

Jaber: Reflections on a Luo Aesthetic Expression.

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Abstract

As a common expression, the Luo word jaber seems to be ordinary or even casual, yet it is a capsule of profound ideas within the context of Luo aesthetics. Jaber literally means “a person of beauty”: it is often used to describe females who have exceptional physical qualities that make them outstandingly attractive and deeply pleasurable to look at. The article advances the view that the term jaber offers us a key to understanding the aesthetics of the Luo of Kenya and of Western Nilotic-speakers in general.

The author drew from personal experience, informal interviews, unpublished songs and existing literature as a basis for description and analysis of jaber. The picture that emerged suggested that visual beauty is only one layer of the meaning of jaber. Exploration of other layers and meanings in a broad context revealed that the expression points to aesthetic ideals, and can therefore be regarded as artistic. Dholuo speakers use the term to express appreciation of what they see, hear and feel; but it is also an intellectual tool used to offer a critique of concrete and non-concrete objects. The article is a contribution to the discourse on East African aesthetics.

Key Words Jaber, beautiful, aesthetic expression, verbal communication, Luo

Thought and Practice: A Journal of the Philosophical Association of Kenya (PAK), New Series, Vol.7, pp.103-122. (2015).

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