



Negotiating Cultural Diversity and National Identity Through Indonesian National Costumes in Global Beauty Pageants

Syarifah Nur Hajja^{1*}, Risky Chairani Putri², Hilmi Khoirul Fikri³

^{1,2}Indonesian Institute of the Arts Surakarta, St. Ringroad, Surakarta, Indonesia,

³University of Sebelas Maret, St. Ir. Sutami, Surakarta, 57126, Indonesia

^{1*}syarifahnurhajja@gmail.com, ²riskychairani@isi-ska.ac.id, ³hilmikhofi@gmail.com



*Corresponding Author

Article History:

Submitted: 20-08-2026

Accepted: 02-09-2026

Published: 01-10-2026

Keywords:

National Costume; Cultural Representation; Beauty Pageants; Stuart Hall; Cultural Diplomacy; Fashion Studies.

The Journal is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial 4.0 International (CC BY-NC 4.0).

ABSTRACT

Indonesian national costumes have become prominent visual representations of cultural identity in international beauty pageants. However, existing studies tend to emphasize nationalism, aesthetics, or promotional value while giving limited attention to the representational processes through which regional cultural resources become nationally recognizable images. This study investigates how Indonesian national costumes translate the archipelago's cultural diversity into visual narratives for global pageant audiences. Using a qualitative multiple-case visual research design, the study comparatively analyzes costumes by five Indonesian designers through official photographs and videos, designer-produced documentation, institutional archives, contextual cultural sources, and Stuart Hall's theory of representation. The analysis followed six iterative stages: corpus familiarization, visual coding, contextual interpretation, representational analysis, within- and cross-case comparison, and conceptual synthesis. The findings identify four interconnected processes: visual translation of regional cultural heritage, negotiation between regional and national identities, cultural hybridization, and visual cultural diplomacy. Rather than reproducing tradition literally, designers reinterpret mythology, ritual traditions, architecture, maritime heritage, and indigenous philosophies through contemporary fashion practices that balance authenticity and innovation as well as cultural specificity and global readability. The study extends Hall's representation theory into fashion studies, demonstrates the analytical value of qualitative multiple-case visual research, and proposes the Indonesian National Costume Representation Framework (INCRF). The framework explains how regional cultural resources move through designer interpretation, visual translation, representational negotiation, and international circulation to form nationally recognizable visual identities.

INTRODUCTION

Indonesia is recognized as one of the world's most culturally diverse nations, comprising more than 1,300 ethnic groups and hundreds of local languages, whose tangible and intangible cultural heritage collectively contributes to the country's national identity (Smith, 2006; UNESCO, 2003). This diversity is expressed through rituals, performing arts, architecture, traditional textiles, indigenous knowledge, and other cultural practices that collectively shape Indonesia's national identity. In the context of increasing global cultural exchange, fashion has emerged as an influential medium through which nations communicate cultural identity, heritage, and values beyond geographical boundaries. International pageants require contestants and designers to translate culturally specific traditions into visual forms that remain meaningful to culturally diverse global audiences (Cohen et al., 1996). Among contemporary cultural platforms, international beauty pageants have become highly visible arenas where fashion, identity, and national representation intersect. National costume competitions extended beyond fashion performance by serving as symbolic stages where countries negotiate and communicate preferred images of national identity (Banet-Weiser, 1999).

Contemporary beauty pageants have evolved beyond competitions centered in physical appearance into global platforms through which nations negotiate identity, citizenship, cultural values, and international visibility (Banet-Weiser, 1999; Cohen et al., 1996) beyond competitions centered primarily on physical appearance into global events promoting leadership, cultural awareness, social advocacy, and intercultural communication. Contemporary beauty pageants increasingly employ national costumes as visual communication media through which regional cultural identities are rendered symbolically for broader public recognition (Plodmusik & Boonarchatong, 2026). Contestants are expected to serve as cultural ambassadors, representing not only themselves but also the historical and cultural identities of their nations. In this context, the National Costume segment occupies a distinctive position, as it transforms fashion into a visual medium for conveying national identity and cultural heritage to international audiences.

For Indonesia, national costumes represent considerably more than ceremonial garments or spectacular stage performances. They function as visual narratives that reinterpret regional myth, indigenous philosophies, traditional craftsmanship, maritime heritage, architecture, ritual traditions, and performing arts into contemporary fashion forms.





Similar to Hanfu, Indonesia's national costumes should be understood as dynamic cultural reconstructions rather than static reproductions of historical traditions (Jiang, 2026). Through the creative integration of textiles, color symbolism, sculptural silhouettes, ornaments, and performative elements, designers translate the cultural representation. Indonesia's national costumes should therefore be understood not as transparent reflections of regional traditions, but as representational constructions through which selected cultural elements are reorganized into nationally recognizable meanings (Hall, 1997). National costumes function not only as garments but also as visual communication systems through which cultural meanings are encoded, and identities become publicly recognizable (Barnard, 2014; Entwistle, 2015).

The increasing prominence of national costumes has attracted scholarly attention across cultural studies, fashion studies, media studies, and heritage studies. Previous research has examined beauty pageants from the perspectives of gender politics, body image, nationalism, media representation, identity construction, and cultural diplomacy. Recent studies have explored national costumes as expressions of creativity (Oanh, 2026), cultural communication (Plodmusik & Boonarchatong, 2026), nation branding (Ratriyana et al., 2024), and traditional fashion innovation (Handini et al., 2023). Other studies have explored national costumes primarily as expressions of fashion aesthetics, cultural heritage, tourism promotion, or creative industries. While these studies provide valuable insight into the socio-cultural significance of beauty pageants, they predominantly conceptualize national costumes either as aesthetic artifacts or promotional media.

Consequently, limited attention has been devoted to the representational processes through which designers transform regional cultural heritage into nationally recognizable visual narratives for international audiences. Recent scholarship increasingly recognizes national costumes as media of cultural identity, heritage, communication, and creative expression. Studies have examined creativity (Oanh, 2026), semiotic communication (Plodmusik & Boonarchatong, 2026), and fashion innovation (Handini et al., 2023). Nevertheless, these studies primarily describe costume symbolism or cultural themes, while providing limited explanation of the representational processes through which regional cultural resources are translated into nationally recognizable visual narratives. Existing scholarship rarely explains how local cultural resources are selected, interpreted, visually translated, and reconstructed through costume design before being presented as representations of Indonesian national identity. Furthermore, previous studies are largely based on individual costume cases or single pageant events, offering limited insight into recurring representational patterns across multiple designers and cultural contexts. Recent studies have demonstrated that national costumes in international beauty pageants function as creative media for communicating cultural heritage and national identity to global audiences. However, greater attention is still needed to explain how these cultural meanings are constructed through representational processes (Oanh, 2026).

A second gap concerns the application of representation theory within fashion research. Although Stuart Hall's theory of representation has been extensively employed in media, communication, and cultural studies, its analytical potential within fashion design remains relatively underexplored. In particular, limited research has operationalized Hall's reflective, intentional, and constructionist modes of representation to examine how cultural meanings are visually produced through national costume design (Ivana Grace Sofia Radja & Leo Riski Sunjaya, 2024). Consequently, fashion continues to be discussed primarily as an aesthetic object rather than as a representational practice through which cultural meanings are continuously negotiated, reconstructed, and communicated. Rather than reflecting reality objectively, representation is a cultural process through which meanings are produced, negotiated, and circulated through shared systems of signs (Hall, 1997).

This study addresses these theoretical and empirical gaps by examining Indonesian national costumes as multimodal cultural texts rather than merely as fashion objects. Using a qualitative, multiple-case visual research design, the study comparatively analyses selected national costumes created by five Indonesian designers, drawing on visual documentation, archival materials, official narratives, and Stuart Hall's theory of representation. Rather than describing individual costumes in isolation, the study identifies recurring elements that represent Indonesia in global beauty pageants. Recent fashion scholarship argues that garments should be understood as cultural discourses through which identities are encoded, negotiated, and interpreted rather than merely displayed as aesthetic objects (O'Connell, 2025).

Accordingly, this study is guided by three research questions: (1) How are regional cultural resources visually translated into Indonesian national costume designs? (2) How do Hall's reflective, intentional, and constructivist modes of representation operate within the visual construction of national costume? (3) What recurring representational patterns emerge across Indonesian national costume designs, and how do these patterns contribute to the construction of national identity and visual cultural diplomacy?

The originality of this study lies in three interrelated contributions. Empirically, it provides a comparative analysis of five Indonesian national costume designers, moving beyond the single case orientation that characterizes much of the existing literature. Theoretically, it extends Stuart Hall's theory of representation into fashion studies by demonstrating that national costumes function simultaneously as visual communication, heritage reconstruction, identity negotiation, and cultural diplomacy. Methodologically, the study demonstrates the analytical value of qualitative multiple-case visual research by integrating comparative visual analysis, thematic interpretation, and representational analysis into a single analytical framework. Finally, conceptually, the study proposes the Indonesian





National Costume Representation Framework (INCRF), a model explaining how regional cultural resources are transformed through designer interpretation, visual translation, representational negotiation, and visual cultural diplomacy to construct nationally recognizable visual identities. By integrating perspectives from cultural studies, fashion studies, heritage studies, and visual communication, the framework contributes to broader discussions concerning the role of fashion in representing cultural diversity within contemporary global society.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Beauty Pageants, Nationhood, and Cultural Display

Beauty pageants are not culturally neutral entertainment events; they are institutional stages on which gendered bodies, national ideals, and cultural hierarchies are publicly produced. Foundational studies show that pageants condense complex ideas of citizenship, modernity, femininity, and national belonging into highly visible performances (Cohen et al., 1996; Banet-Weiser, 1999). Within international competitions, contestants appear not only as individuals but also as symbolic representatives of their countries. The national costume segment intensifies this representative function because it requires a nation to be rendered through a single, immediately recognizable visual composition. Consequently, the costume does not simply display an existing national identity; it selects, organizes, and dramatizes particular cultural signs as representative of the nation (Abdikayeva & Shentsova, 2024).

This selection is especially consequential for Indonesia, where national identity must accommodate extensive ethnic, linguistic, religious, and regional plurality. A national costume cannot reproduce this diversity in its entirety. Instead, it translates a specific regional story, object, landscape, ritual, or form of material culture into a condensed image of Indonesia. The pageant stage therefore creates a productive tension between cultural specificity and national legibility: a costume must retain enough local detail to appear culturally grounded while also communicating a coherent national narrative to audiences who may possess limited contextual knowledge. Existing pageant scholarship establishes the relationship between spectacle and nationalism, but it provides less explanation of the design processes by which cultural plurality is converted into visual national identity.

Fashion and Costume as Systems of Representation

Fashion studies provide a basis for understanding garments as cultural texts rather than as purely aesthetic objects. Dress communicates social position, identity, difference, and belonging through culturally organized visual codes (Barnard, 2014). Its meanings also depend on the relationship among garment, body, movement, occasion, and social interpretation; clothing becomes meaningful through the situated practice of dressing and being seen (Entwistle, 2015). In a beauty pageant, silhouette, scale, textile, color, ornament, accessories, bodily movement, and stage presentation operate together as a multimodal system. National costume should therefore be analyzed not as an isolated garment but as an assemblage of visual and performative signs.

Hall's (1997) constructionist theory clarifies how such signs produce cultural meaning. Representation does not transparently mirror a pre-existing reality; it constructs meaning by selecting and organizing signs within shared cultural codes. Hall distinguishes reflective, intentional, and constructionist approaches. Applied to national costume, the reflective approach concerns recognizable references to cultural forms; the intentional approach concerns meanings articulated by designers and pageant organizations; and the constructionist approach explains how new meanings emerge when cultural sources are transformed through contemporary fashion language (Zhao & Ko, 2023). These modes are analytically distinct but may operate simultaneously in one design. Recent fashion research using Hall's encoding and decoding perspective similarly demonstrates that garments can encode cultural histories and identities while remaining open to contextual interpretation (O'Connell, 2025). This theoretical position makes it possible to examine not only what a costume depicts, but also how its meanings are designed, stabilized, and circulated.

Heritage Translation, Hybridization, and Authenticity

The relationship between national costume and cultural heritage is interpretive rather than reproductive. Heritage is produced in the present through processes of selection, valuation, narration, and public display, rather than inherited as an unchanged body of cultural material (Smith, 2006). The 2003 UNESCO Convention likewise emphasizes that intangible cultural heritage is continually recreated by communities in response to their environment, history, and social conditions (UNESCO, 2003). Accordingly, translating myth, ritual, dance, craftsmanship, architecture, or indigenous philosophy into a pageant costume inevitably involves transformation. Designers alter scale, combine materials, abstract motifs, and introduce theatrical structures so that culturally situated references can function within the temporal, spatial, and visual demands of global pageantry.

This process produces cultural hybridization and raises questions of authenticity. Literal resemblance to traditional dress is not the only possible measure of cultural integrity, because national costumes frequently represent cultural narratives that were never originally garments. Contemporary adaptation can sustain cultural visibility, but it can also simplify heterogeneous traditions, detach symbols from their communities, or privilege spectacle over context (Juvonen et al., 2022). Studies of Indonesian traditional-fashion innovation illustrate that cultural continuity is often negotiated through adaptation rather than achieved through fixed replication (Handini et al., 2023). Research on Vietnamese national costumes similarly identifies pageant costumes as collaborative creative practices that





communicate heritage and cultural identity through contemporary design (Oanh, 2026). These studies shift analysis beyond a preservation-versus-innovation binary, yet they still leave scope for a more systematic account of how designers negotiate authenticity, creativity, and global readability across multiple cases.

National Costume, Nation Branding, and Visual Cultural Diplomacy

Because international pageants are globally mediated, national costumes also participate in nation branding and cultural diplomacy. Their meanings circulate beyond the live stage through official photography, broadcasts, news coverage, and social media. International fashion events can contribute to nation branding by repeatedly associating a country with selected symbols, values, histories, and creative capabilities (Ratriyana et al., 2024). In this process, designers and contestants act as cultural mediators: they frame local heritage as an image of the nation and make it available for international recognition.

However, cultural diplomacy should not be assumed merely from global exposure. Visual circulation does not demonstrate that international audiences interpret a costume as its designers intended, nor does it prove a measurable diplomatic effect. A more precise analytical claim is that national costumes create the representational conditions for visual cultural diplomacy. They organize regional heritage into communicable narratives, position Indonesia within global visual culture, and invite recognition through aesthetic and symbolic means. This distinction separates the analysis of representational mechanisms from claims about audience reception or diplomatic outcomes, which require different forms of empirical evidence.

Synthesis and Research Gap

The literature establishes four relevant propositions: beauty pageants stage national identity; fashion operates as a system of cultural signs; heritage is continually reconstructed through contemporary practice; and globally circulated fashion can contribute to nation branding and cultural diplomacy. Nevertheless, these bodies of scholarship are often treated separately. Pageant studies tend to prioritize nationalism, gender, or spectacle; fashion and heritage studies frequently focus on the meanings or aesthetics of individual garments; and nation-branding studies emphasize visibility and promotion. As a result, limited attention has been given to the intermediate representational process through which designers select regional cultural resources, translate them into visual form, negotiate authenticity and innovation, and reposition them as recognizable signs of Indonesian national identity.

The empirical literature also remains dominated by single costumes, individual designers, or isolated pageant events. Such studies clarify the symbolism of particular works but are less able to identify recurring mechanisms across different cultural sources and design practices. This study addresses that limitation through a qualitative multiple-case visual analysis of five Indonesian designers. By operationalizing Hall's reflective, intentional, and constructionist modes across the cases, it connects cultural source, visual translation, symbolic construction, representational tension, and international circulation. The study therefore moves from asking what a national costume symbolizes to explaining how Indonesian cultural diversity is transformed into nationally recognizable visual narratives, providing the basis for the Indonesian National Costume Representation Framework (INCRF).

METHOD

Research Design

This study employed a qualitative multiple-case visual research design to examine how Indonesian national costumes construct and communicate cultural diversity within international beauty pageants. A multiple-case approach was adopted because it enables systematic comparison across different designers, cultural references, visual strategies, and representational patterns, thereby identifying recurring mechanisms that would be difficult to observe through a single case study.

The unit of analysis was the national costume as a multimodal visual text. Each costume was examined in terms of its formal characteristics, including silhouette, color, textile, ornamentation, material, scale, symbolic object, bodily performance, and accompanying narratives. Rather than treating costumes as static artistic objects, the study approached them as representational practices through which regional cultural heritage is visually reconstructed into nationally recognizable identities. Visual interpretation addressed costume composition, color, silhouette, materiality, ornamentation, scale, and symbolic references rather than treating the images as neutral documentation (Rose, 2022).

Stuart Hall's theory of representation served as the principal analytical framework. The reflective, intentional, and constructionist modes of representation were operationalized to examine how cultural references were selected, transformed, and communicated through costume design.

Case Selection and Data Sources

Purposive sampling was used to select cases that were analytically relevant to the research objectives. The corpus consisted of national costumes created by five Indonesian designers: Habib Farhan Pradiantoro, Inggri Kendran, Anisa Febby, Ikie Morphacio, and Dhaniel Mochtar. These designers were selected because their works explicitly engage with Indonesian cultural narratives while providing sufficient visual and documentary evidence for comparative analysis.





Cases were selected according to five criteria:

1. The costume was presented within an international beauty pageant context;
2. The design explicitly referenced identifiable Indonesian cultural heritage;
3. Adequate visual documentation was available;
4. Official narrative or designer explanations accompanied the work; and
5. The corpus represented diverse geographical origins and cultural themes.

The study relied exclusively on non-reactive visual and documentary materials. Data consisted of (1) official photographs and pageant video, (2) designer-produced documentation, including portfolio and public statements, (3) institutional publications and pageant archives, and (4) contextual sources such as heritage publications, scholarly literature, and credible media reports. Together, these materials provided complementary evidence for examining both the visual construction of costumes and the cultural references informing their design. Official pageant photographs were therefore analyzed as representational materials in their own right, rather than merely as illustrations of designers' written explanations (Rose, 2022).

Analytical Framework and Data Analysis

Visual analysis was guided by an analytical matrix comprising five interconnected dimensions: cultural source, visual translation, symbolic construction, mode of representation, and representational tension (Table 1). These dimensions enable systematic comparison across the selected cases while linking observable visual features with broader processes of cultural representation.

Hall's reflective mode was identified when costumes closely referenced established cultural traditions. The intentional mode examined meanings explicitly articulated through designer narrative and official documentation. The constructionist mode analyzed how designers transformed cultural references into new meaning through abstraction, hybridization, aesthetic reconstruction, and performative presentation. Rather than functioning as mutually exclusive categories, these representational modes frequently operated simultaneously within individual costume designs.

Data analysis followed six iterative stages. First, all photographs, video, narratives, and contextual documents were repeatedly reviewed to establish familiarity with each case. Second, costumes were systematically coded according to their observable visual characteristic, including silhouette, color, textile, ornamentation, material, symbolic objects, and performative elements. Third, these visual codes were interpreted alongside documentary evidence to identify their underlying cultural reference and symbolic meanings. Fourth, each case was analyzed using Hall's representational framework to examine the relationships between cultural sources, designer intentions, and visual construction. Fifth, within-case analyses were followed by cross-case comparison to identify recurring representational strategies and thematic patterns. Finally, related themes were synthesized into a conceptual framework explaining how regional cultural resources are transformed into nationally recognizable visual narratives through fashion representation. The matrix consisted of five dimensions:

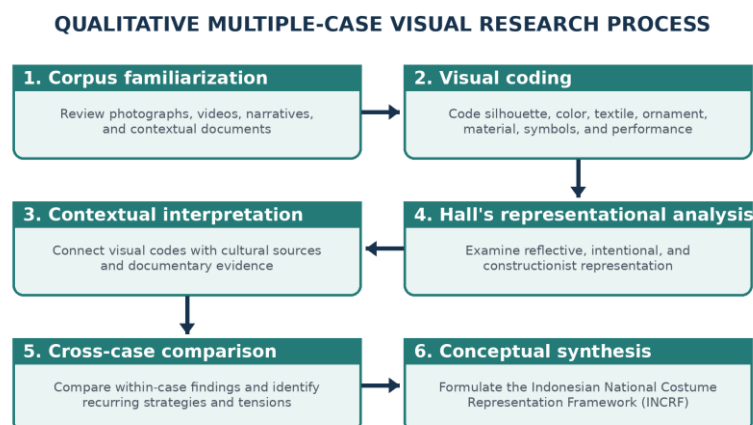


Figure 1. Research Process Flowchart

Table 1. Analytical Framework

Analytical Framework	
Analytical dimension	Operational indicators
Cultural source	Myth, history, ritual, dance, architecture, maritime tradition, regional identity, flora, fauna, or philosophical concept
Visual translation	Silhouette, colour, textile, material, ornament, texture, scale, prop, bodily movement, and stage effect
Symbolic construction Mode of representation	Cultural values and meanings associated with the selected visual signs Reflective, intentional, constructionist, or an interaction among these modes Authenticity–spectacle, locality–nationality, preservation–commodification, specificity–stereotyping, and tradition–innovation
Representational tension	

Research Rigor

The trustworthiness of the study was established through credibility, dependability, confirmability, and transferability. Because the research relied exclusively on visual and documentary materials, credibility was strengthened through data source triangulation by comparing official photographs, videos, designer narratives, institutional documentation, and contextual cultural sources. Interpretations were retained only when supported by observable visual evidence or multiple documentary sources.

Dependability and confirmability were enhanced through researcher triangulation, an audit trail documenting analytical decisions, and repeated comparison between visual evidence and coding categories throughout the analysis. Negative case analysis was also employed to identify visual elements that did not conform to dominant thematic patterns. This thereby reduced interpretive bias. Transferability was supported by providing detailed descriptions of case selection, analytical procedures, and representational contexts, allowing the proposed framework to be examined and adapted in future studies of fashion representation and cultural heritage.

Ethical Considerations

This study analyzed publicly accessible visual and documentary materials and therefore did not involve direct interaction with human participants. All visual materials were examined solely for scholarly purposes, with appropriate acknowledgment of designers, pageant organizations, and sources wherever available. The analysis sought to respect the cultural specificity of each tradition while avoiding essentialist interpretations or unsupported claims regarding designers' intentions or audience reception.

RESULT

Visual Translation of Local Cultural Heritage

The comparative analysis demonstrates that Indonesian national costumes function not as literal reproductions of traditional dress but as processes of visual cultural translation through which regional heritage is reinterpreted into contemporary fashion narratives. Contemporary fashion design increasingly relies on the reinterpretation of traditional costume elements to communicate cultural values while remaining relevant to modern audiences (Zhao & Ko, 2023). Across the five cases, designers drew upon diverse cultural resources including mythology, ritual traditions, architecture, maritime heritage, performing arts, historical memory, and indigenous philosophies. They transformed them into sculptural costume forms suitable for international beauty pageants.



Figure 2. Naga Gini “The Spirit of the Sea” and “Shakti Ratna Bali”



Table 2. Visual Translation of Cultural Heritage across Selected National Costumes

Designer	Cultural Source	Dominant Visual Translation	Representational Orientation	Primary Representation Mode
Habib Farhan Pradiantoro	Local mythology and historical narratives	Sculptural costume forms, symbolic ornaments, dramatic composition	Mythological reconstruction	Constructionist
Inggi Kendran	Balinese philosophy, temple architecture, ritual symbolism	Architectural silhouette, ceremonial ornamentation, sacred color palette	Spiritual-cultural representation	Reflective–Constructionist
Anisa Febby	Traditional performing arts and regional identity	Dynamic costume composition, textile layering, performative aesthetics	Cultural performance	Constructionist
Ikie Morphacio	Phinisi maritime heritage	Monumental ship-inspired structure, symbolism, monumental scale	Maritime identity	Constructionist
Dhaniel Mochtar	Regional folklore and traditional iconography	Hybrid ornamentation, symbolic objects, narrative costume composition	Cultural storytelling	Intentional–Constructionist

Table 2 further demonstrates that constructionist representation constitutes the dominant mode across the analyzed cases. Although reflective and intentional elements remain visible through recognizable cultural references and explicit designer narratives, the selected costumes primarily generate meaning by creatively reconstructing regional cultural resources into contemporary fashion forms. This finding supports Hall's argument that cultural meanings are actively produced through representational practice rather than passively reflecting cultural reality.

Despite their different cultural origins, all costumes exhibit a common representational logic. Traditional cultural elements are selectively abstracted, enlarged, and aesthetically reconstructed rather than reproduced in their original forms. Costume elements such as silhouette, ornamentation, color, and material operate as interconnected signs that collectively communicate Indonesian cultural narratives (Barthes, 1983). Architectural structures become wearable silhouettes, ritual objects become symbolic ornaments, and local narratives are translated into visually compelling fashion compositions. Many Indonesian national costumes draw upon forms of intangible cultural heritage, including ritual practices, performing arts, craftsmanship, and local knowledge, which are visually translated into contemporary fashion designs (UNESCO, 2003). Consequently, cultural heritage functions as a creative resource for constructing nationally recognizable visual identities rather than as a fixed historical reference. The cultural meanings represented in national costumes do not originate automatically from traditional objects themselves, but are produced through processes of selection, interpretation, and contemporary heritage-making (Smith, 2006).

These findings suggest that Indonesian national costume design operates through a process of visual cultural translation, in which regional traditions are reformulated into contemporary visual narratives that communicate Indonesian cultural diversity within global pageantry.

Negotiating National Identity through Representation

The analysis further demonstrates that Indonesian national costumes negotiate the relationship between regional identity and national identity rather than representing either independently. Local cultural traditions remain the primary source of visual inspiration; however, they are consistently reframed as components of a broader national narrative.



Figure 3. Janger Dance

Hall's theory of representation provides a useful framework for understanding this process. Reflective representation is evident in the use of identifiable cultural references, including mythology, architecture, ritual traditions, and indigenous textiles. Intentional representation appears through designer narrative and official pageant documentation that explicitly position the costumes as symbols of Indonesian identity. Most importantly, constructionist representation explains how designers generate new meanings by transforming cultural references through abstraction, hybridization, sculptural experimentation, and contemporary fashion language. Like other forms of representational fashion, national costumes encode cultural identity through the designer's selection and reconstruction of visual signs. At the same time, their meanings remain open to interpretation within global pageant contexts (O'Connell, 2025).



Figure 4. The Sun, The Sea, and The Wind

Rather than functioning as separate categories, these representational modes operate simultaneously across all five cases. Cultural authenticity is therefore established not through literal reproduction but through the strategic reinterpretation of recognizable cultural symbols. National costumes negotiate identity by retaining markers of regional difference while simultaneously reorganizing those differences within a broader narrative of Indonesian nationhood (Barnard, 2014).

Cross-case comparison reveals a recurring representational sequence. Designers first identify culturally significant regional resources, then translate them into visual forms through aesthetic reconstruction, and finally integrate them into costume narratives that communicate Indonesian national identity in international beauty pageants. National costume thus emerges as an ongoing representational practice through which cultural plurality is organized into a coherent visual expression of the Indonesian nation.

Cultural Hybridization and Representational Tensions

A recurring finding across the five cases is cultural hybridization, in which traditional heritage is continually negotiated with contemporary fashion practices. Rather than preserving tradition through replication, designers combine historical references with sculptural construction, innovative materials, theatrical performance, and global fashion aesthetics. The comparative analysis identifies four recurring representational tensions in Table 3. National costume design demonstrates how traditional heritage is continually reinterpreted through contemporary aesthetic languages rather than reproduced in fixed historical forms (Wilson, 2003).



Table 3. Recurring Representational Tensions

Representational Tension	Comparative Finding
Authenticity – Spectacle	Cultural authenticity is maintained through symbolic recognition rather than literal reproduction.
Local Identity – National Identity	Regional traditions function as the building blocks of Indonesian national identity.
Heritage Preservation – Creative Innovation	Cultural continuity is sustained through aesthetic transformation rather than conservation alone.
Cultural Specificity – Global Readability	Local meanings are translated into visually accessible forms for international audiences.

These tensions should not be understood as contradictions but as complementary representational strategies. Designers continuously balance cultural integrity with visual innovation, allowing Indonesian traditions to remain recognizable while becoming communicative within global pageantry. Hybridization, therefore, represents a productive cultural strategy through which fashion mediates among heritage, creativity, and international visibility. The authenticity of national costumes should not be assessed solely by literal fidelity to traditional forms, as heritage representation also involves contemporary choices regarding cultural authority, relevance, and visibility (Smith, 2006).



Figure 5. The Soera Ing Baya From The Sea and The Estuary

National Costume as Visual Diplomacy

The final theme demonstrates that Indonesian national costumes extend beyond artistic fashion objects to function as instruments of visual cultural diplomacy. Rather than communicating through verbal discourse, they project Indonesian cultural heritage through symbolic imagery, aesthetic composition, and performative presentation within globally mediated beauty pageants.

Across all cases, three interconnected representational strategies emerge. First, designers selectively project regional cultural heritage as symbolic representations of the Indonesian nation. Second, fashion functions as a multimodal communication system that integrates material culture, color, ornamentation, bodily performance, and visual storytelling. Third, pageant institutions and digital media extend the international visibility of these representations through broadcasts, photography, and online circulation.

The findings do not claim to measure diplomatic effectiveness; instead, they identify the representational mechanisms through which Indonesian cultural identity became publicly available within global visual culture. National costume, therefore, functions as a mediated platform that connects regional heritage, national identity, and international cultural communication through fashion.

Across the four themes, a consistent representational process becomes evident. Indonesian national costumes originate from regional cultural resources, undergo visual translation through designer interpretation, negotiate cultural meanings through representational practices, and ultimately function as instruments of visual cultural diplomacy. This recurring sequence forms the empirical basis for the Indonesian National Costume Representation Framework (INCRF) developed in the Discussion section.

DISCUSSION

Extending Stuart Hall's Theory of Representation in Fashion Studies

The findings demonstrate that Stuart Hall's theory of representation provides a productive framework for explaining how cultural meanings are constructed through fashion design. While Hall originally developed the concepts of reflective, intentional, and constructionist representation to analyze language and media, this study shows that these representational processes also operate within national costume design. Indonesian national costumes contribute to



heritage production by transforming regional traditions into publicly recognizable cultural representations for international audiences (Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, 2004). Each national costume selectively foregrounds particular regional traditions while inevitably excluding countless other cultural expressions within Indonesia's diverse heritage landscape (Ashworth et al., 2007).

Among Hall's three representational modes, the constructionist perspective offers the strongest explanation for the analyzed cases. Although designers consistently draw upon identifiable cultural references and communicate explicit cultural intentions, the meanings embodied in the costumes ultimately emerge through creative interpretation rather than direct replication. Cultural identity is therefore produced through representational practice, positioning fashion as a site where heritage is continuously reconstructed instead of merely preserved. The reinterpretation of traditional motifs in Indonesian national costume reflects contemporary cultural priorities rather than attempts to reproduce historical authenticity in its original form (Lowenthal, 2015).

These findings extend Hall's framework beyond media representation by demonstrating that fashion functions simultaneously as visual communication, symbolic production, and cultural negotiation. National costume should therefore be understood as an active representational process rather than a static cultural artifact.



Figure 6. The Visual Regional of National Identity

National Costume as Cultural Text and Heritage Communication

The findings further indicate that Indonesian national costumes function as multimodal cultural texts that integrate material culture, visual symbolism, bodily performance, and narrative communication. Rather than functioning solely as artistic garments, they organize diverse cultural references into coherent visual narratives that communicate Indonesian identity to international audiences. The meaning of national dress is not fixed but evolves alongside social change, allowing traditional garments to function simultaneously as cultural symbols and contemporary forms of self-representation (Kusumadewi & Jerusalem, 2023). National costume imagery should therefore be examined as a visual practice that shapes international perceptions of Indonesian culture rather than simply displaying cultural objects (Sturken, Marita; Cartwright, 2018). When presented on the pageant stage, national costumes do not communicate through their material forms alone; their meanings are also produced through the dress body, movement, performance, and culturally regulated modes of appearance (Entwistle, 2015).

This perspective expands existing scholarship that has primarily examined national costumes and expressions of cultural heritage or aesthetic achievement. The present study instead demonstrates that heritage is communicated through continuous processes of visual translation, whereby regional myths, architecture, ritual traditions, maritime culture, and indigenous philosophies are selectively reconstructed within contemporary fashion language. National costumes function as visual communication because their silhouettes, colors, ornaments, materials, and cultural references position Indonesia within particular narratives of identity and difference (Barnard, 2014).

Heritage communication in this context is therefore interpretative rather than preservational. Designers do not transfer cultural traditions unchanged into costume form but instead transform them into visually accessible narratives that function within international pageantry. Indonesian national costumes should therefore be understood as components of a broader fashion system in which cultural identity is communicated through symbolic design rather than through material authenticity alone (Craik, 2009). Fashion consequently becomes an important medium through which cultural heritage remains both recognizable and relevant within contemporary global visual culture. Contemporary fashion increasingly transforms intangible cultural heritage into symbolic narratives that communicate cultural identity while also supporting innovation and public engagement (Liu et al., 2026). Fashion should be understood as a cultural system that produces symbolic meanings rather than simply manufacturing clothing, making garments an important medium of cultural communication (Kawamura, 2018).

Representational Negotiation and Visual Cultural Diplomacy

The comparative analysis reveals that an ongoing negotiation between authenticity and innovation, regional diversity and national identity, and cultural specificity and global readability characterizes Indonesian national



costumes. These tensions should not be interpreted as contradictions but as essential representational strategies enabling local cultural traditions to circulate within international cultural contexts. Heritage can function not only as an object of preservation but also as a diplomatic resource through which nations communicate cultural values, strengthen international relationships, and negotiate identities beyond formal political institutions (Winter, 2015). Fashion presentations may function as nonverbal cultural diplomacy by translating traditional textile heritage into visually accessible narratives for international audiences (Munandar et al., 2026).

This finding contributes to broader discussions of cultural diplomacy by suggesting that diplomacy can operate through symbolic visual representation rather than exclusively through formal governmental institutions. In beauty pageants, designers serve as cultural mediators who selectively transform regional heritage into nationally recognizable visual identities. Recent research on Indonesian kebaya demonstrates that the development of traditional costume involves continuous negotiation between cultural authenticity and adaptation to the global fashion system, rather than the preservation of fixed historical forms (Handini et al., 2023). National costume thus becomes a form of visual cultural diplomacy in which fashion mediates relationships between heritage preservation, creative innovation, national branding, and international cultural visibility. Dress functions as a social practice through which bodies become culturally meaningful, allowing clothing to communicate identity, values, and social positioning (Entwistle, 2015).

Importantly, this study does not claim to evaluate the diplomatic effectiveness of national costumes. Instead, it explains the representational mechanisms through which Indonesian cultural diversity is made visible within global visual culture.

Theoretical, Methodological, and Conceptual Contributions

This study contributes to scholarship in three interconnected ways. Theoretically, it extends Stuart Hall's representation theory into fashion studies, communication, identity construction, heritage reconstruction, and cultural diplomacy. Methodologically, it illustrates the value of qualitative multiple-case visual analysis for identifying recurring representational strategies across diverse cultural contexts, thereby moving beyond the single-case orientation that characterizes much of the existing research on beauty pageants.

Conceptually, the findings lead to the development of the Indonesian National Costume Representation Framework (INCRF). International fashion events have become strategic spaces for nation branding, where visual symbols and fashion practices help construct and communicate national narratives to global audiences (Ratriyana et al., 2024). The framework conceptualizes national costume as a sequential process of representation and translation, culminating in representational negotiation, visual cultural diplomacy, and the construction of nationally recognizable identities. Rather than describing isolated costume designs, the framework explains the recurring mechanisms through which Indonesian cultural diversity is transformed into visual narratives suitable for international audiences.

Because the framework emphasizes representational processes rather than specific cultural symbols, it also offers analytical potential for future studies examining fashion representation, cultural branding, heritage communication, and visual diplomacy in different cultural settings.

CONCLUSION

This study examined how Indonesian national costumes represent the cultural diversity of the archipelago within international beauty pageants through a qualitative multiple-case visual analysis informed by Stuart Hall's theory of representation. The findings demonstrate that national costumes should not be understood merely as aesthetic artifacts or ceremonial fashion objects, but as representational practices through which regional cultural heritage is visually translated into nationally recognizable identities.

Fashion is increasingly understood not simply as an aesthetic object but as a cultural practice through which identities and social meanings are produced. Clothing communicates identity and difference through visual forms, while the dressed body shapes how these meanings become socially visible (Barnard, 2014; Entwistle, 2015). From a representational perspective, such meanings are not inherent in garments but are constructed through culturally shared signs and interpretive conventions (Hall, 1997). National costumes can consequently be approached as cultural discourses in which designers encode regional heritage, national identity, and contemporary creative intentions into forms that are subsequently interpreted within global pageant settings (O'Connell, 2025).

Across the five selected cases, the analysis identified a recurring representational process. Designers first selected culturally significant regional resources including mythology, architecture, ritual traditions, maritime heritage, performing arts, and indigenous philosophies, which were subsequently transformed through visual translation, symbolic reconstruction, and aesthetic innovation. Rather than reproducing tradition literally, designers continuously negotiated authenticity and spectacle, locality and nationality, heritage preservation, and creative innovation, as well as cultural specificity and global readability. These representational negotiations enabled Indonesian cultural diversity to be communicated within international beauty pageants while maintaining recognizable connections to local cultural traditions.

The study contributes to the literature in three important ways. Theoretically, it extends Stuart Hall's theory of representation into fashion studies by demonstrating that fashion functions as a dynamic process of visual communication, identity negotiation, heritage reconstruction, and cultural diplomacy. Methodologically, it illustrates the





value of qualitative, multiple-case visual research for identifying recurring representational patterns across designers and cultural contexts. Conceptually, it proposes the Indonesian National Costume Representation Framework (INCRF), which explains how regional cultural resources are transformed through designer interpretation, visual translation, representational negotiation, and visual cultural diplomacy into nationally recognizable visual narratives.

The findings also have broader implications for fashion studies, heritage studies, and cultural communication by highlighting fashion's role as a medium through which cultural diversity is interpreted and communicated within global visual culture. Nevertheless, this study is limited to visual and documentary analysis and does not examine audience reception or the diplomatic impact of national costume presentations. Future research may therefore integrate audience studies, designer interviews, ethnographic approaches, or cross-national comparative analyses to investigate further how national costumes are interpreted, negotiated, and circulated across different cultural contexts. Beyond Indonesian pageantry, the proposed INCRF offers a transferable analytical framework for examining how fashion mediates cultural representation, heritage communication, and nation branding across diverse cultural contexts.

ACKNOWLEDGMENT

The authors gratefully acknowledge the Indonesian Institute of the Arts Surakarta (ISI Surakarta) for its institutional and financial support through DIPA ISI Surakarta, No. SP DIPA-139.03.2.693404/2025. The authors also extend their appreciation to the designers, pageant organizations, and other relevant institutions whose publicly accessible visual and documentary materials contributed to the development of this research. Their cultural and creative works provided valuable sources for examining Indonesian national costumes as representations of cultural diversity and national identity in global beauty pageants.

REFERENCES

- Abdikayeva, A., & Shentsova, A. (2024). Phenomenon of Artistic Felt in the Modern Art of Costume. *Central Asian Journal of Art Studies*, 9(1), 86–101. <https://doi.org/10.47940/cajas.v9i1.783>
- Ashworth, G. J., Tunbridge, J. E., & Graham, B. J. (2007). *Pluralising Pasts: Heritage, Identity and Place in Multicultural Societies*. Pluto Press.
- Barnard, M. (2014). *Fashion Theory: An Introduction*. Routledge.
- Barthes, R. (1983). *The Fashion System* (1st Englis). Hill and Wang.
- Craik, J. (2009). *Fashion: The Key Concepts* (1st editio). Berg Publishers.
- Entwistle, J. (2015). *The Fashioned Body: Fashion, Dress and Modern Social Theory* (2nd editio). Polity Press.
- Hall, S. (Ed.). (1997). *Representation: Cultural Representations and Signifying Practices*. SAGE Publications.
- Handini, A., Figueiredo, B., & Gurrieri, L. (2023). The fashion development process for traditional costumes in the contemporary global fashion market. *Journal of Global Fashion Marketing*, 14(1), 108–122. <https://doi.org/10.1080/20932685.2022.2085595>
- Ivana Grace Sofia Radja, & Leo Riski Sunjaya. (2024). Representasi Budaya Jember dalam Jember Fashion Carnival: Pendekatan Teori Representasi Stuart Hall. *WISSEN: Jurnal Ilmu Sosial Dan Humaniora*, 2(3), 13–20. <https://doi.org/10.62383/wissen.v2i3.160>
- Juvonen, S., Koivisto, J., & Toiviainen, H. (2022). Learning , Culture and Social Interaction Knowledge creation for the future of integrated health and social services : Vague visions or an expansion of activity ? *Learning, Culture and Social Interaction*, 37(June 2021), 100613. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.lcsi.2022.100613>
- Kawamura, Y. (2018). *Fashion-ology: An Introduction to Fashion Studies* (2nd editio). Bloomsbury Academic / Bloomsbury Publishing.
- Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, B. (2004). Intangible Heritage as Metacultural Production. *Museum International*, 56(1–2), 52–65. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1350-0775.2004.00458.x>
- Kusumadewi, P. D. A., & Jerusalem, M. A. (2023). A Review: The Transformation of the Meaning of Kebaya From National Clothing to a Media of Self-Representation and Lifestyle. *Mudra Jurnal Seni Budaya*, 38(2), 174–187. <https://doi.org/10.31091/mudra.v38i2.2005>
- Liu, D., Lu, Y., & Xiong, Y. (2026). Innovative expression and brand-building application of Intangible Cultural Heritage resources in fashion design—based on traditional visual symbol systems. *Arts, Culture and Humanitie*, 13(6). <https://doi.org/10.54254/2753-7080/2026.34426>
- Lowenthal, D. (2015). *The Past Is a Foreign Country – Revisited*. Cambridge University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9781139024884>
- Munandar, A., Adila, N. P., & Permatasari, R. I. (2026). Fashion sebagai media komunikasi visual: Representasi budaya songket dan jumputan Palembang di Bahrain. *Jurnal Desain*, 13(3), 758–776. <https://doi.org/10.30998/jd.v13i3.2853>
- O'Connell, M. J. (2025). Encoding Fashion, Decoding Identity: Patrick Kelly's Southern Queer Esthetics Through Stuart Hall's Theory of Representation. *TEXTILE: Cloth and Culture*, 23(3–4), 431–451. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14759756.2025.2491749>
- Ratriyana, I. N., Murti, D. C. W., & Asmoro, I. D. (2024). #IndonesiaRepresent: Investigating Nation Branding at





- International Fashion Events. *Asiascape: Digital Asia*, 11(1–2), 56–84. <https://doi.org/10.1163/22142312-bja10056>
- Rose, G. (2022). *Visual Methodologies: An Introduction to Researching with Visual Materials* (5th ed.). SAGE Publications.
- Smith, L. (2006). *Uses of Heritage* (1st ed.). Routledge / Taylor & Francis Group.
- Sturken, Marita; Cartwright, L. (2018). *Practices of Looking: An Introduction to Visual Culture* (3rd editio). Oxford University Press.
- UNESCO. (2003). *Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage*.
- Wilson, E. (2003). *Adorned in Dreams: Fashion and Modernity* (Revised ed). Rutgers University Press.
- Winter, T. (2015). Heritage Diplomacy. *International Journal of Heritage Studies*, 21(10), 997–1015. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13527258.2015.1041412>
- Zhao, M., & Ko, J.-H. (2023). The Influence of Traditional Costume Elements on Contemporary Fashion Design and Cultural Communication. *Journal of Cultural Product & Design*, 72, 221–230.
- Abdikayeva, A., & Shentsova, A. (2024). Phenomenon of Artistic Felt in the Modern Art of Costume. *Central Asian Journal of Art Studies*, 9(1), 86–101. <https://doi.org/10.47940/cajas.v9i1.783>
- Ashworth, G. J., Tunbridge, J. E., & Graham, B. J. (2007). *Pluralising Pasts: Heritage, Identity and Place in Multicultural Societies*. Pluto Press.
- Barnard, M. (2014). *Fashion Theory: An Introduction*. Routledge.
- Barthes, R. (1983). *The Fashion System* (1st Englis). Hill and Wang.
- Craik, J. (2009). *Fashion: The Key Concepts* (1st editio). Berg Publishers.
- Entwistle, J. (2015). *The Fashioned Body: Fashion, Dress and Modern Social Theory* (2nd editio). Polity Press.
- Hall, S. (Ed.). (1997). *Representation: Cultural Representations and Signifying Practices*. SAGE Publications.
- Handini, A., Figueiredo, B., & Gurrieri, L. (2023). The fashion development process for traditional costumes in the contemporary global fashion market. *Journal of Global Fashion Marketing*, 14(1), 108–122. <https://doi.org/10.1080/20932685.2022.2085595>
- Ivana Grace Sofia Radja, & Leo Riski Sunjaya. (2024). Representasi Budaya Jember dalam Jember Fashion Carnival: Pendekatan Teori Representasi Stuart Hall. *WISSEN: Jurnal Ilmu Sosial Dan Humaniora*, 2(3), 13–20. <https://doi.org/10.62383/wissen.v2i3.160>
- Juvonen, S., Koivisto, J., & Toiviainen, H. (2022). Learning , Culture and Social Interaction Knowledge creation for the future of integrated health and social services : Vague visions or an expansion of activity ? *Learning, Culture and Social Interaction*, 37(June 2021), 100613. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.lcsi.2022.100613>
- Kawamura, Y. (2018). *Fashion-ology: An Introduction to Fashion Studies* (2nd editio). Bloomsbury Academic / Bloomsbury Publishing.
- Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, B. (2004). Intangible Heritage as Metacultural Production. *Museum International*, 56(1–2), 52–65. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1350-0775.2004.00458.x>
- Kusumadewi, P. D. A., & Jerusalem, M. A. (2023). A Review: The Transformation of the Meaning of Kebaya From National Clothing to a Media of Self-Representation and Lifestyle. *Mudra Jurnal Seni Budaya*, 38(2), 174–187. <https://doi.org/10.31091/mudra.v38i2.2005>
- Liu, D., Lu, Y., & Xiong, Y. (2026). Innovative expression and brand-building application of Intangible Cultural Heritage resources in fashion design—based on traditional visual symbol systems. *Arts, Culture and Humanitie*, 13(6). <https://doi.org/10.54254/2753-7080/2026.34426>
- Lowenthal, D. (2015). *The Past Is a Foreign Country – Revisited*. Cambridge University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9781139024884>
- Munandar, A., Adila, N. P., & Permatasari, R. I. (2026). Fashion sebagai media komunikasi visual: Representasi budaya songket dan jumputan Palembang di Bahrain. *Jurnal Desain*, 13(3), 758–776. <https://doi.org/10.30998/jd.v13i3.2853>
- O’Connell, M. J. (2025). Encoding Fashion, Decoding Identity: Patrick Kelly’s Southern Queer Esthetics Through Stuart Hall’s Theory of Representation. *TEXTILE: Cloth and Culture*, 23(3–4), 431–451. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14759756.2025.2491749>
- Ratriyana, I. N., Murti, D. C. W., & Asmoro, I. D. (2024). #IndonesiaRepresent: Investigating Nation Branding at International Fashion Events. *Asiascape: Digital Asia*, 11(1–2), 56–84. <https://doi.org/10.1163/22142312-bja10056>
- Rose, G. (2022). *Visual Methodologies: An Introduction to Researching with Visual Materials* (5th ed.). SAGE Publications.
- Smith, L. (2006). *Uses of Heritage* (1st ed.). Routledge / Taylor & Francis Group.
- Sturken, Marita; Cartwright, L. (2018). *Practices of Looking: An Introduction to Visual Culture* (3rd editio). Oxford University Press.
- UNESCO. (2003). *Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage*.
- Wilson, E. (2003). *Adorned in Dreams: Fashion and Modernity* (Revised ed). Rutgers University Press.
- Winter, T. (2015). Heritage Diplomacy. *International Journal of Heritage Studies*, 21(10), 997–1015.





<https://doi.org/10.1080/13527258.2015.1041412>

Zhao, M., & Ko, J.-H. (2023). The Influence of Traditional Costume Elements on Contemporary Fashion Design and Cultural Communication. *Journal of Cultural Product & Design*, 72, 221–230.

