Beauty as Cultural Philosophy: Local Values and Identity in Tiara Kusuma North Sumatra

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Abstract

Beauty is frequently treated as a universal aesthetic category, although beauty practices are always embedded in cultural values, identity, and systems of meaning. This study analyzes the relationship between beauty and cultural philosophy through a case study of the North Sumatra Provincial Board of Tiara Kusuma. It employs a qualitative interpretive-philosophical approach and a document-based instrumental case study. Data were drawn from organizational publications, campaign materials, official social-media content, and literature on aesthetics and cultural philosophy, and were examined through content analysis and philosophical hermeneutics. The findings reveal three interrelated dimensions: beauty as an expression of hasangapon, or dignity and self-worth; beauty as a medium of symbolic continuity through traditional dress and local care wisdom; and beauty as relational balance within social life. The study also identifies a glocalization strategy in which modern forms are adopted while local values remain the interpretive core. The study concludes that beauty can be reconstructed as a cultural ethical-aesthetic framework that strengthens identity, dignity, and cultural sustainability amid the homogenizing pressures of global beauty standards.

Keywords: Beauty; Cultural Philosophy; Aesthetics; Local Values; Tiara Kusuma; North Sumatra

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Theme: Navigating The Future: Business and Social Paradigms in a Transformative Era.
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Introduction

Beauty has occupied a central place in philosophical aesthetics from classical to contemporary thought. Plato linked beauty with the ascent toward higher forms of truth and goodness, while Hume emphasized the role of cultivated judgment and Kant formulated aesthetic judgment as subjective yet carrying a claim to universal validity [1]-[3]. Later histories of beauty demonstrate that what is considered beautiful changes across periods, social settings, and cultural traditions [4]. These perspectives indicate that beauty is not merely a property of physical appearance, but a field in which perception, values, and cultural interpretation meet.

Contemporary beauty culture is increasingly shaped by global media, commercial industries, and transnational popular culture. Taste and bodily presentation are not socially neutral; they are produced within habitus, cultural capital, and relations of distinction [5]. Popular culture further circulates images that normalize particular appearances and lifestyles [6], while modern aestheticization can reduce beauty to exchange value, consumption, and status [7]. In Indonesia, recent discussions of beauty standards also show how external cultural hegemony can reshape the preferences of younger generations [11]. The challenge is therefore not to reject global culture altogether, but to examine how local value systems can remain active sources of meaning within contemporary beauty practices.

North Sumatra offers a distinctive context because it is culturally plural and contains Batak, Malay, Nias, Karo, Simalungun, Mandailing, Pakpak, and other traditions. Cultural values function as normative conceptions of what is considered good, proper, meaningful, and beautiful [8]. Local practices therefore provide an important philosophical basis for understanding beauty beyond standardized physical appearance. Studies of local wisdom in North Sumatra have shown that cultural traditions continue to contain ethical, symbolic, and relational meanings that can be interpreted as living philosophical resources [10].

The North Sumatra Provincial Board of Tiara Kusuma (DPD Tiara Kusuma) is relevant to this discussion because it is a professional beauty organization whose activities intersect beauty practice, training, cultural representation, and professional empowerment. The first author has more than four decades of experience as a beauty practitioner, educator, examiner, assessor, and organizational leader in North Sumatra. This positionality provides contextual sensitivity to changes in beauty culture, while the formal analysis in this study remains grounded in the documentary corpus described in the methodology.

The state of the art shows a gap between classical philosophical discussions of beauty, critical analyses of global beauty standards, and studies of local cultural values. Few studies connect these domains through the practices of a professional beauty organization as a site where philosophical values are translated into contemporary cultural expression. The novelty of this study lies in conceptualizing beauty as a cultural ethical-aesthetic framework built from living local values rather than treating beauty only as physical attractiveness or market preference. Accordingly, this study asks how beauty and cultural-philosophical values are related in the perspectives and documented activities of DPD Tiara Kusuma North Sumatra, and what philosophical implications follow from that relationship.

Literature Review

2.1 Beauty from Universal Aesthetics to Cultural Interpretation

Classical aesthetics often seeks principles that make beauty intelligible beyond immediate preference. Plato treats sensible beauty as a path toward ideal beauty [1], while Hume places emphasis on trained taste and comparative judgment [2]. Kant later explains aesthetic judgment through the tension between subjective feeling and a demand for communicability [3]. These approaches remain influential, but historical accounts of beauty demonstrate that ideals of the beautiful are continually reinterpreted by societies [4]. This provides a basis for moving from the question "What is beauty in itself?" toward the question "How is beauty culturally interpreted and ethically organized?"

Contemporary aesthetics also recognizes that beauty can be embedded in everyday life, fashion, and social practices. The revival of philosophical attention to beauty reopens discussion of aesthetic experience as more than ornament [13], while contemporary reflections on fashion show that appearance can carry philosophical and social meanings [12]. Beauty therefore becomes a useful entry point for examining how individuals and communities negotiate identity, dignity, and belonging.

2.2 Cultural Values, Taste, and Identity

Culture can be understood as a system of values and meanings that guides interpretation and conduct. In the Indonesian anthropological tradition, cultural values are conceptions of what a community regards as important, appropriate, and desirable [8]. Such values shape aesthetic preferences because dress, bodily care, symbols, and public presentation are interpreted through culturally learned categories.

Bourdieu demonstrates that taste is socially structured rather than purely personal [5]. This insight is particularly relevant to beauty because preferences can reproduce hierarchy and symbolic power. Storey similarly shows how popular culture becomes an arena where meaning is produced, circulated, and contested [6]. When global beauty images are repeatedly presented as normal or desirable, local communities face pressure to translate, resist, or selectively appropriate them. Local wisdom studies show that cultural traditions can remain active ethical resources when they are interpreted rather than merely displayed as heritage [10].

2.3 Beauty as Ethical-Aesthetic Education

Schiller argues that aesthetic experience can mediate between reason and feeling and can therefore contribute to human formation [9]. This view allows beauty to be discussed together with ethical cultivation. In professional beauty practice, technical competence is not the only concern; dignity, responsibility, respectful representation, and cultural awareness also matter. Contemporary business ethics similarly emphasizes that professional practices require a normative framework rather than economic rationality alone [14].

This study uses these perspectives to interpret beauty as an ethical-aesthetic practice: an aesthetic expression becomes culturally meaningful when it preserves dignity, communicates symbolic knowledge, and supports balanced social relations. Such a framework provides the conceptual bridge between philosophical aesthetics and the living cultural practices represented in DPD Tiara Kusuma North Sumatra.

2.4 Research Methodology

This study employs a qualitative approach within an interpretive-philosophical paradigm. It uses an instrumental case-study design in which DPD Tiara Kusuma North Sumatra functions as the case through which the broader relationship between beauty and cultural philosophy is examined. The study is document-based and does not claim direct interview or survey evidence.

The primary corpus consists of organizational publication materials, campaign narratives, and official social-media content that address beauty, culture, professional empowerment, traditional dress, and local care practices. Secondary sources include philosophical works on aesthetics, cultural theory, and relevant studies of local values. Materials were selected purposively according to their relevance to the research question.

Data collection was conducted through documentation and structured reading. The analysis combined content analysis with philosophical hermeneutics in three stages. First, the materials were inventoried and reduced into recurring concepts concerning beauty, dignity, symbolism, relationality, and cultural continuity. Second, these concepts were interpreted to identify the values and assumptions underlying visible beauty practices. Third, conceptual synthesis linked the interpreted findings to theories of aesthetics, taste, cultural meaning, and ethical formation. Reflexivity was maintained by distinguishing the first author's practitioner knowledge from the documentary evidence used as the formal analytical basis.

Results

3.1 Beauty as Hasangapon: Dignity Beyond Physical Appearance

The first major finding is that beauty is interpreted as more than bodily attractiveness. Within the cultural frame identified in the documents, beauty is connected to hasangapon, a value that may be understood as dignity, honor, or worthy self-presentation. Appearance becomes meaningful when it is accompanied by courtesy, self-respect, disciplined conduct, and consideration for others. This finding shifts beauty from an isolated visual property to a moral-aesthetic relation between the person and the community.

Philosophically, this interpretation is significant because it resists the separation of aesthetics from ethics. The beautiful person is not simply the person who conforms to a measurable visual standard, but one whose presentation supports dignity. Such an interpretation is compatible with aesthetic education in which form, feeling, and moral cultivation remain interconnected [9]. It also challenges the commodified logic criticized in contemporary aesthetics [7].

3.2 Beauty as Symbolic Continuity and Cultural Memory

The second finding concerns the use and interpretation of traditional visual symbols. Ulos, songket, Malay attire, Nias dress, and other local forms are not treated merely as decorative accessories. They communicate ancestry, social location, continuity, and cultural memory. The philosophical meaning of beauty therefore emerges through the relationship between visible form and the cultural narratives that make the form intelligible.

The same pattern is found in attention to local care knowledge and natural materials. Their significance is not limited to claims of utility; they are represented as parts of an inherited relationship with nature and community knowledge. This supports the view that cultural values are embodied in practical forms and that aesthetics can function as a medium for transmitting collective meaning [8], [10].

3.3 Beauty as Relational Balance

The third finding is a relational understanding of beauty. In the cultural framework examined, a person's appearance is not interpreted entirely through individual preference. It is linked to social role, appropriateness, kinship, occasion, and respect for communal norms. Beauty is therefore relational: its meaning changes according to the social setting in which the person appears and acts.

This result can be read through Bourdieu's argument that taste is socially produced [5], but the North Sumatran case adds an ethical dimension. Social embeddedness does not only constrain preference; it can also provide a vocabulary of responsibility and mutual recognition. Beauty becomes an expression of balance between self-presentation and the dignity of others.

Table 1. Cultural-philosophical dimensions of beauty in the DPD Tiara Kusuma North Sumatra case

Dimension	Cultural Expression	Philosophical Meaning	Contemporary Implication
Hasangapon	Courtesy, disciplined appearance, dignified conduct	Beauty as dignity and ethical self-presentation	Counters reduction of beauty to body measurement
Symbolic continuity	Ulos, songket, Malay and Nias attire, local care knowledge	Beauty as cultural memory and transmission of meaning	Strengthens cultural literacy and heritage continuity
Relational balance	Appropriateness to kinship, social role, occasion, and community	Beauty as recognition and social harmony	Connects personal style with communal responsibility

Glocalization	Modern fashion forms and media combined with local narratives	Beauty as selective cultural negotiation	Enables adaptation without surrendering local identity

3.4 Glocalization as a Cultural Strategy

The fourth finding is a pattern of glocalization. The organizational practices described in the source material do not indicate a complete rejection of modern beauty techniques, fashion shows, social media, or professional standardization. Instead, modern forms are selectively used while local cultural meanings remain central. This strategy creates a space in which global forms can be translated through local values rather than accepted as culturally neutral.

This finding is important because the contemporary beauty field is heavily mediated by popular culture and commercial imagery [6], [11]. Glocalization gives local actors room to negotiate with global standards without withdrawing from modern professional life. In this sense, DPD Tiara Kusuma can be understood as a cultural intermediary that translates between professional beauty practice and the philosophical resources of North Sumatran cultures.

Discussion

Taken together, the findings support a reconstruction of beauty as cultural ethical-aesthetics. The framework is ethical because dignity, appropriateness, responsibility, and recognition shape the meaning of appearance. It is aesthetic because visible forms, style, dress, and care practices remain important. It is cultural because neither ethics nor aesthetics is interpreted in isolation from inherited systems of meaning. This threefold structure explains why beauty can function simultaneously as self-expression, social communication, and cultural continuity.

The framework also provides a critical response to universalized beauty standards. Bourdieu helps explain how taste can reproduce distinction and power [5], while Storey shows how popular culture circulates preferred representations [6]. The present case demonstrates a possible response: instead of simply opposing global beauty culture, local actors can reinterpret modern forms through a different value structure. Such a strategy is especially relevant when younger generations encounter standardized beauty imagery through digital media [11].

The findings also extend philosophical discussions of aesthetic education. Schiller's argument that aesthetic experience can contribute to human formation [9] becomes concrete when beauty practices are connected to dignity, cultural literacy, and relational responsibility. Beauty education in professional organizations can therefore move beyond technique toward interpretive competence: practitioners should be able to explain the cultural meanings of the forms they use and the ethical consequences of the standards they reproduce.

The theoretical contribution of this study is the formulation of a three-dimensional model of culturally grounded beauty: dignity (hasangapon), symbolic continuity, and relational balance, mediated by a strategy of glocalization. Practically, the model can inform beauty training, cultural events, and public communication. It encourages practitioners to treat local aesthetics as living knowledge rather than visual decoration. For policy and education, the model suggests that cultural content in vocational and professional beauty programs should include philosophical interpretation, not only the reproduction of traditional styles.

This study has limitations. It is based on a documentary case study and does not measure how members, clients, or wider communities personally interpret the values identified. The first author's long professional involvement is valuable for contextual sensitivity but also requires continuous reflexive awareness. Future studies can strengthen the model through interviews, focus groups, comparative ethnography across North Sumatran cultural groups, and analysis of how younger practitioners negotiate local and global beauty standards.

Conclusion

This study concludes that the relationship between beauty and cultural-philosophical values in the DPD Tiara Kusuma North Sumatran case is dialectical and constitutive. Beauty is not

treated as an isolated physical standard; it is interpreted through dignity, symbolic continuity, and relational balance. Hasangapon gives beauty an ethical orientation toward self-worth and respectful conduct. Traditional dress and local care knowledge make beauty a medium of cultural memory. Relational values position appearance within social responsibility rather than pure individual preference. At the same time, glocalization enables modern beauty practices to be adopted without making global standards the sole source of legitimacy. The principal theoretical implication is that beauty can be understood as a cultural ethical-aesthetic framework in which aesthetics, ethics, and identity mutually shape one another. The practical implication is that professional beauty education and cultural programming can incorporate philosophical interpretation of local values to strengthen cultural literacy, inclusive representation, and sustainable identity formation. Further development should test this framework through field-based and comparative research involving practitioners and communities across North Sumatra.

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