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Consuming Beauty: Power, body and gender in Tanah Karo, North Sumatra.

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Summary

The dissertation 'Consuming beauty: Power, body and gender in Tanah Karo, Nord Sumatra' explores the social practices and meanings of beauty among the Karo Batak in Sumatra/Indonesia. On the agrarian highland plateau of Tanah Karo, aerobic studios and beauty parlours line the streets of the two small towns Berastagi and Kabanjahe. Female beauty in the form of femininity is understood as being modern. Modern womanhood, which is materialised in a beautiful body, is constituted by a bundle of discourses and practices of local, national and global origin.

Starting with the body, which is understood as the bridge between discourses and practices, the author analyses the complexity of beauty and modernity from the perspective of local women. What aims do they wish to realize by strategically employing the ideal of modern womanhood? How do social statuses structure the respective localisation processes?

The author shows how the growing importance of beauty is connected to transformations in the fields of gender relations, consumption and social differentiation. Modern womanhood is constituted at the crossroad of aesthetic discourses and, more importantly, social, economic, cultural, religious and moral discourses as well. The most powerful motivation for adapting modern ideals of beauty is the wish to further one's agency in patrilinear Karo society. The gendered division of labor, in which women are responsible for the income of the family, leads to growing female dissatisfaction. The state-sponsored ideal of the family, in which women are defined as housewives and men as providers, both of which work together in order to secure the family's and the nation's economic progress, is a powerful resource for women's claims to change the division of labor. In a modern marriage, both partners should work – men as well! But modern beauty not only leads to greater agency, it also contests cultural norms of morals, work and consumption. The difference in the women's respective social position results in diverse adaptations of the ideal of modern womanhood. This point is made clear by comparing the adaptations of middle-class women, young women from the countryside and *waria*, i.e. people with a female *transgender*-identity. Even in a geographically small place like Tanah Karo, the globalisation of beauty leads to a variety of expressions of modern womanhood.