

## **Ambiguity of Images: Visualizing Ethnic/Racial Differences in Indonesian TV Advertisements during the New Order and the Post-New Order Era**

Ratna Noviani

### **Summary**

Advertising imagery relating to ethnicity/race can provide significant cues to reveal the prevailing discourse about ethnic/racial relations in a society and, most importantly, about a perceived majority's assumption in relation to a perceived minority. This study is concerned with the ways in which TV advertisements construct discursive strategies to define and represent ethnic/racial differences in Indonesia. By means of social semiotics and narrative analysis, this study examines how Indonesian TV advertisements rendered overtones and undertones of the ethnic/racial differences existing in Indonesia during the New Order (particularly in the period from 1993 to 1999) and the Post-New Order era (particularly from 1999 to 2005). A close examination of the advertisements demonstrates that TV commercials have articulated and reproduced relations between the ethnic/racial majority and minority existing in the country. It has been revealed that Indonesian TV advertisements employ two kinds of discursive strategies to define and construct ethnic/racial differences in Indonesia, viz. the ambivalent function of cultural tradition and cultural appropriation by mainstreaming the minorities. In line with the shift in the socio-political climate in Indonesia and in the face of globalization, TV commercials tend to change their discursive strategies in visualizing ethnic/racial relationships in Indonesia.

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It has been argued that the mass media play a significant role in articulating, underpinning or subverting racism. Stuart Hall, for instance, asserts, "The media are not only a powerful source of ideas about race. They are also one place where these ideas [of race] are articulated, worked on, transformed and elaborated" (2000, p. 273). The media work to construct a certain definition and meaning of race through their imagery and narrative. They are inclined to highlight differences between ethnic/racial groups and by doing this may evoke prejudice either within or towards certain groups. Power relationships are actually involved between ethnic/racial groups even in entertainment programmes and advertising, which are areas that presumably do not have any explicit political agenda. Advertisements do not simply contain messages attempting to sell products, but, more than that, they

can tell stories of social relations and power structure regarding ethnic/racial groups. In accordance with this, Cortese (2004, p. 89) suggests that advertisements serve as a “type of barometer of the willingness of dominant groups” to accept ethnic minorities. He also argues that advertisements might exert “symbolic racism”, which includes subtle ethnic stereotyping, trivialization of minority empowerment or racial equality, or the absence of ethnic images. Stuart Hall (2000, p. 273) defines this tendency as “inferential racism”, by which certain premises and propositions of race are inscribed in naturalized [advertising] representations and perceived as “unquestioned assumptions”.<sup>1</sup>

It could be said that both positive and negative images regarding ethnic/racial groups can provide significant cues to reveal prevailing discourses about ethnic/racial relations in a society and, most importantly, about a perceived majority’s assumption toward a perceived minority. In their study of race and gender imagery in TV advertisements, Coltrane and Messineo (2000, p. 366) suggest that advertising imagery plays an important part in the construction of subtle forms of prejudice, which are based on the construction of differences between in-groups and out-groups. Advertisements, in this understanding, could promote prejudicial attitudes towards members of out-groups and generate certain stereotypical images, which could encourage people to demean them. Added to that, advertisements tend to naturalize asymmetrical relations of power between majority and minority groups in a subtle way. As a consequence, prevalent images of the majority and the presence or absence of minorities in advertisements are considered to be “normal” and “unproblematic”.

In a country with a multi-ethnic society like Indonesia, depicting ethnic/racial groups in advertisements might be problematic. Images and narratives of ethnic/racial differences potentially involve selection, reduction or even homogenization of cultural differences existing in the country. In addition, on account of commercial and market considerations, advertisements are inclined to address the perceived majority and thus cover their positions more readily than those of the perceived minority. The latter are often considered as having a lack of disposable income (Ghosh 2003, p. 274), which makes them irrelevant or only marginally relevant to advertising. Nevertheless, it should be stressed that the important issue is not whether or not ethnicity/race exists in advertisements, but how discourses regarding ethnicity/race are enunciated and deployed in advertisements.

Following this insight, the aim of this study is to reveal how TV commercials aired during the New Order (in the period from 1993 to 1998) and the Post-New Order era

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<sup>1</sup> Stuart Hall distinguishes between *inferential* racism and *overt* racism. *Overt* racism refers to the attempts to give open and favourable coverage to certain ideas, positions and persons that aim to elaborate and advance an openly racist argument or point of view. It is different with *inferential* racism, which could work in a subtle way and beneath one’s consciousness. However, Hall asserts that both types of racism are equally dangerous and offensive. For further explanation, see Hall (2000).

(in the period from 1999 to 2005) produced and reproduced discursive strategies of ethnic/racial differences in Indonesia through their images and narratives. Since ethnicity/race includes the notion of majority and minority, I aim to reveal how discourses on power relations between the majority and the minority in Indonesia are constructed and articulated in the advertising texts. The corpus of this study consists of TV advertisements which were honoured with the Citra Pariwara Award in the period from 1993 to 2005. This award is a prestigious national advertising competition that takes place annually and aims at awarding prestige to creative “Indonesian” advertisements. It is interesting and of particular concern to this study in that the Award-winning advertisements gain the opportunity to represent Indonesia at the international level of similar competitions. It could be said that the Citra Pariwara Award has aimed to be part of the nation-building project of Indonesia by selecting the archetype of “Indonesian” advertisements that will function as the Indonesian representative at international level. In this study, I examine 32 TV advertisements produced in the New Order era and 36 advertisements made thereafter.

It is worth stating that I prefer to use the term ethnicity/race rather than make a clear division between ethnicity and race. By doing so, I suggest that ethnicity and race could be experienced at the same time. In order to construct ethnic/racial differences discursively, I argue that the advertisements under discussion involve the use of physical characteristics, cultural events, languages and other elements, which are defined and perceived as ethnic/racial markers. The use of skin tone in terms of blackness and whiteness to define ethnic/racial differences, especially when other perceived ethnic/racial markers are absent, is of particular concern to me. In line with this, I will use the terms “White Indonesian” and “Black Indonesian” to illuminate what the advertisements try to suggest when those differences are emphasized.

The first section of this paper attempts to explain the shift of socio-political dynamics from New Order to Post-New Order Indonesia and its interrelationship to media representation. The second section focuses on the discursive strategies applied by TV advertisements in the period from 1999 to 2005 to define and represent ethnic/racial differences and relationships.

### **Ethnicity/race in the context of Indonesia**

To my knowledge, there has been no substantial research on the discourses regarding ethnic/racial groups, especially minorities, in Indonesian advertisements. This fact is hardly surprising owing to the New Order’s cultural politics. The New Order era was a period spanning 32 years in which Indonesia was governed by an authoritarian regime (1966-1998). With his power, President Soeharto exercised an authoritarian form of military government. With regard to the mass media, Soeharto’s government exercised close control over the dissemination of information to the people in

Indonesia. In the context of ethnicity/race, the Indonesian mass media were ordered to avoid any sensitive and potentially inflammatory subjects related to sentiments of ethnicity, religion, race and social class (SARA rule: *Suku* [ethnicity], *Agama* [religion], *Ras* [race] and *Antar golongan* [social class]). It should be stressed that the rule did not significantly reflect the state's appreciation and respect for existing cultural differences in Indonesia. On the contrary, the SARA rule was merely used to cover anything that countered certain political agendas pursued by the government (Tesoro 2000, p. 43). Furthermore, since the New Order's state placed Javanese ethnicity in the prominent position, anything regarding Javanese ethnicity in the media seemed to be immune to the SARA rule. It would appear, then, that the SARA rule has become one of the discursive strategies established by the state to define and justify ethnic/racial groups existing in the country.

Based on indefinite criteria, the New Order government established some media texts as political (Sen and Hill 2000, p. 12), which the regime tightly controlled by imposing either official legislation or a telephone culture.<sup>2</sup> Some others were deemed as apolitical texts, which lack the possibility of becoming a channel for such an ideology or culture that could counter the state's political agenda. Following this logic, advertising belonged to the latter category, which resulted in the state's light control over advertising texts. Despite the state's light control, as stated in the Indonesian Advertising Code of Conduct, advertisements in Indonesia needed to avoid images which could reveal the SARA conflicts and potentially damage the national culture. As a result, advertisements tended to convey "safe" images, which supposedly had a lack of consequences related to ethnic/racial issues.

However, since the ethnic Javanese group received a prominent status in comparison to other existing groups in Indonesia, it got more than its fair share of coverage in the Indonesian media, which includes advertisements, of course. Furthermore, under the New Order regime, all Indonesian commercial television channels were located in Java (particularly in the capital city, Jakarta), where approx. half the Indonesian population lives. Java was then a lucrative source of business for advertisers – and still is today – because it is a big market where large amounts of capital could flow intensively. This situation influenced discourses on the ethnic/racial groups that live on the outer islands of Java and thereby affected either their visual presence or their absence in Indonesian advertisements.

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<sup>2</sup> It was a well-known fact that the New Order government also undertook a sort of 'invisible' mechanism of censorship to both print and broadcast media. One of these was called *budaya telepon* or telephone culture, i.e. a system which involves officials telephoning editors or major shareholders of print and broadcasting media in Indonesia to remind them that any topics which could counter the government line on a particular issue should be avoided. This system was operated by Ministry of Information officials and, occasionally, by the military and other government officials in order to remind the media that they are under constant scrutiny. Even commercial broadcast media were not immune to those mechanisms of censorship. See Article 19 (1996) for more information.

Since the fall of the New Order regime, there have been a number of democratic reforms, partly in terms of cultural politics. The changes in politics have placed the notion of multiculturalism in the limelight. Unlike the previous regime, which attempted to invoke homogenization of culture in the guise of national unity, the new government has been called upon to provide a better place for various cultural differences in every corner of the country to live and develop their own uniqueness and distinctness. The discussion of multiculturalism has called for media participation in providing more space for ethnic/racial minorities. In this sense, the Indonesian media are largely expected to embrace and respond to the celebration of multiculturalism. Television, in particular, is considered the right medium to encourage a celebration of the cultural differences that exist in Indonesia across the whole country (Kompas, 2001).

### **Discursive strategies in visualizing ethnicity/race**

#### *The ambivalent function of cultural tradition*

It is a well-known fact that the notion of traditionality largely referred to Javanese culture under the New Order government. This could be seen in two TV advertisements that were produced and broadcast during the New Order era, for instance: the Bodrex advertisement (1995) and the Citra White advertisement (1996). Both commercials demonstrate that elements of Javanese ethnicity are articulated, transformed and elaborated in order to sell products. In the Citra White advertisement, for instance, Javanese rituals and symbols are used to represent traditionality and the high-value cultural heritage that needs to be preserved in Indonesian modern life. Similarly, by depicting a woman in traditional Javanese attire and a traditional hairstyle, the Bodrex advertisement generates a view of women as subjects, which is drawn from a Javanese viewpoint regarding gender roles.<sup>3</sup> Javanese symbols and viewpoints played a major role in the storyline of both advertisements. This tendency demonstrates that Javanese culture has influenced the mindset and cultural preferences of advertisers to some extent. It should not be forgotten that advertising creators are part of a cultural community that shares social conventions and a similar dominant worldview with other members of the community. Their cultural preferences, according to Marchand in Giaccardi (1995, p. 111), could influence the way they portray and depict the world and society through advertisements. This argument shows its evidence in Indonesian advertising,

<sup>3</sup> Javanese culture requires women to have attitudes and behaviour which are based on the concept of *matelu* (*manak* – giving birth, *macak* – dressing and *masak* – cooking). The concept apparently indicates that the most appropriate position a Javanese woman can have is in the home. In contrast, Javanese men are expected to be macho, strong and powerful, which makes them responsible for dealing with hard duties. This logic is also linked to the assumption that a man deserves to be a leader. In Java, the duties of men are reflected in the concept of *malima* (*main* – gambling, *madon* – womanising, *minum* – drinking, *madat* – use of drugs and *maling* – bandit). Although this is not an ideal type of man, it reflects male supremacy in everyday Javanese life. See Ubed (2002, p. 55), for example.

especially during the New Order era. In his work on portrayals of women in advertising, Priosoedarsono (1998, p. 308) reveals this tendency. He implies that his personal predisposition as an individual professional in an advertising agency has been influenced by Javanese values to some extent. He argues that to create a good advertisement that sells, it is necessary to consider the five principles of life settlement in a Javanese concept, namely, *garwo* (spouse), *karyo* (occupation), *wismo* (house), *turonggo* (vehicle), *kukilo* (pleasure). As regards female images in advertising, he remarked that such images are a sort of manifestation of the first principle of Javanese settlement, i.e. *garwo* (spouse). In other words, a man is already settled if he is married and accompanied by his wife. As a result, the role of women in advertisements largely refers to the Javanese concept of *garwo*, especially as housewives. This sort of women's image was still being maintained as the New Order regime came to an end.

**Figure 1 A Javanese family in the advertisement for headache medicine, Bodrex**



(courtesy of PPPI's documentation)

Elements of Javanese culture in the Bodrex and Citra White commercials are also depicted in a middle-class environment. Bodrex, for instance, presents a Javanese couple who live in a cosy house with paintings hanging on the wall and a crystal chandelier hanging from the ceiling. The woman is also depicted wearing jewellery on various parts of her body, which indicates the couple's economic success. Similarly, Citra White also depicts the twin sisters, Santi and Sinta, as the members of a middle-class family. Their cosy house, the piano, Javanese furniture and the modern standing party tell a particular story about their settled life. This middle-class milieu in both advertisements, in my view, has affirmed the higher status of Javanese culture, which is mostly linked to the Javanese Kingdom. The high culture of Javanese *keraton* (native court) has been appropriated to underscore the fact that Javanese traditionality is a valuable cultural heritage of the country. The tendency to praise Javanese traditionality in fact illustrates the New Order's ambivalence in

defining the term “traditional”. It is a well-known fact that during the era the term “traditional” as opposed to “modern” suggested something backward, pre-modern and uncultured, which frequently referred to ethnic minorities (Bertrand 2004, p. 221).

**Figure 2 The use of Javanese traditionality in the advertisement for whitening body lotion, Citra White**



(courtesy of PPPI's documentation)

Regarding Javanese culture, however, the state assigned a different meaning to traditionality. Instead of referring to backwardness or pre-modernness, the government praised Javanese traditionality as a highlight in the country's cultural heritage, which needs to be preserved in the Indonesian modern world. This phenomenon is called “neo-Javanism” and is an attempt to revitalize Javanese traditions and expressive forms and return them to public favour by demonstrating their continued relevance to the modern world (Geertz in Hooker 1993, p. 9). During the era of economic liberalization in the 1990s, neo-Javanism was reproduced and appropriated by advertising, as depicted in the Citra White advertisement. The advert aimed to demonstrate that Javanese high culture is not merely rich and valuable, but is also constantly relevant to the westernized and modern life of Indonesia. By connecting women in modern life to a Javanese princess and traditional recipe, and subsequently to the advertised product, the commercial

asserted that the construct of modern beauty in Indonesia is barely detached from Javanese culture. In this sense, the advertisement showed its role in imposing Javanese aesthetics upon the rest of the ethnic groups in the country.

This traditionality could have a different meaning if it pointed to ethnic/racial minorities, however. The perceived traditions and ethnic/racial markers of minority groups in Indonesia were employed in advertisements to generate a sense of exoticism and to highlight their backwardness and pre-modernness, which were perceived as an obstacle to the modern lifestyle of Indonesia. This tendency was related to the fact that minority groups became the objects of development programmes during the New Order era, which were certainly defined and determined from the perspective of majority. Traditionality with regard to ethnic/racial minorities was merely maintained and exploited for the sake of the tourist industry. Papua and Dayak, for instance, were often considered primitive, wild and exotic ethnic groups for tourism purposes (Sunjayadi, 2004). Their images were printed and published officially as postcards and/or brochures to attract tourists' attention.

In the Post-New Order era up until 2005, it was noticeable that there was no more thematic silence in Indonesian advertisements with regard to ethnic/racial minority groups; ethnic/racial minorities were not absent as they once had been. Yet it should be noted that the Javanese are still dominant as far as media coverage is concerned, albeit in a slightly modified form. During the New Order era, the Javanese had always played a major role in advertising narrative. Their presence was hardly ever accompanied by any other ethnic groups. Any interaction that took place between the Javanese and the rest of the country's ethnic groups was mostly invisible here. In the Post-New Order era, advertisements changed the way they spoke about the Javanese. In line with spreading concern about multiculturalism, advertisements began to involve ethnic/racial interaction in their narratives. During this era, the Javanese were depicted as having relationships with ethnic/racial minorities in the country. This phenomenon could be seen in an HSBC Bank advertisement, for instance (2004).

The HSBC advertisement tells a story about a Javanese/“White” family who have just spent their holiday on Bali. The couple are depicted telling an interesting story about how they spent their vacation there. The husband says they spent a lot of time shopping during the holiday because the bank was offering discounts to its customers at the time, encouraging them to use their HSBC credit cards. The advertising images illustrate that both adults were fascinated by what they saw, so much so that they lost sight of their (only) son. When they realized their son was gone, they started to panic. The next scene shows the images of their attempt to find their son. One of these shows a man with a *blangkon* (a traditional Javanese hat for men) on a motorcycle pointing his finger in a certain direction trying to help the couple by showing them where he had seen him walking. The couple also asked a

truck driver and a couple of international tourists. The female international tourist on the still image was wearing a *Batik* top of Javanese traditional cloth. A map of Bali is also visible hanging on the wall, reinforcing the location of the couple's presence. The wife says that they finally found their son, who was playing with a new friend of his in a corner. Her husband was surprised to discover that the father of his son's new friend was a relative of theirs. The advertisement then shows an image of the husband and his "newly found" relative, who is played by a "Black" man. Both of them looked happy and smiled as they revealed the fact that they had a family connection. The husband explains that his "newly found" relative is the grandson of the son of the nephew of the uncle of the brother-in-law of his *eyang*'s<sup>4</sup> nephew, a long and complicated line of relations. Several still images of "Black" men appear in the slide-show, as the husband is describing his family connection to the "Black" man. The advertisement also demonstrates an image of the "Black" man in *battik*, and an image of the "Black" man with a Chinese man. The advertisement is subsequently closed by an image of two HSBC credit cards and a map of the world.

**Figure 3 Inter-ethnic relationship in an HSBC advertisement**



(courtesy of PPPI's documentation)

Four ethnic/racial groups appear in the HSBC advertisement: the Javanese/"White", the Balinese/"White", the "Black" and the Chinese. The Javanese play the main role in the advertising narrative. They are also depicted as being successful in terms of economic life, which makes them the target market for the product being promoted, the HSBC credit card. The term *eyang* used by the husband when referring to his

<sup>4</sup> A Javanese term for "grandfather".

grandfather is one symbol that the couple stems from a middle-class Javanese family. *Eyang* is actually a term used by aristocratic Javanese families. Some symbols which are linked to the Javanese also gain high visibility in the advertisement. *Batik* cloth, the typical Javanese wax-resist dyeing cloth, appears in the commercial, being wore by a female tourist from abroad and as a traditional cradle with which to sing a baby to sleep. *Blangkon*, a traditional Javanese hat for men, is also visible in the advertisement, though the story is actually set on the island of Bali. Added to that, the strong sense of Javanese culture is also demonstrated by a picture of a newly married couple in traditional Javanese wedding dress. All this goes to show that Javaneseeness retains a significant status and higher position compared with other ethnic groups in Indonesia. This fact is also illustrated by the undertone of Balineseness in the advertisement. Although the storyline is largely located in Bali, the Balinese aspect itself is under-represented. There is no image that shows the particularity or distinctness of the Balinese. Instead, anything Balinese is merely shown through the quick image of a panoramic postcard and a map of Bali Island.

It is important to note that Bali's status as an internationally famous island is, in fact, implied by the state as being one of the country's highlights in addition to the Javanese and the Sundanese (in West Java), the second-largest ethnic group (Vickers and Fisher 1999, p. 391; Sutton 1998). However, when the Balinese and the Javanese are jointly present, the latter is inclined to be more prominent. The Chinese only attains a superficial representation – similar to the Balinese. The fact that a Chinese man appears in the advert, but plays an insignificant voiceless role in it shows that ethnic/racial minorities experience token inclusion; the implication here is that the minorities should accept being in the shadow of the majority when they appear together with the Javanese.

It is palpably observable that elements of Javanese ethnicity are used in the advertisement to generate a sense of it being in the majority. In addition, unlike the advertisements made during the New Order, which attempted to employ elements of Javanese ethnicity to encounter Western influence, the HSBC advertisement demonstrates that the Javanese are depicted as conforming to the global lifestyle during the Post-New Order. As Post-New Order Indonesia has been increasingly integrated into the global market, which is signified by the advertised product, the Javanese/“White” is depicted as being at the centre of modern [westernized] culture. In this sense, the advertisement delineates the active engagement of the Javanese in modern life by having them perform as the product's consumers. By highlighting Javanese symbols and traditions, the advertisement implies that only the Javanese who has resources is ready to welcome a global lifestyle. The Javanese/“White” is even equated with international tourists, who spend their money on internationally famous Bali. In the advertisement, the Balinese is positioned as an object which is exotically fantastic and attractive. The Balinese receives the Orientalist viewpoint, not merely from the Western people as represented by two international tourists in

the advertisement, but also from the Javanese/“White”, who reproduces the Orientalist view towards other ethnic/racial groups within the same national border.<sup>5</sup> Furthermore, the advertisement tends to omit the use of ethnic/racial markers and traditions that refer to ethnic/racial minorities. All this goes to show that ethnic/racial minorities are still marginalised in advertising narrative in the Post-New Order era and remain in the shadow of the perceived majority – the Javanese.

#### *Cultural appropriation: mainstreaming minorities*

Ethnic/racial differences in Indonesia have also been defined through the use of physical characteristics, particularly the use of skin colour. The dichotomic category of Blackness and Whiteness, for example, has not only been discursively constructed in Western society, but also within the national borders of Indonesia. People who inhabit the eastern islands of Indonesia are considered to be of Melanesian descent and are distinguished from those of Austronesian descent, who inhabit the western islands of the country. Melanesian and Austronesian descendants are largely defined by their different hair form and skin tone. Melanesian descendants are characterised by having curly hair and a darker skin tone. By contrast, those of Austronesian descent are defined as having straight hair and a light skin tone. It could be said that ethnic/racial differences in terms of the dichotomic categories “Eastern/Melanesian/Black” and “Western/Austronesian/White” are a result of cultural politics established by the state. The “Eastern/Melanesian/Black” Indonesians have particularly undergone such marginalization in the public sphere in the New Order era, as experienced by Black people in most Western societies. Under the New Order government, this group was considered to be remote and far from the centre of modern Indonesia (i.e. Western/Java/Jakarta), both geographically and culturally. As a consequence, the regime regarded the “Eastern/Melanesian/Black” Indonesians as peripheral, backward, traditional and pre-modern despite their rich natural resources and cultural heritage (Bertrand 2004, p. 221). This tendency has demonstrated the hierarchical status between the western and eastern regions of Indonesia. In this sense, western Indonesia has imitated and reproduced the Orientalist viewpoint towards eastern Indonesia. In Edward Said’s words, “Orientals were rarely seen or looked at; they were seen through, analyzed not as citizens, or even people, but as problems to be solved or confined” (1978, p. 208). This sort of Orientalist view has been reproduced as well regarding the portrayals of “Black” Indonesians in the advertisement under discussion. In the New Order era, the “Black” Indonesians were largely submerged in Indonesian advertisements. Their simple presence, when they did appear, did not aim to disrupt the dominant principles of social order. As a result, advertisements tended to depict “Black” Indonesians as ornamental snippets rather

<sup>5</sup> Edward Said (1978), in his influential book, *Orientalism*, elucidated that the essence of Orientalism is the enduring distinction between Western superiority and Oriental inferiority. The Occident (the West) imagines and poses the Orient (the East) in a hierarchical way in which the West is superior and higher than the East.

than showing their cultural distinctness. This attempt has reinforced the position of minorities as secondary citizens in the media's discourse.

A similar trend has been experienced by the ethnic Chinese in Indonesia as well. In this case, the dichotomic categories of *pribumi*, or native inhabitants, and *non-pribumi*, or non-native, have been used as a strategy for defining and positioning Chinese ethnicity in Indonesia. The Chinese are considered as *non-pribumi* citizens in the country.<sup>6</sup> They have undergone cultural and political segregation ever since colonial times owing to their cultural, religious and economic differences from the perceived *pribumi* (see Yusuf 2005 and Allen 2003, for example). The "othering" process of Chinese ethnicity was particularly reinforced in the New Order era as the regime established decrees to prohibit any activities pertaining to Chinese culture. As Mackie (1990) points out, "The entire Sino-Indonesian minority has been subject to various forms of discrimination and exclusion from educational, social and employment rights" (cited in Allen 2003, p. 383). Chinese ethnicity in Indonesia has always been considered different, resulting in discrimination in almost all aspects of life. The New Order's government mandated an assimilation project and compelled the Chinese to conform to it. It is important to note that the New Order's assimilationist project called for the Chinese to participate in all the activities of the native Indonesians with all their joy and sorrow (Coppel 2002, p. 27). To show their commitment to the state, the Chinese were compelled to change their names – both personal and business ones – to Indonesian ones. Added to that, due to the state's regulations, expressions of Chinese culture were silenced and excluded from the public sphere. Public celebrations with regard to Chinese cultural events such as those marking the Lunar New Year were forbidden during the New Order era. Another indication of the state's denigration towards the Chinese was their exclusion from the political field. Under no circumstances were Chinese allowed to be active in the political arena. On the other hand, the New Order's government tended to allow and even encourage the Chinese to enter and be active in the economic sector of Indonesia. As a result, according to Suryadinata in Dawis (2005, p. 2), the ethnic Chinese have come to control around 70% of the country's private economic sector. Even though a significant share of business profits has remained in the hands of the New Order's cronies, Chinese economic prowess has generated prejudice among other Indonesians, especially the perceived native Indonesians. This ill will has worsened the position of Chinese ethnicity in Indonesian society.

The practice of "othering" the Chinese ethnic group has been articulated and reproduced by Indonesian media. News media during the New Order era, for instance, depicted Chinese Indonesians in negative stereotypes such as corruptors, introverts, rich but selfish people and outsiders (Yusuf 2005, pp. 175-6). Chinese

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<sup>6</sup> The Indonesian population is also characterized by immigrants of Chinese, Indian or Arabian descent. The ethnic Chinese are the biggest immigrant group in Indonesia, making up between 3 and 5% of the population (see Yusuf 2005, p. 105).

Indonesians have also gained a very limited degree of representation in indigenously produced television programmes (Dawis 2005, p. 3). The presence of Chinese figures has mostly stemmed from drama series or films that were imported from Hong Kong, Taiwan or Singapore.<sup>7</sup> The situation began to change in the early 1990s as the New Order government softened its attitude towards the Chinese.<sup>8</sup> Since then, Chinese figures have increasingly been visible in the world of fashion, poetry reading, entertainment programmes and chat shows in the Indonesian media (Allen 2003, p. 384; Heryanto 1998, p. 105). This tendency was also revealed in their representation in advertising. The thematic silence around the Chinese was gradually

**Figure 4 The visibility of Chinese figures and culture in the Rinsو advertisement**



(courtesy of PPPI's documentation)

<sup>7</sup> Kung-fu serials were shown on Indonesian television from 1988 onwards. Chinese martial-arts series were mostly imported. It should be noted, however, that there were no local television programmes or advertisements that used and told stories about the Chinese in Indonesia. See Dawis (2005).

<sup>8</sup> According to Ariel Heryanto (1998), the situation changed rapidly as a result of Chinese Prime Minister Li Peng's visit to Indonesia in 1990. After that, a series of exchange visits by officials from the two governments took place. This was followed by the establishment of the Chinese-Indonesian Institute for Economic, Social and Cultural Co-operation.

removed from advertising narratives. Chinese cultural expressions began to be inscribed in the advertising storyline, as illustrated in the advertisement for Rinso detergent (1997).

The first scene of the Rinso advertisement is set in a Chinese restaurant with Chinese lanterns hanging from the ceiling, Chinese decorations and pictures hanging on the wall and well-arranged black tables and chairs. The scene shows a typical Chinese restaurant, which people might also see in most Chinese martial-arts films or dramas. The advertisement depicts a man in black clothing moving rapidly between tables and chairs while doing a particular style of Chinese martial arts. Martial-art sounds such as punching or kicking are clearly to be heard, along with Chinese lute music. The other scene shows that this martial-arts fight is part of a performance on television, which is being watched by two boys in a cosy living-room.

The Rinso advertisement does not substantially tell a story about the Chinese. However, it adopts and employs elements of Chinese ethnicity to tell a story about the product being promoted. As noted earlier, prior to the 1990s, expressions of Chinese culture were forbidden in public areas, which included the mass media. This advertisement, at least, demonstrates a change in the situation in that elements of Chinese ethnicity are allowed to be visible. As the New Order regime relaxed its restrictions on Chinese culture in Indonesia, advertisements sought to respond to it by depicting more and more Chinese figures and culture. The visibility of Chinese figures and culture, however, still referred to imported films or drama series from Hong Kong and Taiwan, which have appeared on Indonesian television since 1988. As the Rinso advert shows, the elements of Chinese ethnicity are also taken from or inspired by Chinese martial-arts films. In addition, the advertisement depicts the ethnic Chinese as part of a performance which is screened on television and watched by the two boys. This image reveals the fact that Chinese figures and culture are considered as objects and a spectacle for consumption by the majority. The Chinese ethnicity appropriated in the advertisement is presented in an isolated sequence of the narrative, i.e. it does not feature in any major way as its characters are secondary ones who are not involved in the whole story. They appear superficially and are framed in muteness. Their presence is only allowed at superficial, decorative level. In other words, on the one hand the advertisement seems to embrace Chinese ethnicity by appropriating and using their cultural elements, but on the other it continues to ban Chinese ethnicity to the margins of its narrative and embed it there.

Cultural appropriation became increasingly used as a discursive strategy to represent ethnic/racial minorities in advertisements after the fall of the New Order regime. Along with the spreading discourse of multiculturalism, advertisements made during the Post-New Order era have tended to employ the strategy of mainstreaming minorities in their narratives. In the context of “Black” Indonesians, as shown in the HSBC advertisement, they are not depicted as being totally isolated from other

ethnic/racial groups any more. Rather, the advertisement tends to represent the “Black” Indonesians as having a relationship with other ethnic/racial groups, i.e. with the Chinese and the Javanese. This tendency is also demonstrated through the Javanese’s recognition of the “Black” Indonesian’s existence. By depicting the latter as having a family connection with the Javanese, the majority’s recognition of the existence of minorities seems to be affirmed in the advertisement. In this sense, revealing their family connection becomes a way of mainstreaming Blackness in the advertisement, which serves to signify the majority’s “White” Indonesian’s acceptance of the minority/“Black” Indonesian. The same message is also inscribed in the advertisement for the Djarum Black cigarettes (2003) regarding recognition of “Black” Indonesians.

The Djarum Black commercial does not specifically tell a story about “Black” Indonesians, but it does attempt to impart a certain message related to Blackness. Literally, the advertisement aims to talk about Blackness, which is associated with the name of the advertised product. The narrative of the advertisement delineates the Blacks’ existence and their role in society. In general, the commercial does not

**Figure 5 Mainstreaming Blackness in the Djarum Black advertisement**



(courtesy of PPPI's documentation)

particularly reflect Indonesia in that there is no specific signifier which refers to Indonesia or “Black” Indonesians; the only signifier of Indonesianness is the model.

The setting or location of the story does not reflect an Indonesian panorama either. Added to that, rather than using Indonesian music, the advertisement prefers to use Western music as its diegetic sound. In this advertisement, the diegetic sound plays a significant role in conveying the message about Blackness. The commercial functionalizes the soul song “I Got You (I Feel Good)” by James Brown to define and position the “Black”.

There is a mode of mainstreaming Blackness in the Djarum Black advertisement much like the strategy used in the HSBC commercial. It apparently aims to highlight the valuable existence of the Black. This message not only refers to the product that is to be promoted, but it is also linked to the dominant group’s view about Blacks. As noted earlier, this advertisement does not refer specifically to Black Indonesians, but rather to Black people in Western countries. It is illustrated, for instance, by the use of a Western environment as the narrative setting and, most importantly, the use of soul music as the diegetic sound. The song “I Got You (I Feel Good)” is a hit song by James Brown, an Afro-American who is also known as “the godfather of soul”. Based on the inequality and denigration suffered by Black people in Western countries for centuries, the advertisement attempts to lift up and praise the position of Blacks. The text “No Black, No Soul” attempts to reveal the fact that Blacks have played a significant role in society. Soul music, a product of Black culture, is appropriated and used to sell the product in the advertisement. Through its image and narrative, the commercial highlights the valuable existence and contribution of Blacks to society. This message could be linked and appropriated to the position of the “Black” Indonesian. In a similar way to the HSBC Bank, the Djarum Black advertisement uses the notion of Blackness to show its concern about the existence of “Black” Indonesians.

It must be admitted, however, that despite the presence of Black music, the advertisement simply erases the Black performers or Black figures from its narrative. If the commercial seeks to show its concern for the Blacks, a significant question that arises is why no Black actors are present in it, particularly “Black” Indonesians. Market considerations seem to be the main reason for this. There may be some anxiety that the White majority will not buy the product if they are totally excluded from the advertising text. Following this line of reasoning, the advertisement tends to make the presence of the Black “audible”, but at the same time it erases Black performers from the screen. This practice of racial representation, according to Shohat and Stam (1994, p. 224), is like “granting a White signature on what are basically Black cultural products”. It symbolizes that “White” Indonesians merely welcome Black music, yet the Black people themselves remain emasculated. It would appear, then, that images of the Blacks, if they do appear, only delineate their submerged position and lack of voice before the

majority. This is revealed in the HSBC commercial as well, which tends to frame the “Black” Indonesian in muteness. This representation conveys their low status to voice or show their point of view. The presence of “Black” Indonesians in this regard is only tolerable at a decorative level – they just appear in the background, playing small, insignificant roles in which they don’t say any lines at all.

A close examination of advertisements during the Post-New Order era also demonstrates that the “Black” Indonesian is still defined as “exotica”, just like the ethnic Chinese during the New Order era in the 1990s. In the Rinsu advertisement, Chinese ethnicity is depicted as a spectacle and an object from the majority’s point of view. As shown in the advertisement, two boys who represent the indigenous Indonesians are watching Chinese martial arts on television. Both of them are depicted as being attracted and amused by the spectacle as well as being curious about it. Chinese ethnicity, in this sense, is defined within the parameters of exotica and “otherness”, which generate amusement and curiosity among the majority. A similar mode of representation is used to depict the “Black Indonesian”. According to Gosh, the use of an imaginative landscape is often preferable to gain the “essence of exotica” (2003, p. 279). In this sense, images of dark forests and animals are mostly visible. By associating ethnic/racial minorities with forests and animals, advertisements reinforce the viewpoint of the majority, which is that the minorities are primitive and wild. As seen in the final scene of the HSBC advertisement, an image of a tiger appears when the Javanese is describing his family connection with the “Black” Indonesian. The presence of the tiger is associated with the minorities, especially the “Black” Indonesian, to generate a sense of exoticism. This sort of representation illustrates a tendency by which the majority group constantly talks about “Black” Indonesians, considering them to be different and a separate group.

Both the HSBC advertisement and the Djarum Black one show their ambiguity in positioning the “Black” Indonesian, just as the Rinsu advertisement does in representing the Chinese ethnicity. On one hand, the commercials seek to enunciate their acceptance and recognition of the Black’s existence by appropriating and mainstreaming Blackness in their narratives, but on the other hand, the advertisements continue to symbolically restore Black Indonesians to their submerged position. It would appear, then, that the acceptance of the minorities, especially in the context of “Black” Indonesians, tends to result in a sort of cultural co-optation. To be accepted by the majority, the minorities are required to conform or mingle with the majority’s culture. This tendency could be seen in the HSBC advertisement, which demonstrates a still image of a “Black” man in a Batik shirt. As mentioned already, Batik is a typical Javanese cloth, which has become part of official national dress code since the government of the New Order came to power. This is another example of how the New Order’s government sought to impose aesthetic aspects of Javanese life on other ethnic groups in every corner of Indonesia. Meanwhile, the “Black” Indonesian in the advertisement is not associated with certain cultural elements that signify his ethnicity/race.

In addition, under the conditions of globalization, the global market economy has constantly intensified its effort to transform people into global consumers. In this regard, both majority and minority groups are also persuaded to engage in the global cultural exchange. In this understanding, majority groups are considered to be more readily prepared to live up to global values. As a result, minority groups, which are regarded as pre-modern or even backward, are located in the margins of the global-local nexus. The HSBC advertisement illustrates this fact by having the “Black” Indonesian perform in a minor role. The product itself (the credit card) is a representation of global culture, which is attempting to inject its influence in the country. In the commercial, it can be seen that the “White” Indonesian, particularly the Javanese, is a member of the group that readily engages in the global lifestyle. At the same time, the “Black” Indonesian is depicted as having a complicated and remote connection with the Javanese despite his simple role. This implies that there is still some distance between “Black” Indonesians and the global lifestyle. In this sense, they are depicted as not being ready to follow and adjust to the global lifestyle yet. This fact is also illustrated in the Djarum Black advertisement, which is saturated with Western symbols. As mentioned earlier, despite expressing the significant contribution of the “Black” ethnic element in society, they remain visually excluded from the advertisement. Although the commercial seeks to talk about the “Black”, it prefers to cast the “White” in its narrative. The “Black”, it seems, has been prevented from taking an active part in modern global life. Advertising narrative seeks to ensure that “Black” Indonesians are kept in their due – lowly – place in the ethnic/racial hierarchy, which privileges “White” Indonesians lastingly.

## **Conclusion**

The notion of ethnic/racial groups in Indonesia has always been located within the discourse of nationhood. The complexities of ethnicity and race have generated a certain amount of anxiety about friction or disunity of the nation. It is not surprising that the notion of ethnicity and race in Indonesia has been suppressed and subordinated to the nation cause. Advertising portrayals of ethnic/racial groups have illustrated this line of thinking to some extent. A close examination of ethnic/racial representation in Indonesian commercials reveals that there has been a thematic silence pertaining to ethnicity and race on account of national unity as well as market considerations. As the state officially forbade any sensitive and inflammatory issues of ethnicity and race in the Indonesian media during the New Order era, ethnic/racial groups were often excluded filmically. Portrayals of ethnic/racial groups gained very limited coverage in advertising for more than two decades. There was a tendency for minorities, both indigenous and non-indigenous, to be invisible and unheard in advertising texts. In my close examination of TV commercials, I have revealed three types of ethnic/racial dichotomy, which are mostly present and sometimes overlap in the advertisements under discussion, viz. Javanese/non-

Javanese, indigenous/non-indigenous, and “White” Indonesian/“Black” Indonesian. Most importantly, I have also revealed two kinds of discursive strategies used by advertisements to define and construct ethnic/racial differences in Indonesia, i.e. the ambivalent function of cultural tradition and cultural appropriation by mainstreaming the minorities.

In the New Order era in the 1990s, advertisements conveyed overtones and undertones of ethnic/racial groups through the narrative of good/bad and modern/traditional. Those narratives generated images of ethnicity/race that articulated and reinforced the prominent position of the Javanese in Indonesian society. In this regard, advertisements tended to be confident in their categorization of differences by giving high visibility to the majority, i.e. the Javanese. Whenever they did appear, the minorities – especially the “Black” Indonesian and Chinese Indonesian – were only granted simple roles; they were depicted in a minor and distant role and placed in an isolated sequence of narrative. During this era, ethnic/racial markers were used and were conspicuously present, but they functioned differently for the Javanese and the non-Javanese. Javanese ethnic markers were knowingly used in commercials to revitalize and preserve their valuable expressive forms and to show the ethnic group’s continued relevance to modern Indonesia. But when they relate to the non-Javanese, ethnic markers serve to generate and underscore the former’s backwardness and pre-modernness. The non-Javanese that are represented as minorities, both indigenous (“Black” Indonesians in particular) and non-indigenous (Chinese in particular), only appear at the decorative level as ornamental snippets. It was observable that their presence was defined within the dominant group’s feelings and beliefs about minorities. The “Black” Indonesians, for instance, were depicted as being steeped in their traditions, which kept them primitive and pre-modern.

As there is political willingness to recognize the rights of ethnic/racial minorities in the Post-New Order era, these issues become culturally omnipresent. It should be stressed, however, that ethnic/racial minorities remain filmically submerged in advertisements. Through the narrative of good/bad and educated/ignorant, advertisements incline to embrace cultural differences and inter-ethnic relations in their representation. It is observable, however, that the “White” Indonesians remain dominant and gain higher visibility than the “Black” Indonesians. Despite depicting inter-ethnic relationships, the presence of minorities – especially “Black” Indonesians and Chinese Indonesians – has been subordinated to the majority. The visibility of “Black” Indonesians, for instance, is hardly separated from the presence of “White”/Javanese. In this sense, they are depicted as less modern, less knowledgeable and less self-confident than the “White”/Javanese. When they do appear jointly, the narrative confines the “Black” Indonesians to the periphery and ensures that the “White”/Javanese play the key role in the advertising narrative. In the case of Chinese Indonesians, there is a tendency to include more Chinese Indonesians in the advertising storyline. In the Post-New Order era, the indigenous

“White” Javanese – the country’s majority group – have been positioned as the one most readily prepared to welcome and live up to global culture. Simultaneously, ethnic/racial minorities are prevented from playing an active part in the global modern world. By doing this, advertisements demonstrate a new face of symbolic racism by showing their ambiguity in depicting and positioning minorities. They enunciate recognition and disavowal regarding ethnic/racial minorities at one and the same time. As has been shown, advertisements aired in the Post-New Order era have recognized, yet ignored ethnic/racial minorities. In this sense, advertisements tend to appropriate and mainstream ethnic/racial minorities in their narratives, although this leads to a sort of cultural co-optation by the majority. All this goes to show that advertisements work narratively to ensure the continuation of *normal* hegemonic discourse regarding ethnic/racial differences within the national borders of Indonesia.

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## Figures

Figure 1: Bodrex headache medicine advertisement (1995)

Figure 2: Citra White body lotion advertisement (1996)

Figure 3: HSBC Bank advertisement (2004)

Figure 4: Rinsol detergent advertisement (1997)

Figure 5: Djarum Black cigarette advertisement (2003)