Focus 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. 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 expressing themselves? Through what processes are these changes being ‘interiorized’ and ‘exteriorized’ in new forms of embodied action? One arena in which these processes and reaction are readily revealed is the explosion in Java of the usage of a whole range of over-the-counter (OTC); 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 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 and shapes the environment and condition of existence. The body is a chief site of agency, and therefore a site for the expression, or the embodiment of our condition of existence. To study the consumption of medicines in this sense is not about the medicines themselves or their prescriptive pharmacology, but about what sort of protection we seek from them.

It is through this period of economic contraction of 1997-2004, 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 original channel 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 ways of being in the world.

‘Treatments’ for contemporary life

With the failure of reform (refomasi) 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. The products aimed at this market, the majority were officially classed as ‘energy drinks’ (minuman penengah tenaga) or ‘health drinks’ (minuman kesehatan). Examples of energy drinks from the major drug or food producers were Lipton’s (an older energy drink marketed since 1983), M-20, R-20, Hemaviton, and Kringtang. 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 (jawa kaus lidi), 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 commodification of the categories of substances of energy and of masculinist potency and power.

Further, the stimulant and energy drink category of substances is not limited to products from major manufacturers. Other products, 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 Toedjo. 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 as the other, more expensive bottled drinks. While other mainstream energy drinks aimed at the upper-middle socio-economic groups, Extra Joss made in new direct bid for the masses, targeting the working classes including office and factory workers. The sachets were easy to carry and were widely 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, vitamin B1, B2, B6, B12 and inosine, Extra Joss gives instant energy and aids in feeling refreshed (gosok) or recharged. But a major part of the success of Extra Joss was its ability to meet the needs of ‘extra magic’ or ‘super-efficacious’.

Bintang Toedjo has also had spectacular success with a product for sexual stamina (pewarna ramuan). Sold in the form of syrup in a sachet under the name of Tres’, it gained national prominence when, along with Extra Joss, it was a featured product in Bintang Toedjo’s sponsorship of the Indonesian 2002 TV coverage of World Cup soccer. There is considerable overlap between the categories of sexual stimulants, aphrodisiacs, and that of energy products. The sales of jamu kaus lidi have also increased dramatically in the past few years, mainly through street-side kiosks and small shops. As with other major herbal brands sold nationally (e.g. Kuku Bima, StrongPay), many of those marketed as herbal equivalents of Viagra in fact contain andrological or synthetic testosterone.

An additional type of jamu is worth mentioning here. Manufactured in cottage industries on Java and Madura, these packaged jamus constitute some of the most popular products on the market. They offer a sense of renewal and increased energy, and claim not only to strengthen but also to treat or hold back all sorts of bodily conditions. They act quickly and are widely perceived as natural. Yot 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.

References