevant instruments as it is and was done in the traditional communities. An obvious characteristic has been arrangement of performers in two lines, giving song prominence where dance and instruments only accompany and, therefore, subordinate to song, and joining of “songlets” to form one complete song, which is performed in unison or otherwise harmonies where some communities make use of drones, overlaps, instrumentation and varied vocal ornaments.

From this African music/folksong song introduced in KMF, new genres evolved, that are independent yet still related to it. An immediate departure from the folksong, was dance and instruments being performed as separate categories from the original. Three categories, that is folksong, folkdance and instrumental classes were developed. The folk dance differs from the folksong in the sense that prominence is given to dance as song and instrumentation become subordinate and offer accompanying role. To exemplify the dance category further, it is characterized by formational variation of dance styles and patterns, against existing songs, but takes into consideration the cultural implications of context of performance. Instrumental on the other hand differs from the other two by giving prominence to the manipulative art of the instrument as the song and dance accompany the instrument. Instrumentation, therefore, takes a larger portion of performance against the other two. In essence the following diagram summarizes the classes;

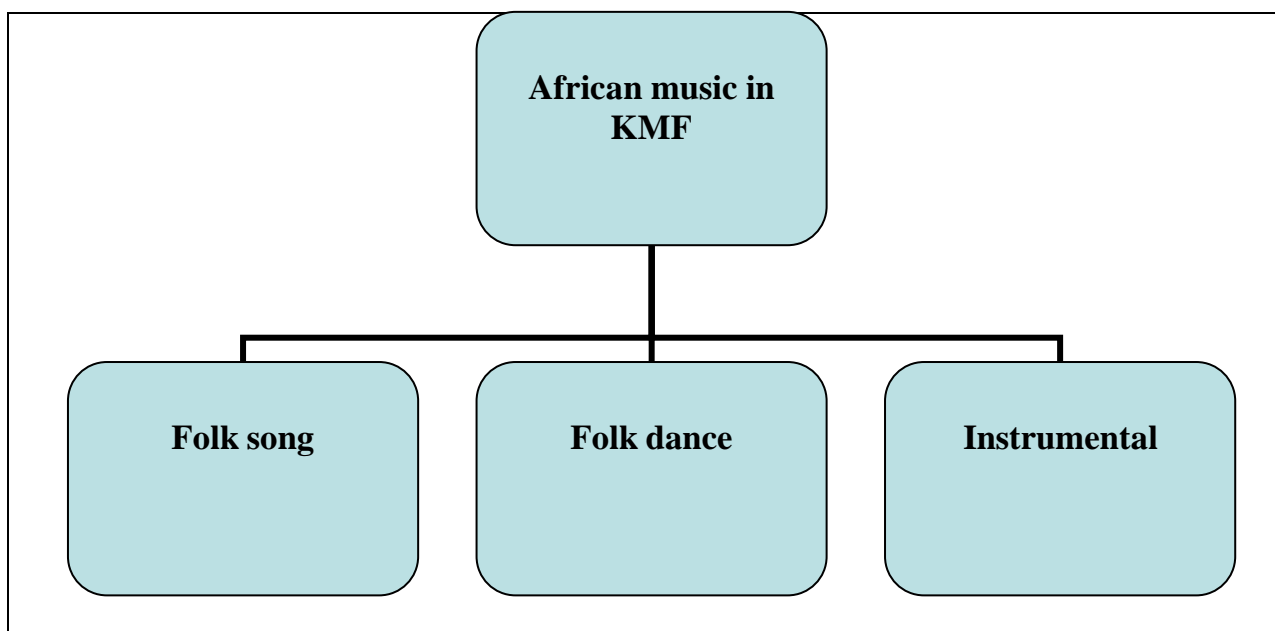


Fig. 2: KMF African Music Divisions

With time, the above classes have attracted more interest and the need for newer ideas. The folksong for instance resulted in being adapted and arranged for three or four voice parts. Such is a notable influence of the Western art music, as learnt in music literacy classes. A category for “adaptation and arrangement of African melodies” was, therefore, established where one or two folksongs are arranged in three or four parts (SSA, SATB or TTBB)<sup>2</sup>, with Western approaches of melodic, harmonic, rhythmic, textual and structural development are employed. A unique characteristic, however, is that the song is performed within the African idiom of choice with relevant traditional vocal, instrumental and dance characteristics. The only departure from the original folksong is its rhythmic, melodic and thematic development.

A unique characteristic of popular Kenyan music is the use of folksongs and songs with cultural idioms in the pop music, what is at times referred to as Afro-fusion. It is interesting that some of the pop songs have found their way into KMF. Typically, pop music makes use of band instruments as guitar, keyboards, drum kits and varied horns. In arranging songs from pop sources, some of the musicians have found the need to arrange the instrumental sections too. The arranged instrumental sections give such songs a unique characteristic that is not evident in arrangement of folksongs. This has become a new offshoot of the then “adaptation and arrangement of African melodies” category, as a new class titled “adaptation and arrangement of Popular melodies ‘zilizopendwa’”, which has developed even further with time. Pop songs from Kenya have been put in one class, those from other African countries in another, the ones from the rest of the world in a different class and sacred pop songs in a separate category. Though in different classes, they are characterized by choice of popular songs “referred to as *zilizopendwa*” a Swahili word to mean ‘ones that were loved’. More so, is arrangement of the instrumental sections where the instruments are vocalized hence no need for instrumental accompaniment. Lately, another category has been created that incorporates use of live instruments.

Under the dance category focus is on cultural dances with specific names performed on given occasions by defined gender and age group. Under guidance of teachers, pupils and students chose and choreograph dance/s for presentation. Previously, dance category focused on dances performed by mature people, although with time, children dances and games have also been incorporated. A unique category for children has come to be the singing game. This is borrowed from how young children in African communities play as they make use of songs and dances. During dance performance, students and pupils with physical, hearing, sight and other challenges were found to be disadvantaged. The KMF executive committee chose to create classes for the challenged participants, but all the characteristics discussed above applied to them.

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<sup>2</sup> S-Soprano, A-Alto, T-Tenor, B, Bass

Again this marked another development in KMF with many advantages except for the fact that they arguably feel isolated from the bigger community of participants and performers.

The instrumental category focuses on exposing and developing instrumental abilities. Most of the African instruments are ensemble based. For example, *Litungu* of the Bukusu people is played in the company of a rattle *Luengele*. *Ohangla* of the Luo community are accompanied by *Kalapapla* drum. KMF designed it that they are performed as solo instruments. It is common to find an instrument that requires other ensemble members being performed in isolation. However, with time, ensemble playing was introduced in KMF, where instruments were given different categories. This include wind ensemble, string ensemble, drum ensemble, and African ensemble. In some instances, Western instruments were also unknowingly incorporated, what led to the need for creation of a class the combines African and Western instruments.

The above descriptions from the folksong/African Music, to the many categories show remarked dynamism and creativity in the festival, that among other objectives endeavors to preserve the Kenyan culture. The following table summarizes the existing classes under African music that have been recreated over time.

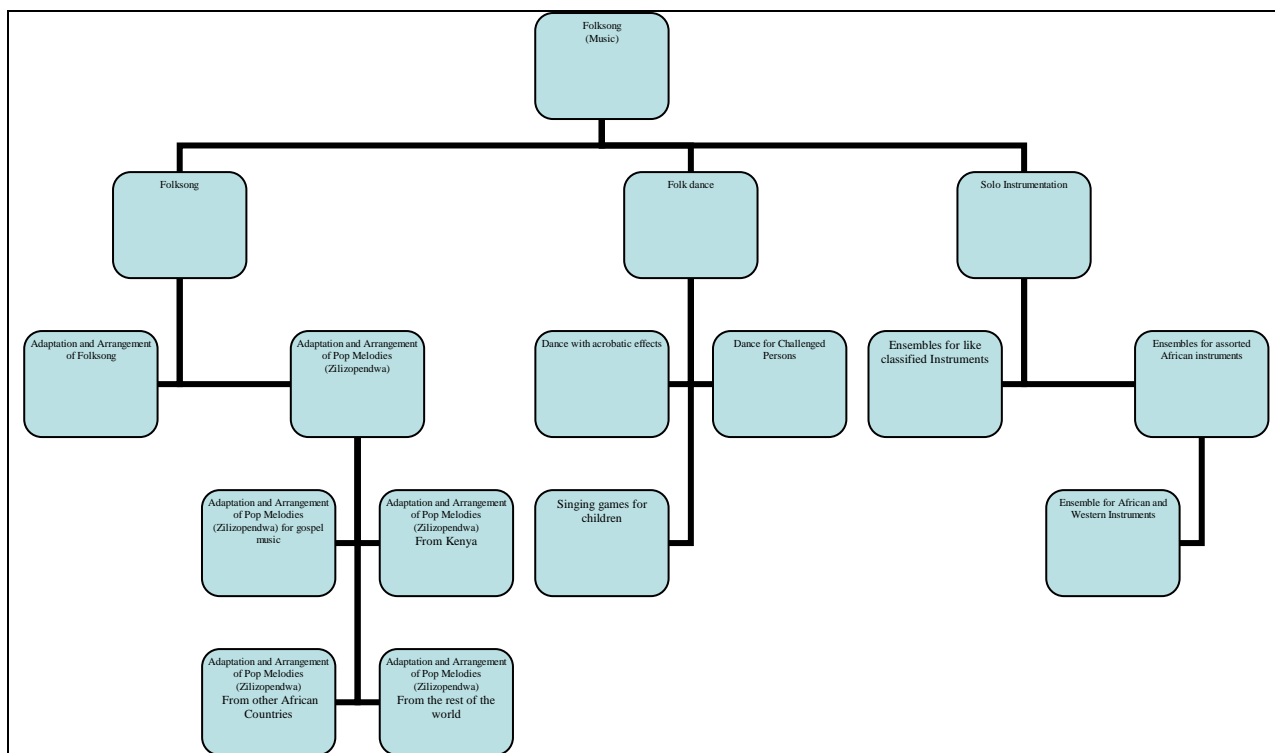


Fig. 3: KMF African Music Metamorphosis

### African Music in KMF reviewed

Prior discussion on the concept of music in African music revealed the composite nature where song, dance, instrumentation and in some instances drama and masquerade are combined.

This art manifests itself in given occasions to serve specific purposes, what Omollo-Ongati refers as utilitarian contextual foundation (ONGATI, 2006). Lead performers of such music are known in as much as all attendees of a given ritual participate. With all these cultural considerations, a difficult task by KMF has been to preserve this art, yet accommodating influences from other cultures that are in constant interaction with Kenyan people. In particular, the Western Classical music, that was basis for formation of the festival under the British colonial masters. KMF has endured these prejudices and influences but also in many ways continued to play the consistent role of preserving what is Kenyan and by extension African.

Bowman (1998) claims that culture is constantly being created, recreated, modified, contested and modified. Perhaps that is why presenting Kenyan music to KMF from the onset required the “recreation” of song as a concept to respective artistic objects for it to fit in the model of a competitive music festival. A number of cultural considerations were defied for the concept of KMF to work. One of the obvious deviations is in terms of who performs the music. It is common for instance to find a song that was traditionally performed by old people being performed by the young children. A song that was previously performed by women being performed by boys at KMF, and so is a song that was traditionally performed by selected and secret communities, for example, medicine men or ritual priests, being performed by children who do not subscribe to such societies.

Performance of folksongs in KMF also shows performers arranged in two lines, an aspect that is not evident in the traditional scene, where participants perform with no specific formation. Particularly, that the performance is prescribed to be performed with specified time (4 minutes). Traditionally such performance would continue for as long as the impending ceremony or ritual was in progress. In the folksong class, it was observed that song is given prominence where the festival is interested in developing the singing ability. Again this is contrary to the cultural requirements where song and dance are intertwined and never separable.

The systematic transfer of the music from its cultural environment resulted in presentation of the songs on a stage that defies the natural outdoor environment that in most cases is determined by impending ceremony or ritual. Such performance stages serve the purpose for songs drawn from all ceremonies that are presented, yet traditionally each ceremony or ritual had its own place that was unique to it. Participation which usually was open to all participants who were present, is restricted to the performers on stage only, in the KMF scenario. The audience is restricted to clapping only after the performance.

It can, therefore, be argued that defying certain cultural considerations opened a window for KMF to create its own niche of music, authorities and identities. In as much as KMF music



has “carved out” a unique blend of artistic expressions, evidence of strong foundations of indigenous music of Kenyan communities is well exhibited in this KMF concept. Today if anyone visited Kenya, KMF would ably provide an avenue for them to sample music that reflects traditions of the different communities of Kenya. Such foundations may further be viewed as the basis for argument that KMF has achieved to preserve music of Kenya to a big extent. In as much as modifications are well seen in the work, it still maintains/retains certain elements of traditional music, what Nzewi (1991) refers to as innovative continuity with conformity.

Some of the characteristics of indigenous music that are evident in KMF include; the use of solo and chorus structure of songs. Where the solo part is done by either a human voice or in some instances instruments and the rest of the singers respond in chorus. In as much as several African institutions have declined over time, KMF has managed to maintain songs from these institutions that are still sang, though not for the ritualistic but for exhibitivie purpose. That is why one can find traditional marriage, initiation, birth, funeral and entertainment songs. Currently these traditional rites are not common, and it means the music is not practiced yet KMF gives opportunity for them to be sung.

In this festival, it is evident that the songs have been clearly maintained in their respective native languages. Text is, therefore, given prime importance in recited and sang forms as it is done in the traditional contexts. This has to a big extent helped in maintaining existence of the respective languages, and making the learners and those who watch the festival appreciate existence of these languages. Performances in KMF also exhibit use of indigenous instruments of the respective Kenyan people, where all types of instruments are well represented and employed. The instruments are important artefacts of the community which if not used risk being lost. In essence, the festival works as an archive of the instruments and other aspects of material culture including costumes and props. This is on the basis that KMF gives opportunity for them to be used hence maintaining their relevance and need to exist.

Music has for a long time acted as an agent for social cohesion, control and balance. KMF brings together people from all parts of Kenya who participate in the festival. In this festival, songs, dances, instruments and games from all parts of the nation are performed in their respective languages. This forms a forum where different people appreciate each other, through the distinctive exhibition of the rich cultural blend of Kenya. Appreciating each other’s culture is a step towards better social cohesion, a virtue that is characteristic of music in traditional contexts.

Creation and recreation has been a focal element in the making and sustaining of this festival, where, new ideas have always kept the interest of the festival going. Separation of the three

main aspects in African music was a step towards opening up space for creation of new ideas. The case of emphasizing dance yet being supported by song and instrumentation is a typical new idea. This led to viewing at dance not just as physical response to the music, but room for creative performance. Creativity can be well observed in the way patterns are created on stage. Starting with a definite entry formation and an exit formation towards the end. On stage, the performers are seen to make patterns drawn from different artistic shapes and letters of the alphabet. More so, is the designing of costumes that aid in enhancement of body movement and creation of patterns and styles. It is interesting that the dances are performed with focus towards definite climax that in most cases signifies the end. Dance class may well be viewed as a creative entity that draws style and idiom from the community and culture of choice. It is, however, contestable that they are cultural dances that are a true reflection of what happens in traditional contexts.

The song class depicts more creativity and borrowing compared to the other categories, where the structure of performance is first a new concept. From songs sung in unison and solo-chorus structure to part singing that exhibit new structural tendencies. This is largely influenced by Western Classical music that is typical of complex elitist art music. This leads to a totally new, unique genre, where pop songs are re-arranged for choral singing, with distinctive style of vocalizing instruments. The dynamism exhibited in the song class basically creates room and space for new music in this festival.

The interesting trends within KMF have been orchestrated by a number of players with distinct roles. This is a festival where participants are drawn from learning institutions. Given that learners have a season to move to the next level, much of the music tendencies of KMF are based on traditions where earlier learners pass them on to the next generation. This usually happens when the younger learners pick up what they can hear and see from the older learners. In other circumstances, the learners grow up to be teachers in the same festival, where they teach the current learners what they learned before. This is exemplified through an oral means of passing on information to the next level. This paper argues that the oral tradition would be responsible for maintaining the practice within KMF, but also the many changes that have taken place in the festival. The changes would be as a result of difference in perception by the learners and those who instruct them, as well as preferences.

Music teachers have for the entire time been responsible for the training of learners in this festival. Prior researchers have shown that the teachers exhibit different levels of music abilities and preference, a situation that is occasioned by prior training in the area of music. Particularly, teachers have been mainly responsible for the new ideas in the festival. For example, when the

arrangement of pop was introduced and one of the teachers presented a sacred pop tune! This led to the committee considering a new class for sacred pop tunes, since it was observed that performance practice for the song with sacred text was different from the secular ones. This paper argues that music teachers stand tall as revolutionists of KMF.

The same music teachers have for a long time been employed as adjudicators who judge the performances, where the winning teams are determined and awarded. The participants are usually curious to listen to the adjudicators' oral comments as well as the written ones. Such comments are usually implemented by the performers, such that in the subsequent years they present works reflecting what was preferred by the adjudicator. Performers also keenly watch the winning teams, where they try to emulate them. An interesting observation is that at times dances that are exaggeratedly fast are rated as the best, when the tempo does not reflect the cultural image of the selected performance. Subsequently all the performers present dances with this exaggerated tempo. This is all a result of the adjudicators' considerations. Adjudicators have, therefore, immensely contributed to the dynamism of this festival, its standards and cultural manifestations notwithstanding.

The Kenya Music Festival is organized under the Ministry of Education Science and Technology, where His Excellency the President of Kenya is the Patron. Ministry of education officials are some of the people who form the National Executive Committee that runs the festival. The committee is responsible for all organizational duties of the festival including choice of pieces to be performed, the classes, venues, and adjudicators. The committee has been the ultimate decision making body for anything new or what is to be maintained for performance in the festival. Their decisions have also in many ways been responsible for the dynamism of KMF.

## **Conclusion**

As an institution, the KMF has helped in preservation of the rich heritage of Kenya through music, as envisioned their objectives. It is, however, notable the same institution has also been responsible for the transformation and alternative appropriation of traditional music, an aspect that formed basis for this discussion. This paper was sensitive on the extent to which KMF has managed to promote preservation of Kenya's rich cultural heritage as well expand what it has attempted to conserve over time, especially in the area of indigenous music of Kenya which forms an integral part of the festival. The KMF can thus be viewed as a concept which draws foundation from the traditional cultural institutions and gives them a new context with defined tenets of performance.

The festival assumes dimensions of “purist” as well as “syncretist”. With this, the festival has come out to exhibit what belongs to the indigenous communities of Kenya, yet recreate them in a manner that can be argued as belonging to KMF yet not quite. This paper views the inter-phase between the purist and syncretic standpoints exhibited in KMF help this paper to argue out as to whose music this is, yet being able to show and describe the web of stability and dynamism as essential elements of cultural posterity. That is why Euba (1970) argues that if music cannot live without new creative forces to sustain it through changing social circumstances, there is a need to establish a frame of reference by which to change. The KMF and its authorities (the executive committee, music teachers, adjudicators, pupils and students), thus provides a requisite framework for such change, where musical creativity and sustainability are fostered.

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