



Ethno-Beauty of Women in Traditional Performing Arts from a Cultural Communication Perspective

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Abstract. This study examines the concept of ethno-beauty in the traditional Muang Sangkal dance of Sumenep, Madura, through the lens of cultural communication. Muang Sangkal is a ritual dance performed to symbolically remove misfortune and convey prayers for safety and prosperity. The research focuses on how beauty is constructed and communicated through movement, costume, makeup, music, and ritual elements. A qualitative descriptive method was employed, drawing on literature review, observation of performances, and interviews with cultural officials, dance instructors, performers, and community members. The findings reveal that beauty in Muang Sangkal is defined by disciplined, graceful movement and moral integrity rather than physical appearance. The use of the *dotod legha* costume, symbolic color combinations, modest makeup, and ritual objects such as yellow rice and flowers collectively express values of purity, humility, and hospitality. The requirement that dancers be unmarried and in a state of ritual purity further reflects the sacred character of the performance. Movement patterns emphasize refinement and respect, influenced by the historical legacy of the Sumenep palace. The study demonstrates that Muang Sangkal functions as a medium of nonverbal communication that transmits cultural identity and communal hope. Preservation efforts through education, festivals, institutional support, and digital documentation strengthen its sustainability. This research confirms that ethno-beauty in Muang Sangkal represents a culturally grounded aesthetic system where ritual symbolism, gender values, and artistic expression converge to sustain Madurese cultural identity in contemporary society.

Keyword: Ethno-Beauty; Women in Performing Arts; Traditional Performing Arts; Cultural Communication.

1 Introduction

Indonesia is home to an extraordinary range of ethnic groups, each sustaining distinct languages, rituals, artistic expressions, and systems of meaning. This plurality forms the foundation of the nation's cultural identity and positions traditional performance arts as vital carriers of collective memory. Among these traditions, dance occupies a central role because it integrates movement, music, costume, and symbolism into a unified cultural statement. Within this diverse landscape, Madura stands out for its strong artistic heritage and enduring ritual practices. Located off the northern coast of East Java, the island has cultivated performance traditions that reflect both local belief systems and the historical influence of the Sumenep palace. These traditions are not static relics but living forms that continue to shape social interaction and communal values [1].

One of the most prominent dances from Sumenep is Muang Sangkal, a performance historically associated with ritual protection and the rejection of misfortune. The name itself conveys the act of casting away negativity, linking the choreography to spiritual purification and communal well-being. The dance is frequently performed to welcome honored guests or during wedding ceremonies, reinforcing its role as a cultural safeguard. Muang Sangkal is performed exclusively by female dancers who embody grace and discipline [2]. The requirement that dancers be unmarried and

in a state of ritual purity reflects the community's understanding of sacred aesthetics. Beauty in this performance is inseparable from moral conduct and adherence to tradition.

The costume known as *dotot legha* distinguishes the dancers visually while connecting them to royal heritage. Dominant colors such as red, yellow, and green carry philosophical meanings related to authority, vitality, and harmony [3]. These visual elements are not decorative additions; they function as cultural codes that communicate status and intention. Makeup in Muang Sangkal differs from the dramatic style commonly found in other traditional dances [4]. The application is intentionally modest, emphasizing clarity rather than exaggeration. This restraint reveals a local definition of beauty grounded in movement quality rather than facial ornamentation.

The dancers carry a brass bowl containing yellow rice and flowers, scattering them during the performance. This gesture symbolizes prayer for protection and the removal of harmful forces. Through this ritual act, dance becomes a medium of communication between the visible and invisible realms [5]. Musical accompaniment shapes the character of the choreography. Early forms were marked by energetic rhythms, while later developments introduced softer melodic patterns. The transformation of tempo mirrors the shift from vigorous protection rituals to refined palace-inspired elegance [6].

Movement vocabulary in Muang Sangkal reflects courtesy and humility. Gestures are controlled, fluid, and deliberate, portraying the ideal of *andhep asor*, a principle of respectful conduct deeply embedded in court culture. Every motion is calibrated to express inner composure [7]. The insistence on an odd number of dancers underscores symbolic balance. Odd numbers are believed to carry auspicious qualities, particularly in ceremonial contexts. This numerical rule illustrates how choreography is shaped by cosmological considerations [8].

From a cultural communication perspective, Muang Sangkal operates as a symbolic text. Through costume, gesture, music, and ritual objects, the dance transmits messages about purity, hospitality, and communal hope. Audiences interpret these elements based on shared cultural knowledge. The concept of ethno-beauty in this tradition prioritizes expressive motion over physical appearance. Dancers are considered beautiful when their gestures are harmonious and their presence radiates sincerity. Aesthetic value emerges from disciplined embodiment rather than cosmetic enhancement.

This understanding challenges globalized beauty standards that emphasize facial perfection and external glamour. In Muang Sangkal, beauty is relational and performative, measured by how effectively a dancer conveys respect and blessing. The stage becomes a space where cultural ideals of womanhood are enacted. A qualitative research design provides a structured way to examine this dance as a cultural phenomenon. Descriptive analysis allows the study to capture philosophical meaning, symbolic elements, and social functions embedded in the choreography. This approach ensures that interpretation remains systematic and grounded in established communication theory.

Interviews with cultural officials, dance instructors, performers, and community members reveal how Muang Sangkal continues to function within contemporary society. Their perspectives demonstrate that the dance is not merely entertainment but an expression of identity and belief. Social participation sustains its relevance. Preservation efforts highlight the importance of intergenerational transmission. Local studios train children and adolescents not only in choreography but also in philosophical meaning. Education becomes a strategic tool to safeguard intangible cultural heritage.

Public festivals and regional celebrations provide platforms for performance. These events expand audience reach and reinforce pride in Madurese heritage. Cultural visibility strengthens continuity and resilience. Government support plays a strategic role in sustaining artistic communities. Financial assistance, competitions, and infrastructure development encourage youth participation. Institutional backing affirms that traditional dance remains a valuable cultural asset.

Digital media has introduced new modes of documentation and dissemination. Recordings shared online allow broader audiences to encounter Muang Sangkal beyond regional boundaries. Archival efforts contribute to long-term preservation and scholarly access. Muang Sangkal ultimately represents a synthesis of ritual, aesthetics, and communication. Through disciplined movement and symbolic design, it articulates a distinct Madurese vision of feminine beauty and communal protection. As both art and cultural expression, the dance affirms the enduring relevance of traditional performance in shaping identity, transmitting values, and defining ethno-beauty within the framework of cultural communication.

2 Method

This study applies a qualitative research design to examine the concept of ethno-beauty in the traditional Muang Sangkal dance of Sumenep, Madura [9]. A qualitative approach is selected because the research seeks to understand

meaning, symbolism, and cultural interpretation rather than to measure numerical variables. The focus is placed on how beauty is constructed, performed, and communicated through movement, costume, and ritual elements. The research adopts a descriptive method to present findings in a systematic and coherent manner. Descriptive inquiry allows the study to portray the philosophical foundations, aesthetic principles, and communicative functions embedded in the dance. The aim is not to test hypotheses but to provide an in-depth explanation of cultural phenomena grounded in observable practice and documented sources.

Data were gathered primarily through literature review and field-based exploration [10]. Academic publications, books on cultural communication, gender studies, and aesthetic theory were examined to establish a theoretical framework. These sources support the analysis of beauty as a socially constructed value shaped by tradition, belief systems, and historical continuity. Field data were obtained from individuals directly involved in the preservation and performance of Muang Sangkal. Key informants included the Head of the Department of Culture and Tourism of Sumenep Regency, leaders of local dance studios, active dancers, and members of the community who regularly attend performances. Their insights provided firsthand explanations of meaning, practice, and ritual discipline.

Participants were selected purposively based on their knowledge and involvement in the dance tradition. This sampling technique ensures that the information collected is relevant and reliable. Informants were chosen because they possess practical experience and cultural authority related to Muang Sangkal. Interviews were conducted using open-ended questions to allow participants to articulate their perspectives freely. The questions addressed interpretations of beauty, the symbolism of costume and makeup, movement philosophy, and ritual requirements. This format encouraged detailed narratives rather than short, limited responses.

Observation formed another essential component of data collection [11]. Performances of Muang Sangkal were observed to document choreography, costume elements, musical accompaniment, and interaction with audiences. Attention was given to gestures, facial expression, spatial patterns, and the ritual act of scattering yellow rice and flowers. The study also examined the visual and material aspects of performance, including the *dotod legha* costume, color combinations, accessories, and makeup application. These elements were analyzed as communicative symbols that convey cultural identity. The investigation considered how aesthetic choices reflect values of modesty, grace, and sacred purity.

Data analysis followed an interpretative approach rooted in cultural communication theory [12]. Symbolic interactionism and intercultural communication frameworks were used to interpret how meaning is transmitted through performance. Each component of the dance was treated as a sign carrying layered significance. To maintain analytical rigor, data from interviews, observations, and literature were compared through triangulation. This process strengthened the credibility of findings by identifying consistent themes across different sources. Contradictory information was examined carefully to avoid oversimplification.

Ethical considerations were respected throughout the research process. Informants participated voluntarily and were informed about the purpose of the study. Cultural sensitivity was prioritized, particularly when discussing ritual purity and gender-related practices. The research also considered historical documentation to trace the development of Muang Sangkal from palace-centered ritual to contemporary cultural performance. Archival references and local historical accounts were reviewed to understand shifts in choreography and musical style. This historical layer enriched the interpretation of aesthetic evolution.

A gender perspective was incorporated to explore how femininity and sacred discipline shape the performance structure. The requirement that dancers be unmarried and in a state of ritual purity was analyzed through established gender theory. This perspective clarified how cultural expectations define the boundaries of beauty and virtue. Limitations of the study are acknowledged in terms of geographic focus and reliance on local informants. The research concentrates on Sumenep and does not compare Muang Sangkal with other Madurese dances. However, the depth of qualitative data allows for a comprehensive understanding of the selected case.

Through this methodological framework, the study systematically examines Muang Sangkal as both aesthetic expression and cultural communication practice. The integration of literature review, interviews, observation, and theoretical interpretation ensures that the analysis remains empirical, logically structured, and grounded in established scholarly perspectives.

3 Result and Discussion

Muang Sangkal dance embodies a distinct construction of ethno-beauty rooted in Madurese cultural values. Beauty is not defined by physical perfection but by the dancer's ability to perform movements with discipline, grace, and sincerity. Informants consistently emphasized that elegance in motion represents the highest aesthetic standard in

this tradition. Makeup practices in Muang Sangkal reflect moderation rather than exaggeration. Unlike other traditional performances that rely on bold facial lines and striking colors, the dancers apply simple and clean makeup [13]. This choice highlights facial clarity without overshadowing expression. The restrained style reinforces the belief that beauty originates from refined behavior and controlled gestures [14].

The costume known as *dotod legha* plays a central role in shaping visual identity. Its layered structure and dominant colors red, yellow, and green carry symbolic meanings linked to vitality, prosperity, and dignity. The costume does not function merely as decorative attire but as a cultural signifier that connects the dancers to the historical legacy of the Sumenep palace [15]. Color symbolism emerged as an important dimension of aesthetic communication. Red suggests courage and royal authority, while yellow signifies prosperity and sacred intention. Green represents balance and harmony [16]. These chromatic elements communicate layered messages to audiences familiar with local philosophy.

The requirement that dancers must be unmarried women in a state of ritual purity reflects a strong moral framework embedded in the performance. This rule is not interpreted as exclusion but as a means of safeguarding the sacred character of the dance. Purity is perceived as a prerequisite for conveying prayers and blessings effectively. The use of a brass bowl containing yellow rice and flowers represents one of the most significant ritual elements. During the performance, dancers scatter these materials as a gesture of protection and goodwill [17]. Community members interpret this act as a symbolic rejection of misfortune and an invitation for prosperity.

Observations indicate that gestures are executed with measured tempo and controlled transitions. Each movement is deliberate, avoiding abrupt or aggressive motions. The aesthetic quality lies in fluid continuity, reflecting the principle of humility deeply rooted in court culture [18]. Musical accompaniment influences the expressive tone of the dance. Earlier forms were marked by energetic rhythms associated with *gending Sampak*, while contemporary performances often incorporate softer melodies such as *Oramba'-Orambe'*. The shift in musical style corresponds with a transition from vigorous ritual defense to refined ceremonial elegance [19].

The insistence on an odd number of dancers reveals cosmological beliefs tied to harmony and balance. Odd numbers are considered auspicious and appropriate for ceremonial events [20]. This structural rule demonstrates how choreography is shaped by symbolic reasoning rather than purely artistic preference. The study also found that audiences interpret Muang Sangkal as a representation of hospitality [21]. The dance is frequently performed to welcome distinguished guests and during wedding ceremonies. Its presence at these events reinforces collective identity and social cohesion.

From a communication perspective, Muang Sangkal operates as a nonverbal narrative. Movement, costume, music, and ritual objects interact to form a coherent message about protection, respect, and communal hope. Viewers decode these messages through shared cultural knowledge [22]. Ethno-beauty in this performance prioritizes internal composure over external glamour. Dancers are admired when their gestures remain steady and their facial expressions project calmness [23]. Beauty becomes an embodied practice shaped by discipline and cultural expectation. The findings also highlight the influence of palace aesthetics [24]. Historical ties to the Keraton of Sumenep contribute to the dance's refined posture and dignified character. Courtly etiquette informs both choreography and costume design.

Gender roles play a significant role in defining the performance structure [25]. The exclusivity of female dancers emphasizes ideals of gentleness and moral responsibility. These ideals align with broader Madurese cultural narratives regarding feminine virtue [26]. At the same time, the dance empowers women as cultural transmitters. Female dancers act as custodians of tradition and ritual knowledge [27]. Their performance sustains continuity across generations.

Educational institutions and local dance studios contribute to preservation efforts. Young participants are trained not only in technical movement but also in philosophical meaning. This dual focus strengthens cultural literacy among emerging generations. Public festivals serve as platforms for cultural promotion. Performances during regional celebrations expand the dance's visibility beyond Sumenep. Increased exposure encourages broader recognition of Madurese heritage.

Government support enhances sustainability through funding and organized competitions. These initiatives stimulate youth interest and maintain institutional recognition of traditional arts. Cultural policy plays a strategic role in safeguarding intangible heritage. Digital documentation has broadened access to Muang Sangkal performances. Online platforms enable audiences from outside Madura to engage with the dance. Digital archives also function as resources for academic research and cultural preservation.

The discussion reveals that Muang Sangkal negotiates continuity and adaptation. While ritual principles remain intact, choreographic refinement reflects responsiveness to contemporary audiences. This balance ensures relevance without compromising sacred values. Symbolic interaction theory helps explain how meaning emerges through performance. Dancers and audiences participate in a shared interpretative process shaped by cultural norms. The stage becomes a site of collective understanding.

Intercultural communication theory further clarifies how Muang Sangkal conveys identity to outsiders. When performed for guests, the dance introduces Madurese values through visual and ritual language. It functions as a cultural ambassador. The concept of sacred aesthetics provides a useful analytical lens. Beauty in Muang Sangkal is inseparable from ethical conduct and ritual discipline. Artistic expression and moral expectation operate together.

The results demonstrate that ethno-beauty in Muang Sangkal cannot be reduced to cosmetic standards. It emerges from harmonious integration of gesture, costume, symbolism, and spiritual intention. This integrated system forms a coherent aesthetic philosophy. Overall, Muang Sangkal illustrates how traditional dance communicates identity, values, and collective aspirations. Its structure reveals a sophisticated interplay between ritual symbolism and artistic refinement. The findings affirm that beauty within this tradition is a culturally grounded construct shaped by history, belief, and disciplined embodiment.

4 Conclusion

Muang Sangkal dance represents a culturally grounded construction of ethno-beauty rooted in Madurese values, palace heritage, and ritual belief. The findings show that beauty is defined through disciplined movement, moral integrity, symbolic costume, and sacred intention rather than physical appearance. Elements such as the dodot legha costume, meaningful color composition, modest makeup, the use of yellow rice and flowers, and the requirement of ritual purity collectively communicate protection, humility, and respect. The choreography embodies courtesy and inner composure, while musical accompaniment reinforces ceremonial dignity. As a form of cultural communication, Muang Sangkal transmits identity, hospitality, and communal hope across generations. Preservation efforts through education, public festivals, institutional support, and digital documentation strengthen its continuity. This study confirms that Muang Sangkal is not merely a performance but a living cultural system where aesthetics, gender values, and spiritual symbolism converge in a coherent expression of Madurese identity.

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