

# Technologies of feeling and being: medicines in contemporary Indonesia

Transformations wrought by urbanization, industrialization and economic globalization are embodied in diverse local social and cultural formations played out in the routines and practices of everyday life. Changing forms of consumption, whether of clothing, material items, food, or other substances including drugs and medicines, are an increasingly important form of agency in our lives today, closely tied to issues of subjectivity, identity, and negotiating relations of authority and power.

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Focusing on particular objects of exchange and new technologies and their shifting status within differing socio-cultural contexts allows us to examine relationships between global and local forms, the connection between fundamental social and economic conditions and lived experience.<sup>1</sup> Taking the case of Indonesia, we can ask how people are affected by radically altered social and economic conditions. Indonesian society has gone through enormous structural changes following the virtual collapse of the economy in the wake of the economic crisis of 1997. How are people experiencing these conditions including feeling and expressive dimensions? Through what processes are these changes being 'interiorized' and 'exteriorized' in new forms of embodied action? One arena in which change and reaction are readily revealed is the explosion in Java of the usage of a whole range of over-the-counter (OTCs, i.e. non-prescription) medications, pharmaceuticals, tonics and new forms of herbal and other mixtures which promise renewed energy and stamina, and to protect one from the onslaughts of hardship and distress.

## The 'uses' of medicines in Indonesia

Patterns of medicine usage<sup>2</sup> is an ideal realm in which to explore the processes of the embodiment of social change, as well as to show how such usage constitutes an important source of agency. The body is a chief site of agency, and therefore a site for the expression, or the embodiment of our conditions of existence. To study the consumption of medicines in this sense is *not* about the medicines themselves or their presumed efficacy for given illness states, but about what *else* is sought through their use. After all, the notion of efficacy of medicines, aside from having to do with restoration of health, is also about the achievement of some desired state and thus a transformation of self and being.

The consumption of medicinal substances considered to be in some way efficacious is thus about *what we seek*, as well as what we think is wrong, and so is simultaneously about the construction of normality and pathology. Common nostrums, whether they be vitamins or other supplements, OTC preparations, or prescription pharmaceuticals, and the multitude of herbal (*jamu*) preparations, thus constitute an ideal locus for the exploration of the nature of agency and its relationship to changing social structural forms.

## Medicines of energy, power, and action in a time of crisis

The category of medicines associated with an increase in energy and alertness,



the enhancement of strength and stamina, and the ability to perform in the face of increased demands grew in size and scope in the period following economic collapse in 1997, and particularly following the 1998 implosion of the New Order regime. Anxiety over the future was palpable as people faced the prospect of rising prices and a rapidly contracting labour market. Fears for the economic future were already significant through the 1990s as inflation took hold and the gap between elite and mass sectors of the population widened. But these fears were increasingly realized as the deeper implications of economic decline and institutional collapse began to manifest themselves.

It is through this period of economic contraction of ca 1998-2004, when the means to respond to the crisis were increasingly circumscribed by economic realities, that one sees the expansion of the market for drugs of energy, power and action. The primary channels for action and thus transformation for many were reduced to the realm of the self, that is, actions performed on their own bodies and minds, on their ways of being in the world.

## 'Treatments' for contemporary life

With the failure of reform (*reformasi*) and worsening conditions came a sense of fruitless struggle and the sapping of one's energy, often giving way to depression. Altered work practices and the struggles of daily life generated new 'needs' and new ways to 'treat' the experience of contemporary life.

Of the products aimed at this market, the majority were officially classed as 'energy drinks' (*minuman penambah tenaga*) or 'health drinks' (*minuman kesehatan*). Examples of energy drinks from the major drug or food producers were *Lipovitan* (an older energy drink marketed since 1985), *M-150*, *Fit-up*, *Hemaviton*, and *Kratingdaeng*. Containing varying combinations of vitamins, minerals, certain amino acids, ginseng, royal jelly, caffeine, glucose, etc., these products were heavily marketed in new

campaigns after 1998 and gained in market prominence. Advertising campaigns linked them to increased alertness, ready energy, stamina, enthusiasm, but also promised renewal of the body in the face of depletion caused by work and strain. For those who are weary or weak, worn out from work and worries, such drinks promised to recharge, to renew energy.

Overlapping with the expanding category of tonics, stimulants and energy drinks, is the long-standing and relatively rich tradition, particularly in Java, of the production and consumption of herbal concoctions (*jamu*). This is particularly true of *jamu* for the enhancement of sexual desire and sexual prowess and stamina (*jamu kuat lelaki*), which account for approximately half of the *jamu* manufactured. Indeed, the marketing of the conventional energy drinks is dominated by macho imagery and, at least initially, was almost entirely aimed at men. The messages conveyed in ads were suggestive of their benefits for sexual prowess, and there was an increasing conflation of the categories of substances of energy and of masculine potency and power.

Further, the stimulant and energy drink category of substances is not limited to products from major manufacturers. Copy-cat stimulant products abound, often produced by cottage industries and marketed locally in smaller outlets, street-side stalls, *jamu* kiosks, and in markets. These include bottled drinks and powders, often containing little more than sugar and caffeine.

The greatest marketing success for an energy product in this period was *Extra Joss*, made by PT Bintang Toedjoe. Sold as a powder in a brightly coloured foil sachet, *Extra Joss* was ready to mix with water, soft drinks, or even beer. Its cost was less than a third that of mainstream bottled energy drinks, yet included ingredients such as ginseng and B6 just like the other, more expensive bottled drinks. While other mainstream energy drinks aimed at the upper-middle socio-economic groups, *Extra Joss* made a

direct bid for the masses, targeting the working classes including office and factory workers. The sachets were easy to carry and store, and easily marketed in small kiosks and shops, as well as by peddlers in bus stations, and on the street.

Containing mainly taurine (an amino acid), inositol, vitamins B1, B2, B3, B6, caffeine, ginseng, and royal jelly, and the artificial sweetener, aspartame, *Extra Joss* gives instant energy and aids in feeling refreshed (*segar*) or recharged. But a major part of the success of *Extra Joss* - and its efficacy - lies in its name. The term 'joss' evokes powerful connotations. *Jos* is used as an exclamation in modern Javanese and when applied as an adjective means cool, groovy, awesome. *Jos* also literally means explosive, as in 'kopi jos', a term used to describe a kind of coffee in which a hot coal has been dipped, causing an explosive, sizzling sound as the coffee boils up. And, *jos* or *joss* connotes magic, such that the name *Extra Joss* carries the connotation of 'extra magic' or 'super-efficacious'.

Bintang Toedjoe has also had spectacular success with a product for sexual stamina (*pemulih stamina*). Sold in the form of syrup in a sachet under the name of *Irex*, it gained national prominence when, along with *Extra Joss*, it was a featured product in Bintang Toedjoe's sponsorship of the Indonesian 2002 TV coverage of World Cup soccer. There is considerable overlap between the category of sexual stimulants, aphrodisiacs, and that of energy products. The sales of *jamu kuat lelaki* have also increased dramatically in the past few years, mainly through street-side kiosks and small shops. Aside from a few major herbal brands sold nationally (e.g. *Kuku Bima*, *StrongPas*), many of those marketed as herbal equivalents of *Viagra* in fact contain anabolic steroids or synthetic testosterone.

An additional type of *jamu* is worth mentioning here. Manufactured in cottage industries on Java and Madura, these packaged *jamu* constitute some of the most popular products on the market. They too offer a sense of renewal and increased energy, and claim not only to strengthen but also to treat or hold at bay all sorts of bodily conditions. They act quickly and are widely perceived as natural. Yet their efficacy is primarily due to the corticosteroids or other pharmaceutical compounds that they frequently contain. Though corticosteroids readily reduce pain and inflammation, and - in sufficient dosage - assist people to feel powerful and energized, long term or high dose use has serious side effects such as kidney and liver damage, osteoporosis, suppression of immune function and thus susceptibility to infections.

## Technologies of self and being

Such products may be said, at least in one sense, to be selling a chemical sense of power. The energy drinks and other stimulants provide a sense of enhance-

ment - both chemical and symbolic - of one's physical and psychic resources. For the people, they are perceived to offer health, ready energy, and readiness for action, in the face of the daily grind of poorly-paid work and the hopelessness of increasing inequity. But this strength is illusion; it obscures the effects of poor life conditions, and masks the effects of lack of sleep, inadequate caloric intake, poor nutrition, pollution, and chronic disease.

The complexities of social and economic life result in the fragmentation of consciousness. The use of myriad substances today provides both a chemical and symbolic arena for the 'incorporation', and thus objectification, of the social world. The use of substances suggests the possibility of transforming being, of protecting the self, yet in fact contributes to alienation of the self. Through drugs and medicines, one in effect tinkers with the relationship of the self to the world, and, through the enactment of that process itself, thereby embodies that world. Chemical substances are therefore agents of being in a phenomenological sense, acting both to obscure and reproduce the social and economic relations in which we are located. <

## Notes

1. See, for example, Marcus (1995) on multi-sited ethnography, and Appadurai (1986) on the social life of things.
2. The study of the socio-cultural dimensions of medicine use is part of a growing sub-field in anthropology termed the Anthropology of Pharmaceuticals. Its pioneers include a group of scholars based primarily in The Netherlands, e.g., Sjaak van der Geest, who with Susan Reynolds Whyte published a seminal collection in this area (1988). See also van der Geest, Whyte & Hardon 1996.
3. *Irex* contains Yohimbe cortex extract, an extract of a woody herb called Muira Puama radix, the amino acid, L-Artinine HCL, and ginseng radix extract.

## References

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