

Buddha Bar in Indonesia: Can Religious Symbols Be Employed as a Unique Selling Point?

Ike Janita Dewi

In March 2009, Jakarta faced a sensitive religious issue, one that was potentially embarrassing. A group known as the Buddhist Students' Alliance held a street protest against Buddha Bar, a bar/restaurant famous for its trademark lounge music and Orientalist interior design centered on images of the Buddha. More than 100 members of the Alliance sealed off the bar by draping a yellow line across the bar's entrance to protest the establishment's use of the name and image of Buddha. The Alliance, which claimed to be the voice of Indonesian Buddhists, justified their obstruction of the bar which they said caused humiliation among Buddhists and hurt their sensibilities.¹

The protesters said "Buddha" was a holy name and should not be linked with an entertainment venue like a bar. "Sealing off the bar was a move by our friends who wanted the Buddha positioned appropriately," said Gatot Sukarno Adi, deputy secretary-general of Walubi, the Indonesian federation of Buddhist organizations. He added that the controversy broke out because the government did not notify the Buddhist community before granting permits for the bar. "The government should have informed us before issuing the permits, to ask whether it was acceptable for us," Gatot said.²

Buddha Bar Jakarta, a local branch of Buddha Bar International, has been embroiled in religious controversy from the day it opened. The bar was accused of using Buddhist sacred symbols inappropriately since it sold alcoholic drinks, which Buddhist teaching forbids. There had been other commercial products in Indonesia that made use of religious symbols one way or another, and some of them had also caused serious controversy. The

tumult surrounding the use of Buddha's name and image in the Buddha Bar was the newest in a long list of cases in Indonesia in which religious sensibilities were stirred up.



Protests against Buddha Bar Indonesia on March 5, 2009³

Buddha Bar International

Buddha Bar has opened fourteen branches around the world, in cities such as Beirut, Paris, London, New York, Dubai, Sao Paulo, Kiev, Dublin, Cairo, Prague, Monaco, and Washington. "Buddha Bar" is also the name of a music CD compilation sold under the same brand. The Paris-based George V Entertainment, which also owns a global chain of hotels, spas, restaurants, and boutiques, is the franchisor of the Buddha Bar. It uses various names of the Buddha in its Buddha Bar product range, namely, Siddharta Café (Prague), Little Buddha Café (Las Vegas, Sharm El Sheikh, Hurgharda, Amsterdam, and Vienna), and Buddhattitude Spa (Paris and Bucharest).⁴ The group also owns Buddha Bar hotels in Budapest, Prague, and

Panama.⁵ Buddha Bar Indonesia is the fourteenth branch, launched in November 2008, and the first one that faced court action for using the Buddha as a brand name and design element.



Inside Buddha Bar Indonesia⁶

Different Facets of the Controversy

Aside from the religious issue surrounding the Buddha Bar in Jakarta, several other elements contributed to the controversy. One is the question of ownership and propriety. Several prominent personages belonging to politically influential families were rumored to be part of the group running the bar.⁷ There had been some questions as to possible conflicts of interest when the city administration, which owns the building that would later become the site of the bar, favored this group over others to lease the structure. The building itself was purchased by the city government in 2002, and has high historical value and is considered a national heritage site. A connected problem had to do with the questionable legality of the city administration's permission to allow a private company to lease the building for commercial and entertainment purposes, when the government originally purchased the structure with the intent to turn it into a public museum.⁸

The deputy governor of Jakarta, Prijanto, said that the permit for Buddha Bar was completely legal since it was given by the Department of Culture and Tourism after

consulting with three Buddhist organizations in Jakarta, namely, Forum Komunikasi Umat Buddha DKI Jakarta (Communication Forum of Buddhist Society in Jakarta), Generasi Muda Mahayana Indonesia (The Youth of Mahayana Indonesia), and Majelis Agama Budha Mahayana Indonesia DPD DKI Jakarta (Buddha Mahayana Council Indonesia, Jakarta Sub-Council)—all of whom supposedly approved of the move.

Different Views from Different Buddhist Groups

Different Buddhist organizations in Indonesia have actually stated different opinions on the matter. In response to the Buddha Bar issue, the Sangha Mahayana Indonesia—a group of more than a hundred Indonesian Buddhist monks that functions as the guardian of the Buddhist Mahayana teachings in the mostly Muslim country—issued an edict reminding Indonesian Buddhists that drinking alcohol is forbidden.

Several other Buddhist organizations (including the aforementioned Walubi) demanded that Buddha Bar be closed down. They were the ones that formed an alliance and sealed off Buddha Bar (as was mentioned earlier). They called for a much larger scale of protests if the government did not shut down Buddha Bar.

However, other Buddhist organizations deemed the act of sealing off the bar as merely an expression of disappointment, and “not a Buddhist act.” Alim Sudio, secretary-general of the Indonesian Pandita Sabha Buddha Dharma Foundation, said that sealing off the bar was not the Buddhist way of seeking a solution. “Our way is never to force anything. A dialogue is needed,” he remarked. Alim said an open dialogue between representatives of Buddhist groups, the government, and the bar's owners had to be arranged. “The Buddha Bar management also has to be given a chance to have a say,” said the Buddhist monk.⁹

Another Buddhist organization, the Youth of Mahayana Indonesia, even questioned the underlying reason for the protests against Buddha Bar. “We have seen many Buddha

statues placed on the streets and hotels, why didn't we protest against them? Why were the protests leveled only at Buddha Bar?" said Budiman Sudharma, the leader of the organization. He asked the Buddhists to refrain from emotionally-charged responses to such issues.¹⁰

Further, Lieus Sungkharisma, chair of the Advisory Council of Buddhist Youth Indonesia (Gemabudhi) stated that the radical ways chosen by some Buddhists to respond to the affair ran contrary to the fundamental teachings of Buddhism. He said, "There are many other, better ways to express opinions." He added that Buddhists should learn to be more patient and forgiving, noting that Buddha himself always taught his believers to clear their minds to avoid any emotional acts against anybody. Lieus Sungkharisma therefore discouraged any street protests demanding the closing of Buddha Bar, appealing instead to all Buddhists in Indonesia to calm down and solve the problems according to law and regulations. Lieus Sungkharisma also stated his opinion that the use of Buddha's name for a restaurant was acceptable, arguing that the tourism industry in Indonesia had also been using Buddhist symbols extensively. There were, for example, a Borobudur (a Buddhist temple) Restaurant and a Borobudur Hotel. "The use of Buddhist names can even popularize Buddhism further; so as long as the Buddha statues in Buddha Bar are well taken care of, there should not be an accusation of religious blasphemy," he added.¹¹

The Use of Sacred Religious Symbols as Unique Selling Points

Religion has always been an important ingredient in forming the Indonesian people's identities, and marketers for the longest time have recognized this as an opportunity. Indonesian marketers have long employed religious elements to be an important product attribute. Customers find value in products that have religious associations, which can differentiate particular products from competitors. For marketers, the tighter the people hold

on to their religion, the more so it becomes a Unique Selling Point (USP). This is why more and more Indonesian products have made use of religious or sacred elements in their packaging. Observe the following examples of brand names: “Moslem’s Housing and Residency,” “Islamic Toothpaste,” “Islamic or Shari’a Banking,” “Wishnu Computer,” “Borobudur Plaza,” “Christian Housing and Residency,” etc.

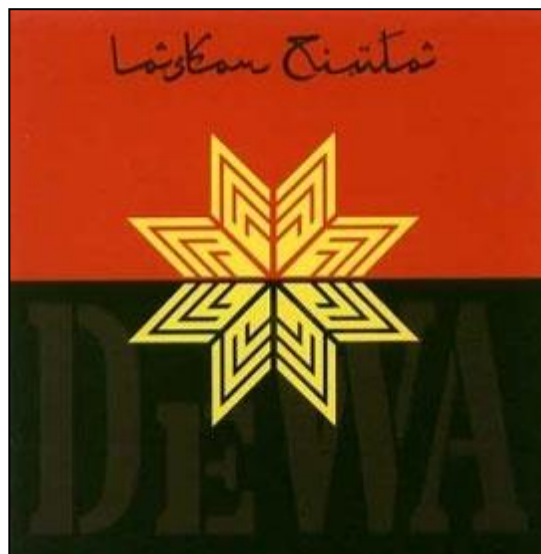
Some of the uses of religious or sacred symbols have resulted in controversies, from minor to major ones. In 2003 Dewi Lestari, a young writer, was sued by Forum Intelektual Muda Hindu Dharma (Hindu Dharma Young Intellectuals), a Hindu organization, for a novel she had written, which featured the sacred “OM” character (*Om*) in its cover. As the cross is to Christians, OM is to Hindus. The organization thus thought that the use of the sacred character in the cover of a novel was inappropriate. The publisher agreed to withdraw all the books from the market and remove the character from the book cover. That was the end of that controversy.¹²

Another case occurred in 2004 when a picture of Wishnu was used to illustrate a song title in an album by Iwan Fals. He composed a song entitled “*Manusia Setengah Dewa*” (“Half-Man and Half-God”) which was then provided an illustration using a figure resembling Wishnu. A Hindu community protested against this, which they thought was a profane use of the Hindu divinity. The controversy, however, ended relatively quickly since several other Hindu organizations and some influential Hindu figures supported Iwan Fals. They said that the use of the symbol was acceptable. Still, the recording company in deference agreed to stop the production of the album cover, but would not withdraw the CDs already distributed in the market.¹³



The Cover of the Music Album “Half- Man and Half-God” which depicts the Wishnu God¹⁴

A third case occurred in April 2005, when another music album, entitled “*Laskar Cinta*” (“Soldiers of Love”) by a group called Dewa, featured an illustration that used calligraphy resembling the word “Allah” in Arabic characters. The protest was initiated by a radical Moslem organization, Front Pembela Islam (Defending Islam Frontage), and supported by several other Islamic organizations. The protesters demanded Dewa to publicly apologize for the mistake they committed, withdraw all the albums already distributed in the market, and replace the album illustrations. The case was resolved quickly when the group and the recording company fulfilled all of the protesters’ demands.¹⁵



The cover of the Music Album “Soldiers of Love” depicting calligraphy resembling the word “*Lafdhul Jalalah*” (Allah or God)¹⁶

The Buddha Bar controversy seems to be another chapter in the history of the Indonesian people's non-acceptance of the use of religious symbols for commercial purposes. Even though the parties involved in the different cases mentioned earlier did not seem to intentionally insult any of the religions, they still attempted to bring sacred symbols into the domain of the profane. In search of product differentiation, marketers have always looked for unique things which products can feature in order to secure unique positioning within the market.

Since bars and restaurants can no longer be differentiated based merely on the products they sell, it is the artistic design of the venue that has become their Point-of-Difference (POD). The artistic design of a restaurant or bar can satisfy the needs of people with so-called "new lifestyles," who eat and drink not only to satisfy their hunger or to quench their thirsts, but also to enjoy the trendy atmosphere of a venue.¹⁷ The food, the drinks, and the space where people can enjoy them are now packaged in such a way as to offer premium product offering. Here the functional attributes are valued less compared to the symbolic benefits created by the total product offering. Consumption has become a way to create and communicate consumers' identity, that is, to differentiate themselves from common people. The products that people consume have become the extended self, meant to express that "You are what you consume."¹⁸

In search for USPs, marketers have creatively reinvented symbols and images. Recently, marketers have increasingly adopted religious and other sacred symbols as their USPs. Somehow marketers have been able to blur the demarcation between sacred and profane symbols by "commercializing" sacred symbols.¹⁹ The "commodification of religions" has become a common occurrence and seems to be acceptable to many people. Shopping malls have extensively used religious occasions and symbols to boost their sales.

The supposed sanctity of Christmas and Eid al-Fitr have become themes for the biggest sales of the year in almost all shopping centers and malls in Indonesia.

In this context, the use of the Buddha as the USP for the Buddha Bar International chain has proven successful in many parts of the world. The exotic images of the Buddha seem to be very appealing for westerners. Buddha Bar International has successfully operated in many other parts of the world, and no other place has experienced controversy except for Indonesia.

End of the Conflict: A Win-Win Solution?

To resolve the conflicts peacefully, several high level government officials, including the vice governor of Jakarta, Prijanto, and the Religious Affairs minister, Maftuh Basyuni, were involved in the attempts to find a solution to the controversy. The minister persuaded the management of Nireta Vista Creative (NVC) Pty. Ltd, the franchise holder of Buddha Bar in Indonesia, to compromise. NVC Pty. Ltd then released a statement that they would try to end the controversy by changing the Buddha Bar name. However, it had first to wait for the permission from its franchisor in Paris. Finally the permission was granted. Starting in April 21 2009, Buddha Bar Indonesia was changed to Bataviasche Kunstkring Bar, the original Dutch name of the building which used to house the immigration office during the Dutch administration of Indonesia.²⁰

However, while the name was changed, the interior décor of the bar/restaurant remains the same. Knowing this, the Anti-Buddha Bar Forum agreed to end their protest but demanded first the removal of all Buddha-related items used as decorations in the bar, since the Forum found all these “very insulting.” A statement released by the Anti-Buddha Bar Forum said that the group is “considering legal steps to take an official complaint to the United Nations that Buddha Bar nightclubs all through the world soon be shut down forever.”

However, despite the remaining objections, the Buddhist organization stopped its open protests against the Bar.²¹

Certainly the name change of Buddha Bar Indonesia has ended the controversy for the most part. However, the fundamental issues still remain. At around the same time that the controversial Buddha Bar opened, another international chain bar and restaurant called Indochine was launched. As the name indicates, Indochine's design is based on the culture of Indochinese countries, namely, Vietnam, Cambodia, and Laos. Since Buddhism is the religion of the majority of the populations in those countries, Buddhist ornaments and Buddha statues have become the main decorations of the place. An isle inside the restaurant features a row of Buddha statues facing a designer's rack of wine and alcoholic drinks. However, unlike Buddha Bar, Indochine has so far not attracted any controversy.

The questions remain: In the quest for the ever-elusive USP, is everything fair game for companies? Should marketers leave religious symbols alone, given the sacred meaning they have for believers? Is there really anything fundamentally, and therefore ethically, wrong with employing religious symbols for profitability, for capitalizing on the sacred for the benefit of the profane? Or is this simply a matter of sensitivity? But if the act is not in itself illegal, why should a company give precedence to sensitivity when there is a large potential for profitability?

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION:

1. Should Buddha Bar alter their Unique Selling Point in Indonesia by removing all Buddhist symbols in the bar?
2. Is the Indonesian market too sensitive towards the use of religious symbols?
3. Does adopting religious symbols make sense for companies to differentiate themselves? If yes, to what extent should companies adopt religious symbols as differentiation strategies?
4. Is it ethical to adopt religious symbols to create Unique Selling Points?

NOTES

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