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## **(In)visible Ethnicity: Celebrating Chinese and Indian Descent in Indonesia**

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(In)visible Ethnicity:  
Celebrating Chinese and Indian Descent in Indonesia

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Abstract

*In Indonesia, ethnocultural celebrations, or their absence, have long been a key signifier of political and social regimes. Our research looks at two festive events, Imlek, Chinese Lunar New Year, and Holi, Indian spring festival, which play an important role in life of two ethnic minorities in Indonesia – Indonesians of Chinese and Indian descent. By asking why in one case (Imlek celebration) ethnicity is actively exhibited while in another (Holi festival) consciously withdrawn from public display, we seek to shed light on different ways that ethnicity is constructed and negotiated in contemporary Indonesia.*

Key words:

(in)visibility, ethnicity, Chineseness, Indianness, festivals, pribumi, Indonesia, ethnic politics

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Figure 1 Decorations during the Lunar New Year. Yogyakarta 2010.



Figure 2 The Celebration of Holi. Kemayoran, Jakarta 2013.

In Yogyakarta, the celebrations of *Imlek*, the Chinese Lunar New Year, seem to be omnipresent and closely linked to the Chinese Indonesian community. Banners and advertisements displaying the Mandarin words *Gong Xi Fa Cai* (literally wishing wealth, but commonly used as New Year's greeting) can be observed all over the city. Every shopping mall is dipped in shining combinations of red and gold.<sup>1</sup> The heart of the celebrations is *Pekan Budaya Tionghoa*<sup>2</sup> Indonesia (Chinese Indonesian Culture Week), a fair lasting several days, and a closing parade, featuring *Barongsai* (Lion dance) and *Liong* (Dragon dance) performance groups. Both events are highly visible in public: the festive events take place near Jl. Malioboro, the main shopping street in Yogyakarta, and are easily accessible to a large number of spectators as there are no entrance restrictions.

The festival takes place in one of the sectors of Jakarta Expo Center, and cannot be seen from the outside. An entrance fee is charged for the festival. Along with traditional *Holi* color play, visitors can enjoy different recreational activities, some of which are free of cultural reference.

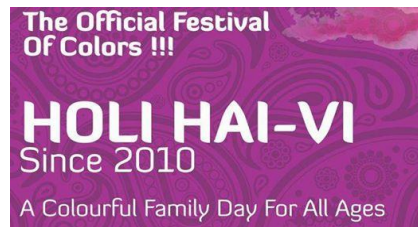


Figure 3 The festival flyer with no reference to ethnicity.

## 1. Glimpse

<sup>1</sup> <http://de.urbandictionary.com/define.php?term=Gong+Xi+Fa+Chai&defid=441970> (last accessed on 11 November 2016)

<sup>2</sup> *Tionghoa* could be considered the emic designation of Chinese Indonesians. But as the notion itself is highly controversial within the Chinese Indonesian community and for the sake of the intelligibility of the text, we here choose the more general designation *Chinese Indonesians*. It is used synonymously with *Indonesians of Chinese descent*. When referring to mainland China, the notions used are *China* and *Chinese*. For accentuating putative ethnicity markers referring to stereotypical ascriptions, the respective terms are put in single quotation marks.



## 2. Introduction

This paper discusses the production and negotiation of Chinese and Indian Indonesian ethnic identities in contemporary Indonesia (the early 2010s) through the analysis of two cultural festivals, namely Chinese New Year festival, or *Imlek*, and Indian festival of colors, or *Holi*.<sup>3</sup> Understanding festivals as “a terrain on which ‘the politics of signification’ are played out” (Storey 2015, p.4), we seek to present new insights on the interrelation between (in)visibility of ethnicity in public space and underlying politics of ethnicity. More specifically, we examine the reasons behind active promotion of ethnicity during the celebration of *Imlek* and withdrawal of ethnic markers from public display during the *Holi* festival.

Ethnicity and its public (in)visibility was and still is an important aspect of the Indonesian social life. Since the colonial times, the category of ethnicity, which “certainly existed first and foremost in the minds of Europeans” (Anderson 1987: 3) significantly transformed the social fabrics of the population residing on the Indonesian archipelago. Even though the legal categories of “Natives”, “Foreign Orientals” (i.e. those of Chinese, Indian and Arab descent) and “Europeans,” introduced during the Dutch rule, should not be considered to represent rigid (racial) stratifications, they nevertheless created social, cultural, political and spatial tensions based on ethnicity (cf. amongst others Willmott 1961; Mackie 1967: 4-16; Luttikhuis 2013; Pols 2010; Stoler 2002).

In post-colonial Indonesia, the ethnic politics reached a new level of complexity and reached its peak during Suharto’s New Order (1965-1998). During that period, the above-mentioned ethnic categories were integrated into several repressive and racist state politics, which reinforced the division into the so-called indigenous, or *pribumi*, population, and non-native, or non-*pribumi*, residents. Moreover, although the slogan *Bhinneka Tunggal Ika* (Unity in Diversity) proclaimed harmonious coexistence of diverse ethnocultural groups, the state strictly controlled the limits of cultural expression in public space, approving of some forms while prohibiting others. For example, the New Order imposed an official ban on many ethnocultural festivals including Thaipusam, traditional Tamil Hindu celebration and the abovementioned Chinese New Year.<sup>4</sup>

The link between the (in)visibility of ethnicity in public space and the state politics of ethnicity during the New Order regime is well researched, especially in regard to Chinese Indonesians (Suryadinata 1997, Freedman 2000, Lindsey & Pausacker 2005, Li 2000; Schlehe 2010). Scholars have argued that the state policy promoting Unity in Diversity deliberately discriminated against Indonesians of Chinese descent. The state assimilation program, which banned all the explicit ethnic markers, such as language, religious celebrations and rituals, to speed up assimilation of Chinese in Indonesia, in fact, continuously reproduced their “otherness.” In the apt words of Heryanto, Chinese identities were “never totally to be wiped out. They are carefully and continually reproduced, but always under erasure” (Heryanto 1998: 104). The administrative regulations required Chinese Indonesians to carry special identity cards and obtain an additional proof of Indonesian citizenship, *Surat Bukti*

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<sup>3</sup> Although *Holi* festival takes roots in ancient Hindu tradition, signifying arrival of spring season, praising fertility of land and, more generally, symbolising victory of good over evil, in modern days the festival is equally popular with Hindu and non-Hindu population of India, so calling *Holi* a Hindu holiday would be misleading.

<sup>4</sup> Ban on celebration of Thaipusam in Medan by Tamil Hindus was imposed in 1973. According to Mani (1993), the ban was requested by the Hindu Temple leaders themselves as they did not want to emphasize any cultural and religious differences and stood for total integration of Tamils into Indonesian society (Mani 1993: 80).

*Kewarganegaraan Republik Indonesia* (Certificate of Citizenship of the Republic of Indonesia). The racial dichotomy between *pribumi* and non-*pribumi* Indonesians, the latter also known as *warga negara Indonesia keturunan* (Indonesian citizens of foreign descent) was fixed by the state laws and regulations.<sup>5</sup> In other words, public invisibility of Chinese and many other ethnic groups in cultural sphere was a result of deliberate discriminatory policy of the military state, which denied minority groups a right for cultural expression.

The fall of Suharto and collapse of the New Order regime in 1998 initiated multiple processes of democratization, with many reforms aimed at ending discrimination and marginalization of various minority groups. The Presidential Decree 26/1998, issued by the Vice-President B.J. Habibie in 1998, and the following Citizenship Law of 2006, abolished the *pribumi* and non-*pribumi* division and made all citizens of Indonesia, who did not hold foreign citizenship, equal before Law (Hoon 2009). At the same time, with the introduction of regional autonomy laws and entailing land reforms originally aiming at decentralizing as well as democratizing processes, local, regional and ethnic identities became again a significant and powerful leverage in disputes over land and resources. Thereby, quite paradoxically, the implementation of the new laws and regulations called into existence the legally abolished division into *pribumi* and non-*pribumi* Indonesians as the commonly accepted means of justifications such as “adat” (traditional law) and “ancestry” were considered to apply to indigenous Indonesians only.<sup>6</sup> Thus, on the one hand, the politics of ethnicity in post-Suharto Indonesia went through considerable transformation, on the other hand, old concepts continued to influence state policies and practices.

The political, social and economic reforms became well reflected in the public sphere. During the first several years (1998–the early 2000s) the images of homogeneous Indonesia in media, literature and cultural performances were replaced by rather nuanced accounts of (and by) various ethnic, religious and social minority groups.<sup>7</sup> Again, the ongoing transformation was particularly visible in regard to the Chinese Indonesian minority. Although first steps towards the visibility of Chinese Indonesian culture were made in the mid-1990s (Heryanto 1998), significant changes took place only after 1998, when the ban on public celebrations of Chinese religious and cultural festivals was officially lifted and *Imlek* was proclaimed a national holiday.<sup>8</sup> This boosted public visibility was quickly interpreted as an acceptance and recognition of Chinese Indonesians as equal citizens of the state. Meanwhile, regardless of reforms encouraging expression of cultural diversity, certain groups continued to remain largely invisible in the national public sphere, and Indonesians of Indian descent were among them.

It should be underlined that apart from being classified and continuously reproduced as non-indigenous Indonesians, Indian and Chinese Indonesian minority groups have more differences between them than similarities. The minorities vary significantly in numbers. Chinese Indonesians are roughly estimated between 0.9 per cent (1.83 million according to

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<sup>5</sup> For a detailed account on the term *warga negara Indonesia keturunan*, or Indonesian citizens of foreign descent, see Hoon (2007).

<sup>6</sup> For more on regional autonomy laws and land reforms and their ethnic aspects see Davidson & Henley (2007), Bouchier (2007), Picard (2005), Tyson (2011), von Benda-Beckmann & von Benda-Beckmann (2011).

<sup>7</sup> For changes in public sphere during the late New Order see Heryanto (2008) & Sen (2006).

<sup>8</sup> For a detailed account on lifting the ban on celebrating *Imlek* and making it a national holiday see Hoon (2009).

the official Census of 2000) and 2–3 per cent (5–6 million).<sup>9</sup> Meanwhile, the Indonesians of Indian origins constitute around 120,000, which is less than 0.01 per cent of the total Indonesian population (Mani 2008). Most importantly, their histories of settlement, their experiences during the colonial and early post-colonial periods, and the different diplomatic relationships of Indonesia with China and India, all set these two minorities apart.

Given the considerable dissimilarities between two ethnocultural groups, the objective of this article is not to compare them but to bring to the fore two very different experiences of negotiating and expressing “foreign” ethnicity in contemporary Indonesia. We also seek to understand the meaning of public (in)visibility of ethnic identities in the post-Reform period. We ask the following questions: Can visibility of ethnic markers in public space be seen as the end of the racist regime? And can ethnic invisibility be still interpreted as the result of discriminatory state politics?

### 3. Emic perspectives on the politics of ethnicity

We start our analysis of the ethnic politics and construction of “foreign” descent, or “otherness,” in contemporary Indonesia by taking a closer look at the everyday experiences of Indonesians of Chinese and Indian origins and their perceptions of ethnic identity. As ethnicity is not a given thing but a process of social negotiation, documenting self-identification is an important step towards understanding ethnic politics and its impact on the everyday life of people.

It is surely not possible to talk about all Indonesians of Chinese and Indian descent due to diversity within these broad categories, so in our research we look at two rather small communities: Chinese Indonesians in Yogyakarta and Indian (Sindhi) Indonesians in Jakarta. Yogyakarta was chosen as a research area for several reasons. First, despite the absence of a closely-knit Chinese Indonesian community, there is a loose network of those who consider themselves as Chinese Indonesians.<sup>10</sup> The public celebration of *Imlek* has been held in Yogyakarta for more than ten years and continues to grow steadily. Moreover, Yogyakarta is multicultural and therefore representative of the complex Indonesian society. Lastly, as a “city of students,” Yogyakarta is promoting itself as an open-minded city, which is often attributed to the wise leadership of the Sultan, a moral as well as a political leader.<sup>11</sup>

The Indian community in Jakarta, which amounts to around 10,000, is among the most numerous and organized local Indian communities in Indonesia.<sup>12</sup> Jakarta is home to one of the oldest community schools, ethnically based business organizations, social clubs and places for religious gatherings (Mani 1993, 2008; Thapan 2002; Myutel 2017). Moreover, in Jakarta several local Indians, who usually keep low profile, have reached the status of

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<sup>9</sup> The number of Chinese Indonesians can be estimated only roughly. This is due to the fact that the first census since 1930, conducted in 2000 mainly relied on self-identification with many Chinese Indonesians probably quite reluctant to declare themselves as such (Mackie 2005). More generally, being “Chinese Indonesian” does not rely on specific characteristics, but on negotiation and therefore can hardly be expressed in total numbers.

<sup>10</sup> After first difficulties of accessing the field, every respondent could refer to someone particularly relevant for studying the Chinese Indonesian community in Yogyakarta. This “snowballing” method excludes certain people, e.g. Chinese Indonesians that do not want to be perceived as such or do not form a part of certain circles. The sample for this article as a part of the wider PhD project encompasses more than fifty formal interviews with Chinese Indonesians of various background, gender, age and class, completed by an uncountable number of informal conversations.

<sup>11</sup> Yogyakarta holds a special autonomy status.

<sup>12</sup> The most numerous communities of local Indians are based in Sumatra. For more see Mani (1993, 2008).

Indonesian public figures/celebrities. Most of them became famous due to their leading role in the industry of mainstream film and soap opera production and distribution (Mani 1993; Myutel 2017). It should be mentioned that the Indian community in Jakarta is largely dominated by Hindu Sindhis, a highly exclusive ethnocultural group, that puts a lot of effort in preserving Sindhi and, more generally, Indian culture. Sindhis practice endogamy, maintain the language, observe Hindu rituals and organize lavish celebrations of traditional Indian holidays, with *Holi* being one of the key events of the community life (Falzon 2004; Markovits 2000). The community of Jakartan Sindhis forms the core of this study.

Our initial contacts with the Chinese Indonesian community in Yogyakarta revealed that most Chinese Indonesians were very reluctant to speak about their Chinese descent with a stranger whose intentions they did not know well. The conversations then often started with everyday topics, without referring to personal experiences. Even when some respondents took a more personal perspective, they claimed that since the fall of Suharto's regime their "Chineseness" ("ketionghoan") no longer affected their lives. The respondents usually stated that since the legal recognition of Confucianism and Chinese Indonesian culture by President Abdurrahman Wahid (commonly called Gus Dur) and subsequent President Megawati Sukarnoputri, they did not experience discrimination. One respondent, Pak Edhi, admitted that there were some incidents triggered by riots that then affected the Chinese Indonesian community, but then added that this was what usually happened when people learnt to live together as one nation. He suggested that since Gus Dur and Megawati publicly expressed how much they valued the Chinese Indonesian community, the community experienced no adverse effects.<sup>13</sup>

It was possible to get beyond such rather common sense statements though. Despite the official recognition of Confucianism as one of the religions professed in Indonesia and Chinese Indonesian tradition as part of national culture, Chinese Indonesians (younger and older alike<sup>14</sup>) have continued experiencing racism in everyday lives. The massacres of 1965, the racist New Order regime and the violent ethnic conflict of 1998<sup>15</sup> left deep emotional scars, particularly on older generations, although the respondents did not express their grievances about racist treatment explicitly:

*"Chinese Indonesians became victims [during the Suharto regime], because the Indonesian government of Suharto wasn't happy with China. He [Suharto] froze diplomatic relations. Within the country [Indonesia], he banned Chinese characters, Chinese language and Chinese culture. So we, who had become Indonesian citizens, were the actual victims. [...] Honestly, my group was always a little repressed, also before the Suharto government, from the 1950s to 1966"* (Pak Tommy, personal communication, 13 February 2011).

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<sup>13</sup> All respondents' names are pseudonyms. Interviews conducted in English are quoted verbatim. Interviews conducted in Indonesian language are translated by the authors with E. Sandkühler translating interviews taken in Yogyakarta, and M. Myutel translating interviews conducted in Jakarta.

<sup>14</sup> This very general differentiation is based on the fact that the older generation are those respondents that have consciously experienced the massacres of 1965 and the New Order regime and its breakdown in 1998. The so-called younger generation includes the respondents who were born in the late 1980s and had no personal memories of the social unrest and ethnic violence of 1998.

<sup>15</sup> The times of regime change in 1965 and 1998 were accompanied by massive violence outbreaks against Chinese Indonesians. In 1965 a failed putative communist coup was used as a pretext to assault Chinese Indonesians, who were generally suspected of being communists. In 1998 especially Chinese Indonesian women suffered from assault and rape (cf. amongst others Simanjorang 2007, Strassler 2004).



Although younger people in Yogyakarta did not live through physical and psychological violence as did older generations, they also experienced racist treatment, often being teased for their “slit eyes” and asked to pay higher fees for public services.

*“When I came to Sardjito [the biggest public hospital in Yogyakarta], they [public servants] did not give me respect [....] Whenever they looked at me, they did not express the warm attitude. Instead they were rather cold [....] I spoke Javanese [language], but they still could look at my face. My face is really Chinese (“cina”). Usually one needs to pay 25,000 Rupiah [for ID card]. I paid 300,000, and the process was very long. It took two or three weeks. They said if you want it faster, you have to pay more. How much? You pay one million” (Edwin, personal communication, 5 February 2011).*

These experiences continue to have a traumatic impact on Chinese Indonesians, and their relationship with the so called *pribumi*. Because of this treatment Chinese Indonesians minimize contacts with *pribumi* and practice extreme caution during occasional interactions that happened to take place. Most Chinese Indonesians still experience prejudice owing to their descent or their “blood,” as most respondents put it.

Unlike Chinese Indonesians in Yogyakarta, Jakartan Indians, and more specifically Sindhis, spoke freely about their origins and their cultural differences. Moreover, they usually characterized their life in Indonesia as very comfortable and safe. Jakartan Sindhis talked about themselves and their descent in two major ways: those in their late thirties and older usually called themselves Indians born and raised in Indonesia. Younger Sindhis, third or even fourth generation of migrants, preferred identifying themselves as Indonesians brought up in the Indian culture. Both older and younger generations underlined their difference from non-Indian Indonesians and expressed pride in their Indian roots.

According to the respondents, their feeling of difference was nurtured by the local Indian community and strengthened in everyday encounters with non-Indian Indonesians: *“Here [in Indonesia] it’s automatic: when people look at you, they look at you as you are a foreigner” (Reena, personal communication, 6 March 2013).* At the same time, the community members themselves put a lot of effort in preserving Indian culture:

*“I grew up in the Indian family. I did all the Indian stuff you could imagine. I did Indian Saturday temple learning. I did Sunday school for five years of my life. I’m a vegetarian on Mondays as Monday is a Shiv Mandir day. I can play tabla, sing bhajans. I can do everything [Indian]”<sup>16</sup> (Nagesh, personal communication, 17 April 2013).*

Another respondent, a woman in her forties, formulated the essence of her Indianness in a similar way by saying that it was the Hindi language, food, music, as well as religious rituals and traditions that made her culturally more Indian than Indonesian. Thus, India is present in everyday life of Jakartan Sindhis as a constant cultural reference, continuously underlying the distinctiveness (which often takes the form of superiority) of Indian Indonesians from other Indonesian citizens.

The differences with the majority of local population be it in cultural practices or physical appearance do not cause discomfort for Indian Indonesians in Jakarta. In fact, many consider life in the capital “too comfortable.” It is very common among the community members to send children abroad for a couple of years, to “shake them up” as the respondents often put

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<sup>16</sup> *Bhajans* are devotional Hindu songs.

it, i.e. to show them another — a less rosy — side of life. After spending a few years in overseas schools and colleges, Indian Indonesians usually come back to Jakarta, which, despite their “roots and routes” they call home. And Home, as Ignatieff (2001) pointed out, is about feeling safe. Many respondents insisted that if safety were a concern, they would not settle in Indonesia. As one of the respondents put it: “*I think we got the best of both worlds [Indonesia and India]. Whenever I want to be Indian I’m Indian, whenever I want to be Indonesian I’m Indonesian*” (Priya, personal communication, 30 January 2013).

In the last several decades (since the late 1960s) the community members felt unsafe only during the period of the prolonged social unrest caused by the economic and political crisis of 1997–1998. Many left Indonesia for several weeks. Those who stayed remembered that:

“It became a little shaky as we were not sure where we stood. Would they [rioters] look at us as *pribumi* — no; as representatives of Chinese — not really.... I live in Sunter so all my neighbors are Chinese, and a couple of Indians left and right around there. And we had to shut our gates. All guys stood outside the whole night with golf sticks and cricket bats. I remember [that] my mom wrote something in Sindhi because Sindhi [script] is very close to Arabic and stuck it outside of our door. I think there was some fear” (Sandesh, personal communication, 1 February 2013)

The Indian community in Jakarta was, however, neither considerably reshaped, nor seriously traumatized by the riots. Those who fled the country during the crisis, returned to Jakarta as soon as the political situation stabilized.

The accounts of the everyday experiences show that Indian and Chinese Indonesians do feel different from the so-called *pribumi* Indonesians. There is, however, a significant discrepancy in the evaluation of this difference. In everyday life Indian Indonesians do not see their ethnocultural identity as a problem. Quite on the contrary, they eagerly reproduce their cultural distinctiveness through religious and educational practices. Meanwhile, for Chinese Indonesians their “origins” make them feel insecure and discriminated against. In this context, the celebrations of *Imlek* and *Holi* reveal a rather paradoxical situation: those who feel secure and comfortable within the Indonesian multicultural setting, i.e. Indian Indonesians, do not visibly promote their ethnicity, while those who feel discriminated, i.e. Chinese Indonesians, overtly display unequivocal ethnicity markers. The description and analysis of the festivals’ organization seeks to explain this paradox and offer a new interpretation of (in)visibility of ethnicity in public space.

## 4. The festivals

### 4.1. Celebration of *Imlek* in Yogyakarta

#### **Description of the festival**



Figure 4 Decorations during the Lunar New Year

*Pekan Budaya Tionghoa Yogyakarta* (Chinese Indonesian Culture Week, henceforth PBTY) is the main event of the public Chinese New Year celebration in Yogyakarta. In 2012 the PBTY took place in *Kampung Ketanden*. While not popular among tourists throughout the year, *Kampung Ketanden*, the main residence of Chinese Indonesians in Yogyakarta, turns into a busy area during the celebration. The entrance gate of the *Kampung*, decorated for the special occasion, easily captures the attention of passers-by, inviting them to dive into a festive atmosphere of Chinese New Year. No admission fees are imposed on the visitors.

The 2012 motto of the PBTY was *Mengukuhkan Kebhinekaan Yogyakarta*, (Acknowledging the Diversity of Yogyakarta). The focus on diversity is reflected in different parts of the festival. Indeed, the kickoff event offered a diverse program featuring Javanese, Chinese and other ethnic-inspired dances, theatre and music performances. Visitors could also enjoy a variety of cuisines, from Javanese street food to Chinese culinary delights (mostly without pork though). Other attractions included stalls with Lunar New Year decorations and fabrics, consultations with paranormal specialists (Schlehe 2014), traditional massage and acupuncture, as well as booths providing information on bilingual (Indonesian and Mandarin) schools in Yogyakarta. There were also *Potehi* performances in Indonesian language and a Karaoke contest.<sup>17</sup>

The festival organizers obviously targeted quite a large and diverse audience, not only Chinese Indonesians residing in Yogyakarta. With the exception of the opening ceremony, an invitation-only event attended by the heads of Chinese Indonesian associations and the city political elites, the festival events attracted a big non-Chinese Indonesian crowd. One could observe large groups of women and men, possibly Muslim, walking around, shopping and eating at the food stalls.<sup>18</sup> Most people seemed to be wearing everyday clothes, but some were wearing “Shanghai” dresses, and children, not necessarily with a Chinese Indonesian background, often wore t-shirts with *Imlek*- or “Chinese”-inspired imprints. Thus, despite the

<sup>17</sup> *Potehi* is a traditional puppet theatre based on the popular Chinese myths and stories. Performed mostly in Chinese temples, *potehi* were banned by the New Order regime.

<sup>18</sup> Being Chinese Indonesian and Muslim should not be understood as mutually exclusive categories, as there is a small number of Chinese Indonesian Muslims. Nevertheless, the here-mentioned Muslims did not seem to be part of the Chinese Indonesian community.

fact that the red and gold putative “Chinese” cultural markers could be seen everywhere (see the picture above), the PBTY presented itself as an open, non-exclusive space offering a wide range of attractions for everyone irrespective of ethnicity, religion, gender or age.

The Chinese Indonesian ethnic markers were particularly visible during the closing parade, the main attraction of the PBTY. For several hours, thousands of people had an opportunity to enjoy *liong* and art performances prepared by the Chinese Indonesian associations, parading through Malioboro, the main street of Yogyakarta. Unlike other PBTY events, the parade was widely covered by the local media. The Yogyakarta Dragon Festival, a competition among lion dance groups for the *Piala Raja* (The Sultan’s Trophy), a trophy worth approximately US\$2,500, received the most attention of the journalists.<sup>19</sup> *Liong* performances, seen as a typical Chinese Indonesian art form, with only a very few groups of non-Chinese Indonesian background participating, created a very “Chinese” atmosphere in the touristic heart of the city.

### ***The objective of the PBTY organizers***

The main organizer of the PBTY is the Yogyakarta Chinese Art and Culture Center (henceforth JCACC), which brings together the heads of most Chinese Indonesian organizations in Yogyakarta. Every year one organization is appointed director of the PBTY event. Additionally, for the last several years, the wife of the mayor, Ibu Anna, has been the patroness of the event. The head of the JCACC and two people concerned with cultural matters (*budayawan*) of Yogyakarta are, however, the main figures behind the organization, and they chose the motto “Acknowledging the Diversity of Yogyakarta.” Curiously enough, the driving force for developing the motto was the only non-Chinese Indonesian member of the organizing committee and one of the few women involved in the management process. In a conversation with one of the authors, Ibu Anggie explained that it was a little surprising to her that she was often asked for an idea for the PBTY motto, and she wondered why others could not think of a suitable motto. In general, it was important to her that the PBTY should not be regarded as entertainment but rather as a cultural event. In her own words, commitment to culture was one of the main reasons why Ibu Anggie volunteered for the festival. Similarly, the head of the JCACC, Pak Harry, is also known for his interest in promoting Chinese Indonesian culture. For him art and culture are the only ways to achieve social harmony, and this he sees as the main possible accomplishment of the PBTY. Pak Harry is also actively involved in the rituals of the *Imlek* celebration, such as asking for blessings in a *klenteng* (Chinese temple) prior to *liong* performances.

The official statements by the Yogyakarta political elite shed some light on their understanding of culture. At the opening ceremony Ibu Anna stated that:

*“With the motto we try to show the richness of Yogyakarta, which means cooperation, friendliness and harmony. There is not only Chinese Indonesian culture in this event. The event cannot be enjoyed only by people of Chinese descent but there is also national culture that can be enjoyed by everyone in our society. The aims of the event are the following: 1. Perform the tradition of Imlek for those who celebrate; 2. Preserve and promote the Chinese Indonesian culture as one of the components of the Indonesian nation that exists in Yogyakarta; 3. Inform the society about the Chinese Indonesian traditions and*

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<sup>19</sup> cf. *Harian Yogyakarta*, 6 February 2012, 13,19; *Kedaulatan Rakyat*, 6 February 2012, p.12; *Bernas Yogyakarta*, 7 February 2012, p. 8; *Radar Yogyakarta*, 7 February 2012, p. 4.

culture; 4. Support regional tourism and help to increase the income of the wider community; 5. Strengthen Yogyakarta as a cultural city that is hospitable, cooperative, friendly and safe” (Ibu Anna, 2 February 2012).

The multicultural aspect of the PBTY stands out in this statement. Implicitly Ibu Anna also underlines that the event must acknowledge other national cultures as well. The national culture is somehow constructed as the “other” of Chinese Indonesian culture, which actually contradicts the claims for harmony and multiculturalism. A closer analysis of the festival program reveals that the featured multiculturalism is not as strongly represented as claimed. Only one out of sixteen performances during the kickoff event can be considered as part of non-Chinese Indonesian national culture. During the parade through Malioboro only two out of twenty-nine groups were of non-Chinese Indonesian background, namely *Jatilan* (a traditional Javanese dance) and the WARIA (transgender) and it is doubtful if the transgender WARIA would really be considered as representing national culture by most political officials under different circumstances. This is not to say that multicultural elements were not present during the PBTY. The point here is that for the political elite it seemed impossible to present PBTY in a positive light without referring to its multiculturalism.

Ibu Anna also points to the fact that large-scale *Imlek* celebrations boost the attractiveness of Yogyakarta for tourists, which means additional income for the city. Interestingly, the speech of the Sultan, the governor of Yogyakarta Special Region, was the only one that did not align with these opportunistic argumentations. However, despite acknowledging the significant role of the Chinese Indonesian community in the history of the Indonesian nation, the Sultan’s choice of words revealed an essentialist division between *asli* (real, original) Indonesian and Chinese Indonesian cultures: “Out of the contiguity of different cultures originates a melting pot, where the Chinese Indonesian culture mixes with and joins the original culture [...]” (Sultan Hamengkubuwono X., at the occasion of the PBTY opening, 2 February 2012). All of these meanings ascribed to the PBTY by the organizers as well as the political elite exhibit different interpretations of the role of ethnicity and its visibility within the very same event, which will be elaborated in the following chapter.

### **Discussion: *Imlek* and the (in)visibility of ethnicity**

The public celebration of *Imlek* in Yogyakarta includes an extensive exposure of stereotypical Chinese Indonesian ethnicity markers such as red and gold colors and *barongsai* and *liong* performances. Nevertheless, within this “Chinese” ambience there is space for interethnic contact due to the diversity of attractions appealing to many kinds of visitors.

At first glance, there is no apparent difference between the actual celebrations and the interpretation of the event by the city officials. A closer look reveals something different. The officials’ statements show that Chinese Indonesian culture is opposed to “original,” or “genuine” Indonesian culture. This process of othering goes hand in hand with the political agenda of promoting Yogyakarta as an integrative, multicultural city. Thus, Chinese Indonesian ethnicity is constructed as the “other culture” welcomed by “the hospitable and friendly” city of Yogyakarta. The visibility of ethnicity becomes a “place marketing tool” (Waite 2008: 515) to attract tourists and investment flows. As the city officials commodify visible ethnicity, the Chinese Indonesians lose the opportunity to publicly define Chinese Indonesian culture themselves. This observation is underlined by the fact that many Chinese Indonesians still feel insecure and powerless in situations of interethnic encounter.

On the other hand, it cannot be forgotten that the celebrations also make it possible to overcome interethnic difficulties. In the PBTY celebrations explicit Chinese Indonesian symbols are displayed in public. The PBTY also now recognizes such cultural activities as asking for blessings in *klenteng*, which was not possible previously, and thus could be considered as marking an important shift from helplessness to hope for self-determination.

One could even argue that Chinese Indonesians of Yogyakarta have become visible political actors exhibiting their ethnicity. Some members of the Chinese Indonesian community in Yogyakarta saw the festival as a (positive) form of exclusive identity and self-definition. As mentioned before, the opening ceremony was not a publicly accessible event, but mostly limited to the members of the Chinese Indonesian community in Yogyakarta. Nevertheless, the visibility of Chinese Indonesian ethnicity during *Imlek* seems to be an expression of the politics of ethnicity played out *on* and not *by* Chinese Indonesians of Yogyakarta.

## 4.2. The festival of Holi in Jakarta

### **Description of the festival**

In 2013 the *Holi Hai* festival in Jakarta took place in one of the outdoor sectors of the biggest Expo center (PRJ Kemayoran), located in the Northern part of the capital. As the territory of the Expo center is enclosed, the celebration cannot be seen from the outside. Admission was based on the entry fees of 100,000 Rupiah (roughly US\$10).

In 2013 approximately two thousand people attended the festival with Indian Indonesians constituting the majority of the visitors. Expatriate Indians, foreigners and non-Indian Indonesians made up less than 10 per cent of all participants.<sup>20</sup> Expatriate Indians were easily recognized in the crowd: while Indian Indonesians were wearing shorts and t-shirts, expats came to the festival wearing *shalwal kamis*, a traditional outfit of South Asia, consisting of pantaloons and a body shirt. Other foreigners, mainly Koreans and Filipinos, were the classmates of Indian Indonesians studying in Jakarta International and Gandhi International Schools.<sup>21</sup> Most of the local non-Indian Indonesians were nannies/babysitters accompanying children of Indian Indonesian families. The nannies rather obviously felt out of place.

The color play, as it could be expected, was the main activity during the festival. Most of the visitors came well-equipped for the game carrying water guns and paints. Colorful powder was also available at the entrance so all guests had a chance to join the color fight even if they did not prepare for it in advance. The key moment of the festival was a Bollywood inspired dance performed by the teenage girls and community choreographers in an improvised circle formed by the cheering audience.<sup>22</sup> The cultural program also included the performances of school children presenting regional Indian dances. Besides that, the guests could enjoy non-culture specific activities like flying fox, roller balls, and rowing boats.

Apart from the *Holi* play and Indian dances, there were other “overt signs and symbols” of Indian culture. The “soundscape of the festival” (Duffy 2000) was dominated by the latest

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<sup>20</sup> Expat Indians and local Indians are two different communities that usually do not mingle with each other. Expat Indians have their own celebration of *Holi*, organized out of town in fancy hotels booked over the weekend. The program includes dinner on Saturday night, *Holi* play and a festive lunch at the hotel on Sunday.

<sup>21</sup> From 2014 onwards Jakarta International School is known as Jakarta Intercultural School.

<sup>22</sup> The community choreographers are well-known and respected as they are responsible for staging dance performances for the main community events — the community weddings.

Bollywood hits with few international pop hits occasionally interrupting the flow. The stalls, mostly promoting small businesses of Indian Indonesian women displayed stereotypical symbols of Indian culture, i.e. Ganesha with his chariot *Mushika*, pictures of Taj Mahal mausoleum and Om signs.

Food booths had both vegetarian and non-vegetarian options. Along with Indian snacks and dishes (*samosa*, chicken *tikka*, Mysore mutton), the guests could indulge themselves in Indonesian street food, such as *soto*, *sate* and *gorengan*, Hong Kong noodles, Italian focaccia, American burgers and Cream and Fudge ice cream.<sup>23</sup> The kiosks selling beverages offered both non-alcoholic and alcoholic beverages, but *bhang lassi*, a yoghurt drink mixed with cannabis leaves, a common, even traditional, element of *Holi* celebration in India, was not offered in Jakarta.



Figure 5 Festive crowd during the Holi celebration 2013. Courtesy of Da Difference, the organizer of Holi Hei in Jakarta.

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<sup>23</sup> *Soto* is a traditional Indonesian soup with broth, meat and vegetables; *sate* is a dish of seasoned, skewered and grilled meat, served with sauce; *gorengan* are fritters filled with vegetables, tofu, seafood or other similar ingredients.

## ***The aim of Holi Hai festival organizers***

Since the first celebrations of *Holi* in Jakarta (the late 1940s), the organizers saw the main aim of the festival in bringing the otherwise diverse and divided community of local Indians together and constructing a pan-Indian identity in an Indonesian environment. As one of the oldest and most beautiful Indian festivals widely celebrated by Hindus and non-Hindus alike, and as a festival, which disregards all socially constructed barriers, be it religion, caste, gender or age, *Holi* was a perfect occasion to unify the community. As years passed, the celebration acquired some other meanings: for elders the festival was also about nostalgia for “the green days spent in India,” while for youngsters, born in Indonesia, playing *Holi* was living through the scenes of their favorite Indian (and later Bollywood) movies.

In Jakarta the organization of *Holi* has always been in the hands of the Sindhi community, the most numerous and wealthiest ethnic group within the bigger local Indian community of Jakarta. For half a century, the organizer and the host of the celebration was Gandhi Memorial School (henceforth GMS), an educational institution founded in the early 1950s by the Sindhi business organization (Bombay Merchant Association, currently known as Gandhi Seva Loka). Held within the school premises, the festival was a very intimate, exclusionist celebration being limited to the local Indian community members.

In 2010 the organizers took the celebration out of the GMS walls, brought it to an outdoor area (Jakarta Expo) and opened admission to a wider public. These substantial changes did not, however, alter the main philosophy behind the celebration. *Holi*, as an Indian cultural festival, as an event celebrating and recreating Indianness, remained largely inaccessible for non-Indian Indonesians. For a wider, non-Indian audience, largely imagined by the organizers as middle-class families, the festival was marketed as a “Colorful family fun day for all ages.” No cultural or ethnic references were made in the promo materials targeting potential visitors with a non-Indian background.<sup>24</sup>

## ***Discussion: Holi and invisibility of ethnicity***

We argue that the erasure of Indian ethnocultural elements in promotional campaigns of the *Holi* festival is a deliberate construction of Indianness as an exclusive ethnic identity, different, if not superior, to the Indonesian national self. Even with some openness of the festival to the general public, Jakartan Sindhis continue the tradition established by the GMS — the practice of treating India-related holidays as a tool of distinction and exclusion. Invisibility of Indian ethnicity in promotional materials targeting a non-Indian Indonesian audience is not a result of racism towards and marginalization of the Indian ethnic minority. Quite on the contrary, invisibility is rooted in the desire of the community to stay in charge of ethnicity production.

The disjuncture between the way the festival is promoted by the organizers and the way it is celebrated shows that not using Indianness as a selling point is a deliberate decision of organizers. For Indian Indonesians *Holi* continues to play an important role in creating and maintaining the Indian part of their identity. For example, demonstration of familiarity with, if not expertise in, the latest Bollywood songs and dance routines is a significant part of the celebration. But by promoting *Holi* as a family fun day, the organizers are not inviting the

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<sup>24</sup> *Holi* promo campaign is limited to the small radio stations, internet sites and two or three banners in the area of Kemayoran, North Jakarta.



wider public to share this Indian cultural experience. They offer the potential audiences a culturally neutral event.

The organizers did not change the *Holi* promo campaign even after the international entertainment business, which appropriated the color play element of *Holi* for its events, such as *Color Water Play* and *Color Run*, reached Jakarta in 2014. Despite strong competition the organizing committee continued positioning *Holi Hai* as a family event, obviously avoiding capitalizing on the distinct ethnic and cultural features of the festival. The advertisement for *Holi Hai VI* posted on different sites promoting Jakartan cultural events in 2015 stated that:

*“Holi Hai is still with the same concept, which is a family event where everyone of all ages can have fun with Holi (color) powder ...HOLI HAI FESTIVAL JAKARTA is the first and original Holi Festival in Jakarta. It’s not a rave party. It’s not a sport event. It’s Holi Hai Festival.”*<sup>25</sup>

The refusal of organizers to build a promotional campaign around their Indianness in the presence of the growing competition only underlines that invisibility of ethnic elements in the materials targeting non-Indian audience is a conscious decision made by people who in their daily lives have positive experience of their ethnic differences.

## 5. Conclusion

This article pursued two major goals. First, our concern was to discuss differences in production and negotiation of “foreign” ethnic descent in contemporary Indonesia. Second, we sought to deepen our understanding of how ethnic (in)visibility is interrelated with the everyday politics of ethnicity. We started by showing that for *Imlek* celebrations the ethnic markers, often presented stereotypically (red and gold colors, lion dance, etc.) were made very visible both in the promotional campaign and the festive celebration itself. Meanwhile, *Holi* was marketed for the non-Indian public as a culture-neutral event, with no ethnic elements being included in flyers and banners advertising the festival.

To understand the interrelation between ethnic invisibility and the politics of ethnicity we focused on two aspects: the everyday experiences of Indian and Chinese Indonesians as ethnic minorities, and the organization of the ethnic-themed festivals. Our analysis of everyday experiences showed that Indonesians of Chinese and Indian descent are (made) aware of their differences in daily interactions with other Indonesians. But while for Chinese Indonesians these differences are a source of insecurity and feeling of being an unequal part of the Indonesian self, for Indonesians of Indian descent ethnocultural distinctiveness does not cause discomfort. On the contrary, Indian Indonesians perceive their differences as a marker of distinction, even cultural superiority. Further discussion of the ethnic festivals showed that both minorities have very different connection to and influence on the organization of festive events. While Indian Indonesians remain, by and large, in full control of the festival organization and thus, production and display of their ethnicity, Indonesians of Chinese descent have to negotiate with several parties and are restricted through different factors. In fact, the intentional visibility only reinforces the image of Chineseness as a “foreign element” in the Indonesian multicultural society.

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<sup>25</sup> The changes were initiated by the younger generation of Sindhis (the third generation of migrants). In 2010 the GMS Board transferred authority over festival organization to a small private company *Da Difference* owned by a young Sindhi entrepreneur, Perry Topandasani.

Juxtaposition of respondents' perceptions of their own ethnic identity with the representations of ethnicity during public celebrations and the factors contributing to the (in)visibility of ethnic markers, brought us to the following conclusion: in post-reform Indonesia the visibility of ethnic minorities in public space can be seen as a result of marginalization, not acceptance; it is a process of continuing estrangement and appropriation of ethnicity by the state,. Meanwhile, invisibility of ethnic markers is not necessarily a response to the pressures of integration and assimilation, but, quite the contrary, can be rooted in the intentions of an ethnic minority to preserve ethnic distinctiveness.

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