

## POEME ELECTRONIQUE FUSION CONCEPT OF NATIONALISM IN *FEEL THE SOUNDS OF KENYA*

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### Abstract

This study sought to find out Poeme Electronique fusion concept of nationalism in *Feel the Sounds of Kenya*. Edgar Varese, a French composer, is hailed as the pioneer of electronic music with his signature Poeme Electronique composition, which was performed in 1958 in Brussels. Attributes of similitude with Edgar Varese's Poeme Electronique style have come to identify certain African contemporary music idioms. Transcending conventional sonic boundaries that have long defined the Kenyan music space, the piece *Feel the Sounds of Kenya* by CeeRoo exemplifies this innovative fusion concept of electronic elements with social-cultural schemas akin to the Kenyan nationhood, a blend of native nuances with technological progress. Using the content analysis method, the researcher analyses Poeme Electronique concepts in *Feel the Sounds of Kenya* with the aim of establishing the intersection between artistry and technology within the broader discourse of nationalism while propagating national consciousness. This is achieved by using Sofia's model approach to examine CeeRoo's *Feel the Sounds of Kenya* on both descriptive and conceptual analysis levels. From the analysis, it is clear that CeeRoo's *Feel the Sounds of Kenya* exemplifies a perfect union of definitive cultural nuances with electronic music in a space that has long been defined by conventional musical schemas. This information provides a model of how music composers, listeners and performers in Kenya can use normative cultural schemas to augment the conventional musical parlance, grammar and vocabulary. The researcher recommends a contextual-conscious approach for music making, practice and education in Kenya for relevance.

**Key terms:** Conceptual analysis, descriptive analysis, electronic music, fusion, nationalism, poeme electronique.

## 1.0 INTRODUCTION

The Twentieth Century music story is one of adventure and diversity in the development of Western Art music. Kamien (2012) describes it as "a time of revolt...that saw more fundamental changes in the language of music than any time since the beginning of the Baroque era" (p. 283). Bennett (1987) describes it as an age of exploration and experimentation, while Burrows (2012) speaks of it as an age that breaks from the past. It brought about dramatic changes in how music was composed and transmitted to the listeners. Through television, recordings, radio and the internet, performances can be seen and heard by a wider audience. This development and influence has, with time, crossed normative music-making boundaries and has come to define music performance and composition in contemporary societies in developed as well as developing countries. The development of electronic music, among the copious 20<sup>th</sup>-century developments, has had a tremendous influence on music composition and performance in Kenya as well.

Electronic music has had a tremendous effect on music composition and appreciation. Contemporary African music has significantly been influenced by electronic music in the last few decades. It is the hope of this researcher that the current study will, to some degree, shed light on the use of 'natural sounds' in music composition through electronic music in the Kenyan context. Using the content analysis method, this paper seeks to identify Varese's 'Poeme Electronique' concepts in Cee-Roo's *Feel the Sounds of Kenya* with the aim of promoting Kenyanhood. The information and data generated from this study will aid in augmenting existing musical parlance and vocabulary with the aim of accommodating more diversified musical expressions beyond conventional music grammar.

## 2.0 RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

### Poeme Electronique

Edgard Varese is a French-born American composer born on December 22, 1883, in Paris, France. He grew up in Paris, Burgundy and Italy and later moved to the United States. He is a twentieth-century composer popularly known for his compositions in electronic music. His masterpiece, the 'Poeme Electronique', involved the collaboration of an architect and painter known as Le Corbusier. It was commissioned by a Dutch company known as Philips as a work on the development of a pavilion for the Brussels World Fair in 1958. This Pavilion was an initiative to provide an opportunity for the exploration of new ways of working with composition, performance and perception concepts (Centola, 2017).

For a long time, conventional Western music has used standard-pitched sonorities as foundational compositional elements in music making. In contrast, Zugasti and Copon (2016) note that Varese's intention was to liberate sound by using noises that are not considered musical. Whereas this may seem a new trend in the Western musical development landscape, Roebbers and Leeuwenberg's (2010) documentary 'Foli' exemplifies the existence of this concept in the African space. 'Foli' is a traditional African musical exposition that demonstrates how the Baro people from Guinea use natural sounds that are found in their social-cultural environment as resources for their composition and rhythmic schemas. This approach depicts a similitude of composition approaches and principles with that of Edgar Varese's Poeme Electronique.

## Analysis of Poeme Electronique

To understand Edgar Varese's Poeme Electronique, Sofia (2001) uses both descriptive and conceptual analysis to unmask the insights of the compositional and interpretive processes of this masterpiece. This research will adopt these two approaches in analyzing *Feel the Sounds of Kenya* for two reasons: First, Sofia's descriptive approach unveils the form of the composition, shedding light on the structure and design used by the composer. Secondly, the conceptual approach aids in analyzing definitive elements used in the composition and how they signify nationhood. At the descriptive level, the analysis looks at the sequencing of sounds within the piece, while the conceptual level looks at how these sounds have been used in representing the Kenyan consciousness.

## 'Feel the Sounds of Kenya'

A characteristic feature in *Feel the sounds of Kenya* is elaborated by Kamien (2012) as a need by composers to humanize electronic music. This, he elaborates, can be done in several ways: First, by using live performers in conjunction with taped sounds. These taped sounds may be electronic pitches or noises or may be previously recorded sounds of live performers; secondly, performers may have electronically manipulated duets with themselves; thirdly, using traditional instruments and digital synthesizers and samplers live. The analysis of *Feel the Sounds of Kenya* using Sofia's (2001) approach is an attempt to humanize electronic music in Kenya.

*Feel the Sounds of Kenya* by Cee-Roo is a fusion of Poeme Electronique ideas in a Kenyan context of using both pitched and unpitched natural sounds that would otherwise be considered 'noise' in traditional classical music parlance. It is these sounds that serve as signifiers of Kenyan nationhood, having been captured electronically from the Kenyan natural and socio-economic environments. It is this aspect that makes the *Feel the Sound of Kenya* piece an identity marker of Kenyan culture.

## Descriptive Analysis of 'Feel the Sounds of Kenya'

Using Sofia's (2001) model, this section analyzes descriptively the content, structure and form of *Feel the sounds of Kenya*. A form analysis of *Feel the Sounds of Kenya* reveals a binary structure that begins with a short exposition and ends with a short coda summarised as follows:

### *Introduction/Exposition:*

00:00-00:27 Melodic themes  
00:28-00:37 Percussive and rhythmic themes

### **SECTION A**

00:38-00:55 Theme variation I  
00:56-01:12 Theme variation II  
01:12-01:46 Theme variation III

### **SECTION B**

01:47-02:49 Contrasting Section  
02:50-02:59 Coda

## **Introduction:**

The introduction is divided into two sections: the first one exposes the melodic themes, while the second section introduces the percussive and rhythmic themes. These themes make the compositional framework of all sections of the piece.

- 00:00-00:09 It begins with a rushing wind sound with three Maasai gentlemen facing a cliff. The Exposition of the vocal theme taken from the women of Giriama, Coastal, Kenya, follows with the tonic and mediant male vocal pedal as background music.
- 00:10-00:18 There is a repetition of the vocal theme taken from the women of Giriama, with additional footsteps of a girl walking to fetch water in metronomic quadruple pulses. A chordal background of vi-V-IV-V6/4 by male vocals is used as background music.
- 00:19-00:27 There is a transition of the rushing sound of maize falling into the grinder (kinu) against the repetition of the vocal theme taken from the women of Giriama. A duple pulse by the pounding handle of the grinder (kinu) with a Sustained chordal background of vi-V-IV-V6/4 by male vocals is heard, shakers join in at 00:25, everything ending in a rest at 00:27, paving the way for a stomping kids clap on the main beat.
- 00:28-00:36 There is a declamation by a woman's voice with a rapid rhythmic motif played in the tenor drum while kids clap. The sound of the tambourine and metal hammer by a jua kali artisan, the jingles of a jumping Maasai and the proclamation of 'soba' by a Maasai elder are superimposed.

## **Section A:**

- 00:37-00:45 A Sustained chordal background of vi-V-IV-V by male vocals interspersed by two pulses after each is heard alongside a fusion of all rhythms recorded from the pounding handle of the grinder, clapping of the kids, footsteps of the girl going to fetch water, mental hammer by the jua kali artisan, tambourine and the drums beating. The addition of the bran cutter in triplets at the end of the section brings an element of polyrhythms.
- 00:46-00:55 A Sustained chordal background of vi-V-IV-V by male vocals interspersed by two pulses after each is heard alongside a fusion of all rhythms recorded from the pounding handle of the grinder, clapping of the kids, footsteps of the girl going to fetch water, mental hammer by the jua kali artisan, tambourine and the drums beating. An addition of a chant by a boy, Muslim men background singing a theme on l s f m r l s, with a sustained chord from the male chorus is heard.
- 00:56-01:12 A return of the main theme by the women of Giriama, electronically modified, and a sustained chordal background of vi-V-IV-V6/4 by male vocals interspersed by two pulses after each with a descant is heard. Additionally, a fusion of all rhythms recorded from the pounding handle of the grinder, clapping of the kids, footsteps of the girl going to fetch water, mental hammer by the jua kali artisan, tambourine and the beating drums are juxtaposed. The sharpening of a machete in a metric quadruple pattern at the end, the rushing wind, kids' chuckles, and the entry of sustained strings at the end heighten the percussive effect.
- 01:13-01:28 -A continuous chordal background of vi-V-IV-V progression by male vocals and strings with a descant as background music against a percussive pulse from a fusion of all rhythms recorded from the pounding handle of the grinder, clapping of the kids, footsteps of the

girl going to fetch water, mental hammer by the jua kali artisan, tambourine and the drums beating.

-Additional sounds of a man canoeing.

Ends in a terraced rest at 01:27 with an interlude of a girl's "Maasai" whisper

01:29-01:36 -Percussive sounds with the sustained chordal background of vi-V-IV-V progression by male vocals and strings continue against additional sounds of a tuk engine and rushing matatu bus.

-This is terminated by a declamation of a matatu tout on "beba" at 01:35 with an interlude of a wheelbarrow's screeching sound.

01:37-01:45 -Percussive sounds with the sustained chordal background of vi-V-IV-V progression by male vocals and strings continue against additional sounds of rustling sounds of a woman weeping, metal welding, tambourine playing and shaking, a short declamation by a canoeing man, the whistling of a boy in school uniform and a small Radio on air.

-This is terminated by a sudden rest of everything at 01:45

## **Section B:**

01:46-02:01 -Electric-generated sounds with indistinct Maasai gnats begin this section in a crescendo -This is juxtaposed with distinct sounds of a walking insect ushering in a stamping of a plastic cup by a beggar in triple pulse. This is then overlaid with a mellow flute by a man in a Kanzu, with the re-emerging of the percussive sounds culminating to a grand halt by the dropping of a Maasai jump at 02:01

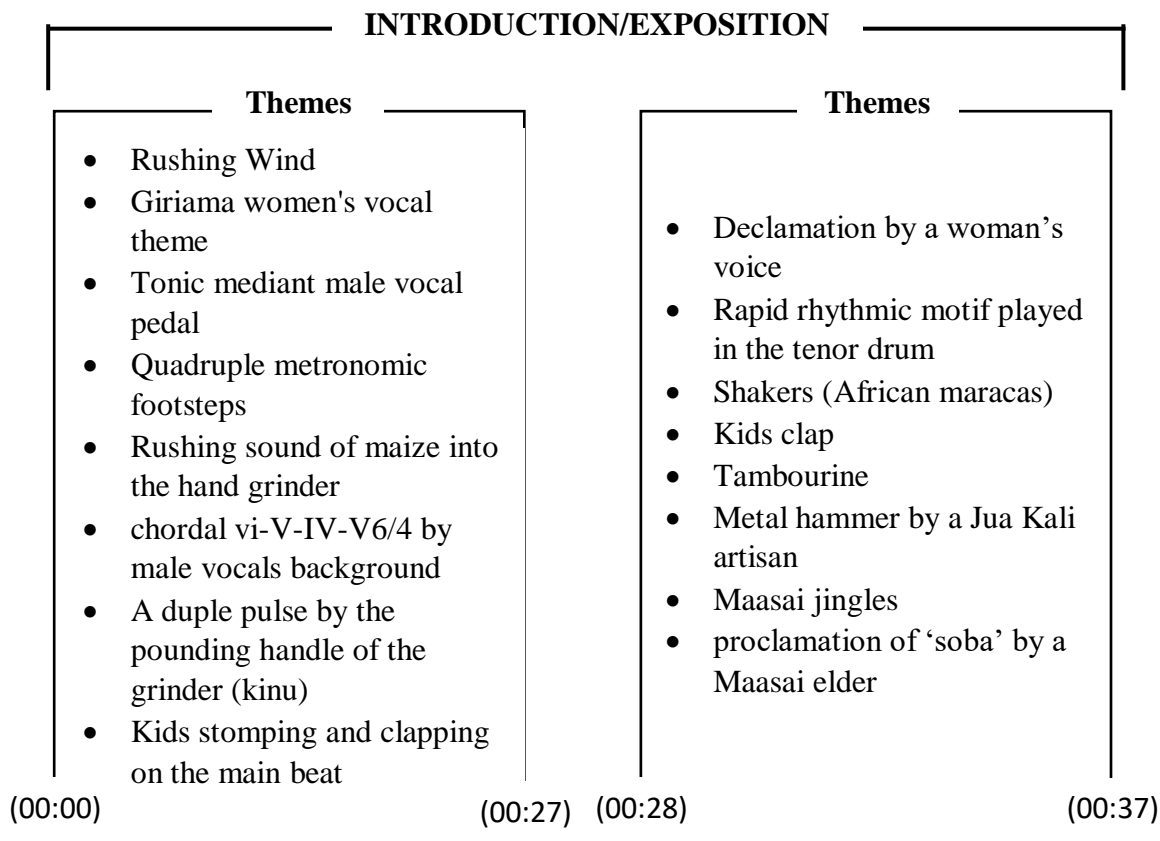
02:02-02:17 -A responsorial acapella singing of a gospel song by kids against a background rushing wind, of kids laughing and chuckling and birds tweeting at the end of this section

02:18-02:33 -The responsorial singing of a gospel song by kids continues with a chordal background of two-bar blocks of I-iii progression alongside a duple percussive pulse by the maize grinding sound and clapping by the kids.

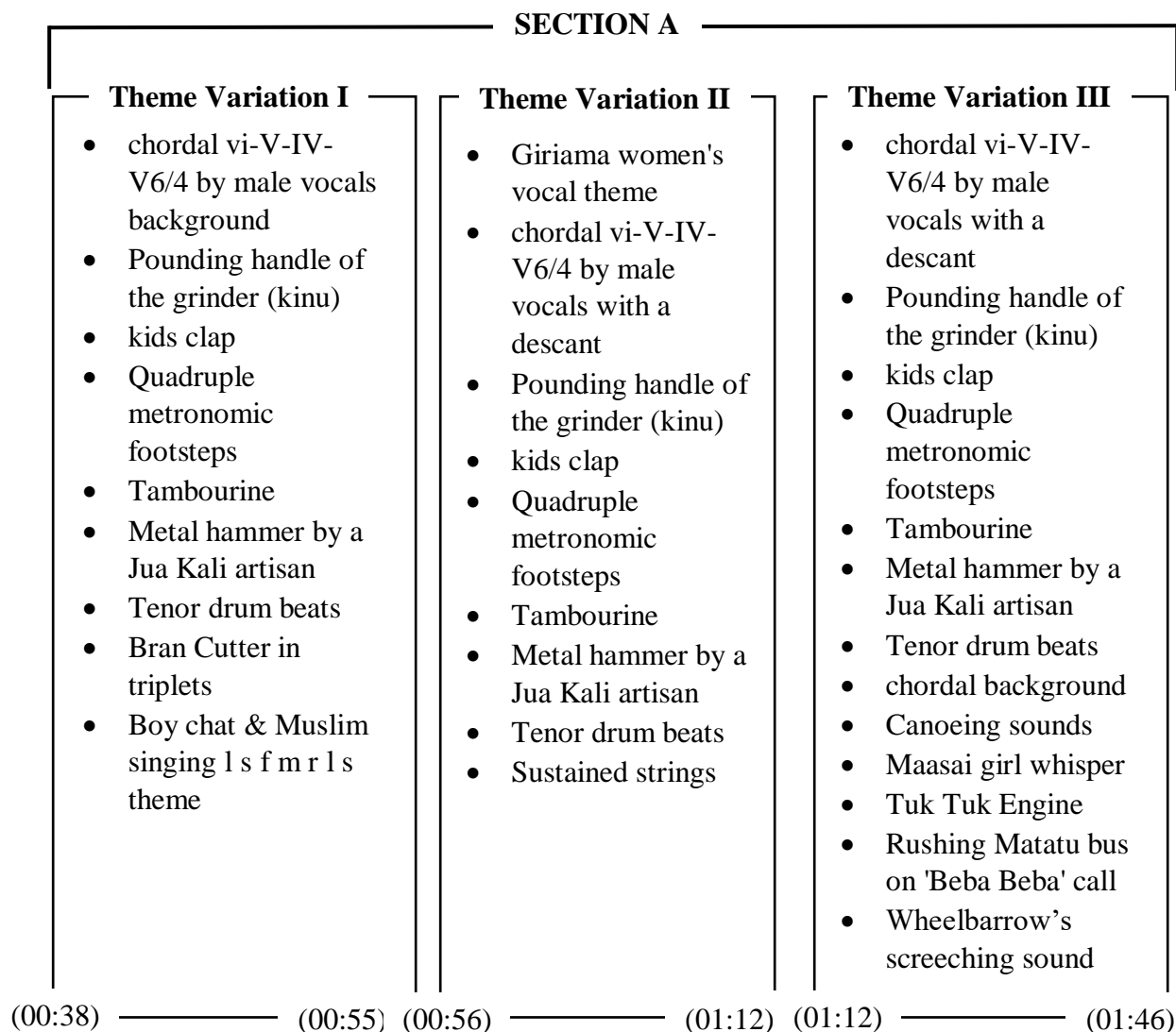
-This ends with a stamp that begins a game song at 02:33

02:34-02:49 -A kid singing a game song against the background of a variation of the I-iii chord progression with assorted percussive metronomic sounds

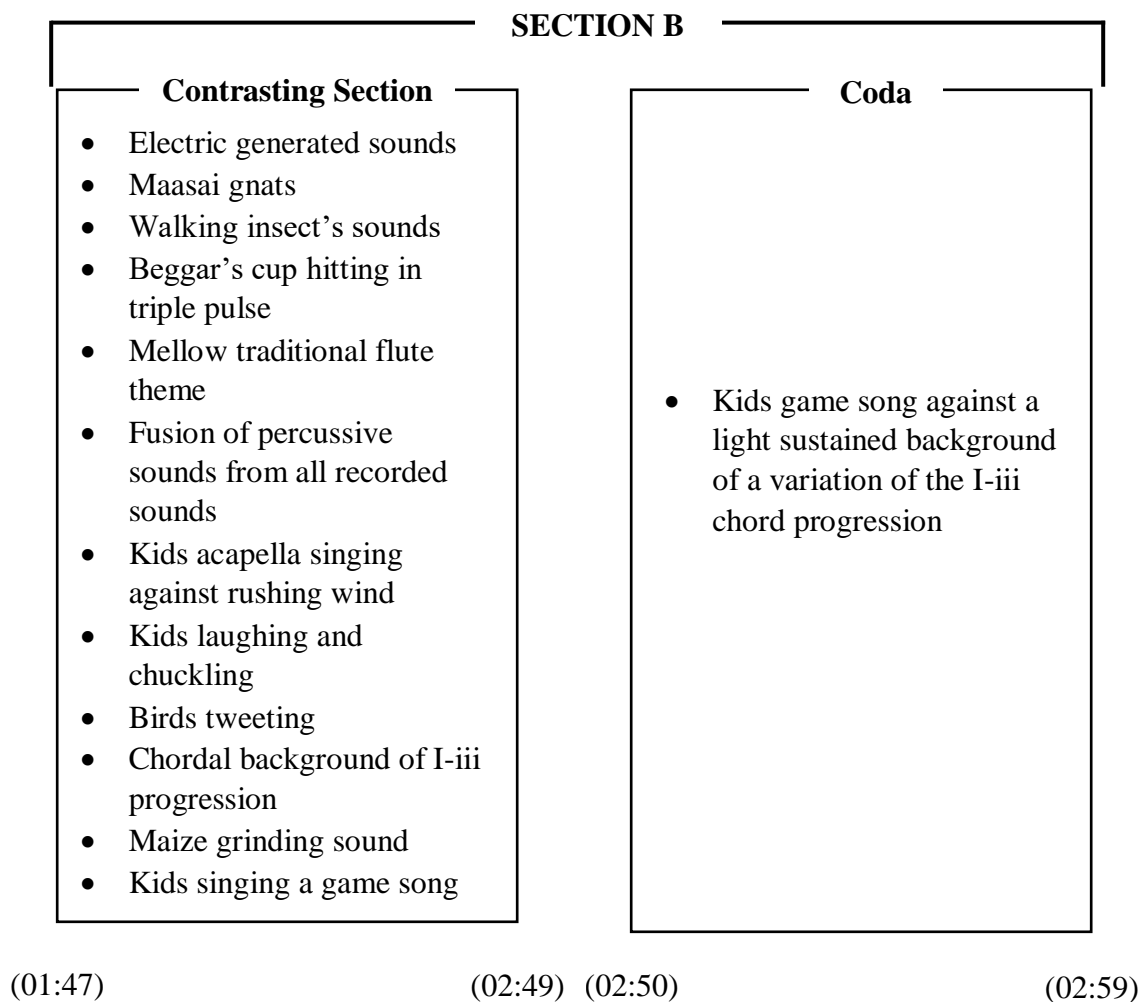
02:50-02:59 -Kids singing game song against a light sustained background of a variation of the I-iii chord progression



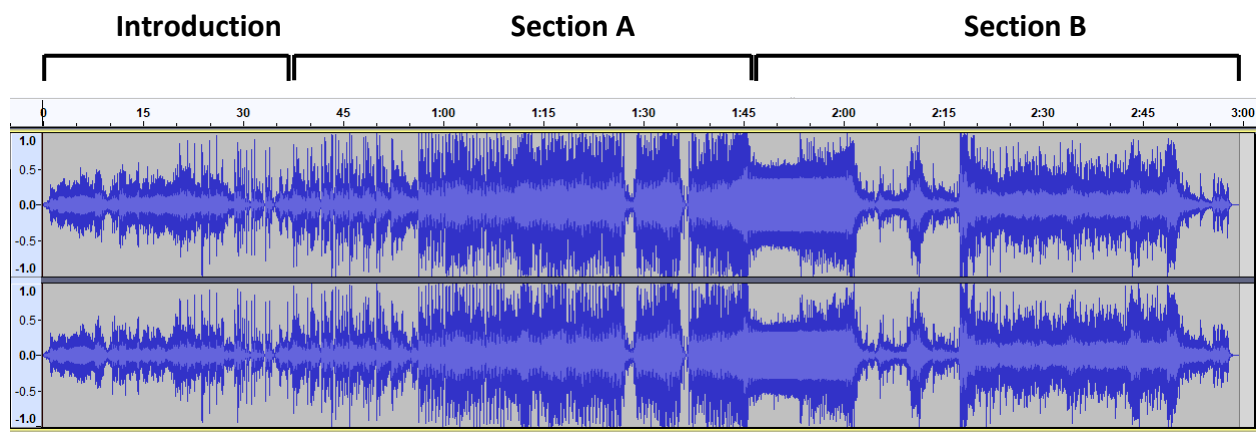
**Figure 1: Graphical Representation of Introductory Themes**



**Figure 2: Graphical Representation of Themes in Section A**



**Figure 3: Graphical Representation of Themes in Section B**



**Figure 4: An Electronic wav Graphical Representation of *Feel the Sounds of Kenya***



## Conceptual Analysis of Nationhood

Though it started earlier, nationalism in music was more defined in the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries. It is a movement characterised by a deliberate drive to create musical works with specific national identities (Kamien, 2012). Just like in traditional setups where music is used as a medium of community identity (Nketia, 1976), contemporary society also embraces musical expression as a means of identity. The following sounds, as used in the *Feel the sounds of Kenya* are identities of the Kenyan natural landscape:

- Maasai:* Due to their traditional culture and colourful attire, they stand out as a representation of Kenyan traditional culture.
- Juakali artisans:* They are representative of the 51.31% of Kenyans who are self-employed and work under tough conditions in the informal sector. (World Bank, 2021)
- Matatu touts:* They represent the unskilled Kenyans who make up 60% (2020) of Kenya's population.
- Women fetching water:* They depict the challenge of water where 60% of people in Kenya do not have flowing water for domestic use and have to fetch water in distant places.
- Canoeing:* For the majority of the people who live in the Nyanza region, Turkana and other water basins, canoeing is a means of transport and fishing.
- Sweeping using reeds:* The majority of middle-class and lower-class households use brooms made of reeds to clean and sweep their households and environment.
- Wheelbarrow's screeching sound:* A sound that depicts the majority of unskilled labourers in the mjengo and other informal industries.

## 3.0 CONCLUSIONS

Whereas pitched sounds have traditionally been used as conventional mediums of musical expression in contemporary Kenya, the contemporary Poeme Electronique concept, as used by Cee-Roo in *Feel the sounds of Kenya*, exemplifies a meaningful alternative. The fusion of natural sounds from Kenya's natural environmental and socio-economic activities with conventional harmonic progressions has proved valuable in representing the Kenyan culture in *Feel the Sounds of Kenya*. This is a foundation upon which Kenyan musicians, composers, performers and educators can draw inspiration on how to broaden their horizons of musical schemas and resources.

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