

# Feeding a Crowd: Hybridity and the Social Infrastructure behind Street Food Creation in Bandung, Indonesia

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Based on ethnographic research on street vendors' activities in Bandung city, this article attempts to uncover the production process of street food. Drawing on Simone's (2004) idea of people as infrastructure, the research focuses on street vending activities as a conjunction of heterogeneous activities and modes of production that becomes a platform to support the vendors' livelihood: for example, the ways in which vendors achieve efficiency in street food production. We need to consider, however, the roles of various actors surrounding the street vending activities that directly or indirectly contribute to the production process of street food, as well as the large network that is created as social infrastructure. This network is an outcome of the ability of vendors, for example, to engage in convivial interactions with customers, to create an intimate relationship with food suppliers, and to engage in "a form of labor exchange" with their neighbors. This article argues that such hybrid contributions on the part of street vendors are their efforts to stabilize the network in a fluid and adaptable way that makes a social infrastructure possible.

**Keywords:** street food, hybridity, infrastructure, social network,  
*pedagang kaki lima*

## Introduction

It was a rainy day in the middle of 2015 when I met Mr. Rahmat, whom I have known since I was a student at university in the northern part of Bandung city. While having a tasty bowl of soto ayam Madura,<sup>1)</sup> I interviewed him for my ethnographical research about street food vending activities. He has been catering soto ayam Madura for over 10 years. His *pelanggan* (customers) around his vending spot range from university students to employees, most of whom are familiar with his food. As is common among street vendors,

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1) *Soto ayam* is generally translated as chicken and soup full of spices accompanied by white rice. It is cooked in various ways depending on where it originated. For this study, I interviewed a vendor who cooked soto ayam originating in Madura city, East Java Province.

Mr. Rahmat decided to start selling street food after doing many odd jobs in Jakarta. Having only a high school graduation certificate, he got a job as a laborer at a garment factory and subsequently became an *ojek* driver (a motorcycle taxi driver) before joining a group of street hoodlums at a seaport in northern Jakarta. Although he earned enough to support his daily life, he was not able to save enough money for his future. Realizing his previous lifestyle was filled with sin, he finally repented to the Almighty and set about making a pushcart as a means of vending street food.

He was grateful for the strong network of support he had when he started the business. Since he was unable to acquire start-up money or get a loan from the bank to begin his business, his neighbors, acquaintances, and relatives as well as other vendors supported him both financially and practically—for example, his uncle advised him on how to run a soto ayam business. Even now that the business is established, I observed Mr. Rahmat's neighbors voluntarily helping him prepare food at his home. This occupation would be impossible without the street food industry, due to the tight hygiene regulations for established restaurants in fixed premises.

Another interviewee was a sate klatak (skewered grilled beef) vendor whom I knew from university. With a master's degree from design school, currently Mr. Radis works at both a design studio and at the university from which he graduated as a lecturing assistant. Along with two friends, who also graduated from design school and culinary school in the United States, he started a street food business. Inspired by the taste and the unique way of cooking sate klatak by skewering the meat using bicycle spokes, the three decided to emulate the concept in Bandung city. Considering the tight regulations and lengthy time needed to open a formal restaurant, they finally opened a small-scale business that was easy to start without amassing a huge amount of capital. They deliberately chose a street food style using common street vendors' equipment, such as a pushcart, a handwritten banner, and wooden stools to create a modest, cheap, and humble environment. Mr. Radis explained that the differences between street vendors and formal restaurants were in the scale of production and the eating space, and that the main obstacle to starting business in the formal form was the amount of capital required, which was quite unaffordable for him and his partners.<sup>2)</sup>

These two examples of vendors seemingly have a similarity, as they are both among almost 20,000 street vendors in Bandung city. In some ways, however, there are subtle differences among vendors, especially in their background and objective. For instance, in the street vending community in Bangkok, some university students sell street food in order to fund their education, assisted by networks of family and acquaintances

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2) Mr. Radis, interview with author, December 11, 2015, Bandung.

(Narumol 2006, 43–44). Interestingly, there has been a growing movement of new entrepreneurs with various purposes and visions starting street food businesses. Narumol Nirathron (*ibid.*, 17) stated that the economic and social contributions of street food vendors were underestimated due to the occupation's image of poverty and marginality; however, the case of street vendors in Bandung contradicts this.

Recognizing the thriving number of street vendors in Bandung with various business plans and intentions, this paper investigates four vendors from diverse backgrounds by focusing on the social networks behind the production process of the food.

Street vendors in Indonesia are mostly categorized in the informal economy sector, at least in the place where this research was undertaken. Consequently, their marginal character might be linked to an image of “informal” businesses, which are unregulated, illegal, outside the scope of the state, or the domain of the poor to survive (Roy 2009, 826). The informality, however, is much more than economic; it can be a mode of space production, with different values attached to the formal and informal spheres (*ibid.*).

To understand activities in the informal sector, for example, the notion of “piracy” might be useful to explain the practices of African urban residents operating resourcefully in under-resourced cities (Simone 2006, 357). This idea can be a starting point to understand the activities of street vending and food creation linked to the idea of “built infrastructures.” Indeed, the idea of infrastructure has commonly been associated with the physical forms shaping the nature of networks, or with the reticulated systems of highways, pipes, wires, or cables facilitating the movement of things in an effective way (Simone 2004, 407; Larkin 2013, 328). However, Simone advocates the idea of “people as infrastructure” to extend the concept of infrastructure directly the people's activity to see the intersection of residents that depended on the ability of people to engage in combinations of practice, person, spaces, and objects (Simone 2004, 408).

In the context of street food creation, the engagement of various people and practices during the process leads to the construction of networks consisting of heterogeneous actors that need to be established and stabilized in order to successfully operate. Because various kinds of people are engaged in vending activities, it is necessary to have a translation of ideas among them to allow the heterogeneity to become building blocks in the daily work of vending.

In order to understand the details of the infrastructure creation process, we need to acknowledge the various ways in which vendors engage with people in the city. We also need to see the multiple ways in which vendors make use of resources and combinations of people with different skills, perspectives, identities, and aspirations (Simone 2006, 357). In this regard, this research draws on the notion of hybridity to consider the process of creation of street food as a vital factor to achieve “people as infrastructure.” Indeed,

the notion of hybridity is nothing new, but it is important to understand that hybridities of ideas and meetings of cultures are an instance of valorization, where it is possible to occur under the construction of adaptability and flexibility as an ability to meet new demands, and to combine experiences and elements of knowledge in new ways (Leach 2007, 109).

Looking for a ceaseless movement by vendors to find new methods of food production, we might consider the term “whirlwind model,” which explains that goods and services have a social life, passing from hand to hand and continually changing during the process (Callon 2004, 9). Each actor involved reconfigures and reshapes them depending on their needs and conceptions. Madeleine Akrich and colleagues postulate that innovation comes from everywhere and progressively transforms through a series of trials and experiments, dealing with theoretical knowledge and know-how (Akrich *et al.* 2002, 212). In other words, the whirlwind model represents innovation as a process of compromise with the capacity of adaptation (*ibid.*, 212–214).

Based on the aforementioned ideas of infrastructure and hybrid communities, in the context of street vendors’ activity studied here I reconsider infrastructure to be not merely physical but also applying to people themselves (Simone 2004, 407). Therefore, focusing on the “conjunction” (*ibid.*, 410) created by the people is important as a platform for social transactions and livelihood. The specific way of how the conjunction operates is constantly negotiated depending on the particular history, needs, and works of the people involved; hence, this conjunction becomes a coherent platform for social livelihood, which attempts to achieve the maximum outcome with minimum effort.

To confirm this idea, I analyze how the collective activities in creating street food, which has various contributors—such as food suppliers who provide affordable goods, neighbors who help with food preparation, and customers who request vendors to modify the food—could stabilize the networks among the people and be utilized as a platform or built infrastructure. Finally, this research emphasizes the informal environment that contributes to the creation of multiple conjunctions. These conjunctions, indeed, become an important factor in achieving an infrastructure through the hybridity of ideas in the street vending activities carried out by heterogenous actors.

## Street Food in Indonesia: Past and Present

In 1905 Augusta de Wit, a Dutch anthropologist, wrote in her journal about the daily activities of locals in Batavia:

After the bath, the Javanese proceeds to take his morning meal; and this, again is a public performance. The noon repast—the only solid one in the day—is prepared and eaten at home. But, for the morning and evening meals, the open air and the cuisine of the *warong* are preferred. The *warong* is the native restaurant. There are many kinds and varieties of it; from its most simple and compendious shape—two wooden cases, the one containing food, prepared and raw, the other, a chafing-dish full of live coals, and a supply of crockery—to its fully-developed form, the covered hut. (De Wit 1905, 117)

Over a hundred years ago De Wit wrote a journal about the eating habits of local people in Batavia, which included buying food from street vendors. Street food is still commonly consumed at lunchtime, or even as a quick take-out dinner. It is quickly and easily prepared and served by vendors, and it has become a realistic choice for customers who want to eat out but not in formal restaurants. In this regard, the concept of fast food is not new for Indonesians—it has existed for decades (Forshee 2006, 133).

One of the typical varieties of Indonesian street vendors is the *pedagang kaki lima* (PKL), or “five-legged seller.” The five legs are believed to refer to the three wheels of the cart along with the seller’s two legs (Barker *et al.* 2009, 58). Another explanation of PKL appeared during the Dutch colonial era, when this type of business was commonly found on the sidewalk. At the time the width of the pavement was 5 feet, which in Indonesian is literally translated as *lima kaki* (Hendaru 2013).

Despite the two different definitions behind the label, the term PKL is now used for categorizing all types of vendors selling on the street. Recently it has become common to see signs prohibiting vending activities by the depiction of a pushcart. Even official documents issued by the government use the term PKL to describe every vendor in public spaces.

Historically, during the Dutch colonial era in Indonesia the hierarchical system placed local people, mostly *pribumi* (natives), at the lowest class-rank; consequently, they were able to work only as manual laborers or serfs for a daily wage. In contrast, having the independence to earn and manage their income without the shadow of a patron and having access to Dutch houses and government offices to sell goods, street vendors possessed a higher position than the other natives. People who decided to start a street vending business were regarded with more respect than people who were under the tyranny of the enslavement system (Seruni 2004). Street vendors displayed entrepreneurial values, spreading the spirit of independence among local people.

The situation of street vendors changed dramatically over the years. At one time they were regarded as an eyesore from the point of view of city development, especially during the Suharto period with its policy of Gerakan Disiplin Nasional (National Discipline Movement). During this period there were officers called *penertiban umum*, abbreviated

as TIBUM (public order), who wore uniforms that looked like police officers' and aimed to discipline street vendors by clearing them from particular streets (Barker 1999, 103).

During the financial crisis that gripped Indonesia in 1997, several formal enterprises collapsed, resulting in the termination of an enormous number of workers. Unemployment increased, forcing many people to find alternative sources of income (Bhowmik 2005; Resmi and Untung 2009). The informal economic sector became the choice for many people, because it does not require huge amounts of capital or high levels of education (McGee and Yeung 1977, 101).

Although there are uncountable street vendors spread around the globe, this form of business is still regarded as a vulnerable source of income due to its limited access to social protection, unclear labor rights, and lack of an organization system. Moreover, some countries deny the existence of workers by neglecting them as independent businesses, and the workers often remain unrecognized or unprotected under national law or regulatory systems (International Labour Office 2013, 1).

A few years ago the local government of Bandung city enacted regulations in order to regulate street vendors' mobility and growth in the city. The Peraturan Daerah No. 4 (Municipal act number 4) divides the vending area into three zones: the red zone (which prohibits vending activities at all times), the yellow zone (which allows vending activities during particular times), and the green zone (which allows street vending activities at all times). The Peraturan Daerah No. 4 and Peraturan Walikota No. 571 (Mayoral decree number 571)<sup>3)</sup> were passed in 2011 and 2014 respectively (Dinas Koperasi UKM dan Perindustrian Perdagangan Kota Bandung 2014). However, information about the regulations did not spread to vendors and customers. At the same time, bribery and corruption on the part of dishonest government officials who gave illegal permits became an obstacle to achieving the objectives of the regulations (Barker *et al.* 2009, 59).

There are rising numbers of *preman* (street hoodlums)<sup>4)</sup> who informally organize street vendors to protect them from eviction by the local authorities. Mr. Juniarso, a staff member in the Department of Cooperative, SME, Industry, and Trade of Bandung City, explained, "When we tried to do an eviction, the conflict never occurred between the vendors and us—a group of *preman* was always standing in front of the vendors, creating a barrier against the relocation."<sup>5)</sup>

Although the municipality has issued a decree to regulate the PKLs' presence in the city and try to elevate them to the level of a formal economy, the policy is not well

3) Formerly, the decree that regulated street vendors' activities was Peraturan Walikota Bandung Number 888, 2012. In 2014 the new mayor established another decree that modified the previous one.

4) For a detailed explanation of *preman*, see Ryter (1998).

5) Mr. Juniarso, interview with author, August 22, 2015, Bandung.

implemented. Again, Mr. Juniarto stated, “If we legalize their presence, I suppose many migrants will come and start vending on the street. We always attempt to avoid an outbreak of vendors. And the only way to stop their growth is to increase the number of jobs in the formal sectors.”<sup>6)</sup>

The street vendors’ existence is real in the midst of the city’s development, and their income is rather high in comparison with other formal occupations. For instance, in Yogyakarta, Joshua Barker and colleagues (*ibid.*, 58–60) found several street vendors emerging to oppose the enactment of regulations by the local government, including a new type of vendors who were capital owners masquerading as PKL or positioning themselves as *rakyat kecil* (little people), taking advantage by claiming to be poor, less powerful, or humble persons.<sup>7)</sup>

In this regard, we cannot underestimate the contribution of street vendors to the economic sector. Although the street vending industry seemingly holds promise, particularly with regard to economic prospects, it is still considered by some as a marginalized business type that flourishes sporadically and continues to disperse around the city.

## From House Pantry to Street Cookery

I was fascinated at how the street food business could attract more than 20,000 street vendors in Bandung city alone (Dinas Koperasi UKM dan Perindustrian Perdagangan Kota Bandung 2014).

Some might look down on street vending as a petty trading model, but it can be a viable alternative for those who are excluded from the formal economy. We can understand how the activities of street vendors reflect the needs of those around them, and therefore such vendors should be regarded as part of the dynamic development of the city.

I focus my research on tracking the flow of street food production, which is divided into two main phases: (1) raw to half-cooked, and (2) half-cooked to cooked. This research attempts to describe the social network that vendors are constantly attempting to build, stabilize, and rely on. I found out how vendors undertake various efforts to stabilize their networks, such as providing pleasant hospitality to customers through convivial conversation, building a close relationship with suppliers, or being helpful and reliable to others

6) Mr. Juniarto, interview with author, August 22, 2015, Bandung.

7) Gibbins also explained this in her research on the local government’s plan to relocate street vendors in 2007. Some of the capital-owning vendors tried to hide behind the representation of the old PKL, posing as *rakyat kecil* in order to avoid being viewed negatively by other vendors. In other words, being imposters of the “poor” was what was expected of them (Barker *et al.* 2009, 58–60).

in their neighborhood as they often require assistance from their neighbors. This reveals the complexity of street food creation, which involves the engagement of various people within a social network.

In July 2015 I began three months of field research by interviewing 15 vendors, nine customers, several municipal staff, and researchers generally connected to street vendors. I focused on four vendors with whom I could carry out participant observation (helping them to prepare the food, serving guests, etc.) to understand their workflow. While admittedly this is a very limited sample relative to the immense number of vendors in Bandung, there were subtle cultural barriers, such as vendors' reluctance to be interviewed and a general suspicion of my presence as a prospective informant to officials, and this prevented a free flow of information. Being a native Indonesian who could speak the local language did not guarantee that I could easily approach the vendors, especially since they were selected randomly.

In this section I provide a general background of the informants, with a focus on the four traders, including before, during, and after the vending activities. The next section—titled “Street Food Cooking: By Self or Masses?”—examines the networks of traders. The subsections below provide detailed profiles of the four street vendors I studied, whom I divide into two main categories: full-time and part-time.

*Full-Time Vendor (1): Mr. Rahmat, Soto Ayam Madura Vendor*

After many years doing odd jobs in Jakarta, Mr. Rahmat decided to move to Bandung city in 2002 and started vending sate ayam Madura<sup>8)</sup> every night. After reconsidering his health situation, since sate ayam is usually consumed at night, he switched to offering soto ayam, which is consumed during the day.

As is typical among new street vendors, he began selling soto ayam from a cart that he pushed from his house in the city center. When he started his business he could only serve a maximum of 40 bowls of soto ayam daily. “In the past, I was always struggling to compete with other vendors who catered food for lunch,” Mr. Rahmat recalled.<sup>9)</sup> This unseen competition forced him to seek another selling point, such as improving customer service. Besides maintaining the food quality, he believed another important factor was to welcome customers with the greatest hospitality. When describing his business principles he said, “No matter how tasty or cheap your food is, if we are not striving to provide a pleasant welcome, they will never remember us.” Through casual conversation and providing special services such as giving unlimited rice along with extra sliced chicken,

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8) Skewered grilled chicken with peanut sauce.

9) Mr. Rahmat, interview with author, September 20, 2015, Bandung.



**Fig. 1** Mr. Rahmat, a Soto Ayam Seller

Source: Author

shrimp, and chips, Mr. Rahmat is able to maintain a customer base that gradually increases through word of mouth.

Today he does not need to walk from one place to another to cater lunch for customers, because he has found a permanent vending spot near a university in the northern part of the city.<sup>10</sup> He starts vending at 9 a.m. and ends at 3 p.m., or sometimes even earlier if unpredictably large numbers of customers come to have his soto ayam.

#### *Full-Time Vendor (2): Nasi Goreng Mas Ruris; Incorporating Customers' Ideas and Opinions*

When asked by his friend, a nasi goreng vendor, to be a cook's assistant, Mr. Ruris decided to accept the position with the aim of starting his own business after learning the know-how of the trade. He gradually gained an understanding of how to manage the production of street food, learning from base level up, i.e., washing dishes, serving customers, cleaning each ingredient, and finally frying the rice that was the most important part of cooking nasi goreng. While street vendors do not have a formal pace of career progression, there are unseen paths to be walked, as Mr. Ruris explained: "There were

10) Mr. Rahmat became acquainted with the head of the neighborhood association in this area (who, he claimed, was his regular customer). It can be said that he is one of the fortunate vendors, because he does not need to pay a "security fee" to gangsters or street hoodlums; instead, he only pays regular cleaning fees to the neighborhood association.

several milestones I had to pass, although it was not documented like in a human resource manual; the master always determined who deserved to be promoted to the next level.”<sup>11)</sup>

After 12 years of being an apprentice, he decided to open his own cart at Jalan Jawa (Jawa Street). Interestingly, his previous employer prayed for his success and advised him on how to survive. Following the example of his previous employer, Mr. Ruris welcomes anyone who wishes to acquire knowledge of street food cooking. He is not afraid of his secret spice combinations being copied, since, he explained, “Everybody was born with uniqueness. Even though the spices or the ingredients may be similar to mine, I believe that every person has a particular skill, ability, and knowledge in developing the taste. I always support anyone who is willing to start vending.”<sup>12)</sup>

Mr. Ruris is very friendly toward his customers. He allows them to customize their dish or add additional ingredients if they wish. He is also talkative with customers and makes an effort to memorize their names, their occupations, and personal stories about them. As a result of his convivial interactions as well as his kindness toward every person that he meets, many people regard him as a close friend.

*Part-Time Vendor (1): Sate Klatak Mas Tanto by Mr. Radis and Friends; Secondary Business*

Mr. Radis, Mr. Pepeng, and Mr. Aso knew each other before they decided to start a Web-based food journal in early 2015. They attempt to promote local culinary wisdom through unique presentations and well-designed media. Mr. Radis and Mr. Aso studied together at the oldest art school in Bandung, while Mr. Pepeng got his degree from a prominent culinary academy in San Francisco afterwards. At his day job, Mr. Pepeng has been working to create new culinary menus for several restaurants in Bandung and Jakarta since he returned to Indonesia after completing his studies abroad. Mr. Radis works at a design studio and also teaches at the university from which he graduated. Mr. Aso works as a freelance designer after resigning from his previous job as a designer of local brand watches.

After featuring sate klatak—skewered grilled beef from Yogyakarta—for the news-feed, the three became fascinated with the dish and decided to open a small shop called Sate Klatak Mas Tanto in Bandung. Due to the high start-up costs, they chose not to open a conventional restaurant; instead, they adopted the *warong* (tavern) style that is usually found on the sidewalk. By intentionally using handwritten banners, a simple pushcart, and a set of wooden stools and table, they adopted the image of humble, modest,

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11) Mr. Ruris, interview with author, August 30, 2015, Bandung.

12) Mr. Ruris, interview with author, August 30, 2015, Bandung.

and cheap *warong* that are usually associated with street vendors, even though the food itself might be pricier.<sup>13)</sup>

Mr. Radis explained that these days the main difference between a *warong* and a formal restaurant is in their production size and eating area; when it comes to taste and promotion of itself, the *warong* is able to compete with the big restaurant. In addition, he explained to me, “The informal situation of street vendors allows us to have more opportunities in exploring production methods, methods of promotion, and we can feel the impact immediately. Today we advertise something, and the following day the crowds will be coming abundantly.”<sup>14)</sup>

*Part-Time Vendor (2): Angkringan Mas Jos; Between Being an Entrepreneur and an Employee*

In 2007 Mr. Jos and his former co-worker started a street food business, selling food in the *angkringan* style<sup>15)</sup> adopted from Yogyakarta. After more than two years collaborating with his former partner, Mr. Jos restarted the business from scratch on his own. The venture gradually grew, and currently he owns four pushcarts. Mr. Jos realizes that his customers are mainly young people, and he therefore strives to invent new dishes, such as by modifying existing ones. Utilizing a social network system for promotion, he immerses himself in his customers’ world through the usage of language commonly used by young people, and provides extra services for diners.

To expand the scale of his business, he has engaged a nasi goreng vendor to sell food under his management. As the nasi goreng vendor has brought many customers, Mr. Jos obtains more benefits than he did before. “It is kind of like merging two gigantic powers: he and I [the nasi goreng vendor] gained benefits by sharing our regular customers,” he explained.<sup>16)</sup>

He attempts to provide customers with the best service not only by increasing portions but also by maintaining intimate communication. He is also mindful of using “youthful” language to increase his business. As he explained, “Many young people use Facebook and Twitter. Therefore, every day I post photos of my customers to keep maintaining the interaction with them.”<sup>17)</sup>

Although his business is quite successful, he continues to work as a driver for a

13) Mr. Radis, interview with author, December 11, 2015, Bandung.

14) Mr. Radis, interview with author, December 11, 2015, Bandung.

15) *Angkringan* are typical street vendors in Yogyakarta who sell comfort foods such as small pieces of paper-wrapped rice, and other side dishes such as skewered grilled chicken, fried tempe, and chicken eggs relatively cheap compared to other street foods.

16) Mr. Jos, interview with author, September 28, 2015, Bandung.

17) Mr. Jos, interview with author, September 28, 2015, Bandung.

company from morning until afternoon. He earns more from his business than from his regular salary. He once attempted to resign from the company, but his boss encouraged him to stay. He feels indebted to his boss for having supported him in various ways after he moved to Bandung city.

### Street Food Cooking: By Self or Masses?

In this section I reveal the cooking process by examining the connections of each street vendor and their impact on the creation process as well as the nature of street food. The paper looks at some of the important activities undertaken by street vendors as they travel from the market and their neighborhood to the vending spot, where various actors actively assist in the production process of street food. This process is at the center of this paper, which attempts to uncover the hybridity of contributions in stabilizing the infrastructure of the people. In the following subsections, I distinguish the two main processes in street food making: turning food from raw to half-cooked and from half-cooked to cooked.

#### *Raw to Half-Cooked*

Given the limited time and space available for serving street food, most vendors prepare the ingredients prior to starting vending. They cannot cook from scratch at the time of vending; therefore, the main ingredients, such as chicken meat, beef, rice, and spices, are usually processed earlier in their homes.<sup>18)</sup>

The high cost of manpower is a common obstacle for vendors, which forces them to find efficient methods to deal with the problem. Mr. Rahmat and Mr. Ruris explained that living around the market is one of the ways to reduce production cost. It helps them to cut down on gasoline cost, and it is also a faster way to acquire fresh ingredients.

Since 2004 Mr. Rahmat has been renting a tiny house in the slum area around the city center, even though he owns a house in the southern part of Bandung city that he bought a couple of years ago. Ciroyom Market—one of the biggest traditional markets in Bandung—is located only 300 meters away from the rented house. Mr. Rahmat is acquainted with many suppliers in the market, as they are now his neighbors. The rented house is located near the vending spot, in the northern part of Bandung, and Mr. Rahmat requires only one liter of gasoline per week to commute. “I rent out my house in southern Bandung city for 6 million rupiah per year, while I rent this house for only 2 million

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18) Mr. Rahmat and Mr. Ruris, separate interviews with author, August–September 2015, Bandung.

rupiah per year,” he said. “Therefore, I still have a margin of 4 million rupiah to be saved. Moreover, this rented house has a strategic location from where I can go to the market and vending spot without spending too much time.”<sup>19)</sup>

Easy access to the market as well as the vending spot seems to be a strong positive for street vendors in operating their businesses. In another example, Mr. Ruris, the nasi goreng vendor, explained that his current house was located just behind Kosambi Market, one of the traditional markets in Bandung.<sup>20)</sup> Reducing transportation cost is a priority, but another important issue is that he needs to arrive at the market as early as possible in the morning to buy fresh ingredients, as there is strong competition among vendors for getting the best ingredients. Similarly, Mr. Jos lives with his family in a house provided by his office; however, he also rents a small house for his staff and to store ingredients, which is located only 400 meters away from his vending spot and the traditional market.<sup>21)</sup>

To produce soto ayam, Mr. Rahmat usually does daily as well as weekly shopping. He procures the four main ingredients—chicken meat, rice, cabbage, and rice noodles—every single day at Ciroyom Market. As mentioned earlier, many suppliers are his acquaintances—for example, the owner of a chicken abattoir was his neighbor in his hometown of Madura Island. He always provides chicken meat for Mr. Rahmat, even when there is a shortage in the market. A greengrocer from whom Mr. Rahmat regularly buys his vegetables gives him a discount of 50 percent since he has become a regular customer. During the transaction process, the two often make small talk and discuss various matters ranging from trivial topics such as celebrity gossip to personal matters such as recent profit or family news. Maintaining close friendships with suppliers means Mr. Rahmat does not need to go early to the market and compete with other vendors to obtain fresh ingredients.

After collecting all the daily ingredients in the evening, Mr. Rahmat immediately cleans the chicken meat and vegetables to prevent them rotting. In his neighborhood there is a shared kitchen equipped with a well in which the people of the community usually wash dishes or clean ingredients. When Mr. Rahmat visits the well he often engages in casual conversation with his neighbors, and sometimes he borrows from them kitchen equipment such as stools, knives, or buckets. When I asked why they let Mr. Rahmat use their things, one of the people said, “Sudah biasa pinjam-pinjam barang disini [It is common to lend and borrow stuff here].”<sup>22)</sup>

19) Mr. Rahmat, interview with author, September 12, 2015, Bandung.

20) Mr. Ruris, interview with author, August 30, 2015, Bandung.

21) Mr. Jos, interview with author, September 28, 2015, Bandung.

22) Mrs. Nuri (Mr. Rahmat’s neighbor), interview with author, September 12, 2015, Bandung.

After visiting the well, Mr. Rahmat boils the chicken meat for the next few hours while he prepares the spices. He usually wakes up around 3 a.m. to cook the rice and prepare other ingredients before setting off to the vending spot at around 9 a.m.

As for his weekly shopping, Mr. Rahmat usually buys four of the 14 necessary spices for the chicken broth at the biggest market in Bandung city, Caringin Market. At this market, Mr. Rahmat needs to purchase a minimum of 5 kilograms of each item; therefore, the rest of the spices are usually obtained in another market. Due to the fluctuating prices of shallots, garlic, ginger, and turmeric, he attempts to compare the prices offered by each supplier. Doing this means he cannot get any special discounts, as he does not maintain intimate communications with any supplier.

Discussing the arduous part of preparing soto ayam, he explained that processing the spices for the broth is the most tiring work, which he does only once a week. All the ingredients need to be cleaned, after which some need to be peeled, sliced, and washed. Some ingredients have to be pounded or ground to make a paste. All these steps have to be completed before the soto ayam can be cooked. Therefore, sometimes Mr. Rahmat's wife assists him in processing the ingredients, and sometimes he asks a favor from his neighbors. During my observation at his house, Mrs. Yayah, whose husband also works as a street vendor, was helping Mr. Rahmat clean the spices. Several children also came to peel the spices, although some of them were just playing with the ingredients. Fascinated with this situation, I questioned Mrs. Yayah about her willingness to help Mr. Rahmat, since she did this work voluntarily. She explained, "I came across Mr. Rahmat's house by chance, and he asked me to help him cook. Because I do not have any set schedule, why not lend him a hand?"<sup>23)</sup> In return, Mr. Rahmat assists other neighbors with cooking preparation or other activities. For example, at the time of this study he was voluntarily organizing a sightseeing trip for neighbors the following month. Helping others in the community almost becomes a habitual activity, an obligation for every resident to keep good relationships.<sup>24)</sup> Mr. Rahmat's wife plays an important role in ensuring good communication amongst the women in the neighborhood. During the food

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23) Mrs. Yayah, interview with author, September 12, 2015, Bandung.

24) The act of give-and-take performed by Mr. Rahmat and his neighbors might be related to the issue of "gift" that is widely discussed by scholars. The classical writing by Marcel Mauss (2002, 6–7) explains that what is exchanged is not solely property and wealth but also acts of politeness, rituals, dances, etc., in which the economic transaction is only one element. This gift exchange system is possible when there is mutual benefit, for example when the gift provider attempts to make himself or herself appear to be more valuable than the recipient—in other words, this exchange of goods appears to be an instrument to build mutual friendships among groups (Bell 1991, 164). Indeed, the activity undertaken by Mr. Rahmat instantiates the notion of give-and-take; however, I will not delve deeper into the issue here.

preparation process, she had a conversation with Mrs. Yayah discussing the plan for an *arisan* (social gathering among the women in the neighborhood), while Mr. Rahmat treated Mrs. Yayah's son by giving him a new toy.

Despite the wives of vendors rarely joining them during the vending period, their presence is important for preparing the ingredients at home. One reason the wives do not participate in the selling activity is because they are mostly housewives, spending time taking care of their children and also being involved in neighborhood activities such as *arisan* or other gatherings.<sup>25)</sup>

Another example is Mr. Ruris. His wife supports him in preparing the ingredients for nasi goreng at home, though she has never appeared during the vending activities. She also plays a role in selecting the best-quality ingredients, as Mr. Ruris admits his wife has a natural ability to find them. On the other hand, the angkringan vendor Mr. Jos entrusts his wife to control the ingredient stock and cash flow, as he is not available all the time to manage this side of the business. Realizing his capacity is limited when it comes to managing the various aspects of his vending activities, his wife handles the stock control and financial aspects, and they run the business together.

Mr. Radis, the sate klatak vendor, usually asks his staff to get spices from Kosambi Market, located near the area in which he sells. He does not have regular suppliers to provide the spices he needs; he or his staff just buy them wherever they find them. When it comes to other materials, regular suppliers routinely deliver rice, mineral water, and gas cylinders to his place. For instance, a butcher from Sadang Serang District brings meat to the kitchen hours before the start of vending activities around 5 p.m.<sup>26)</sup>

Although they produce slightly different types of food, Mr. Jos is similar to Mr. Radis when it comes to obtaining ingredients. He relies heavily on each supplier delivering materials to his kitchen. As he works regularly during the day, he does not have time to spare and getting all the ingredients directly from the market is impossible. Although this might affect the production budget by raising the delivery cost, Mr. Jos trusts the suppliers to deliver ingredients rather than letting his employees obtain them directly from the market. Because of this purchasing system and his wife handling all the production flow in the house, he can continue his job in a conventional company without exerting too much effort in collecting and processing the ingredients.

The above activities are the attempts of vendors to stabilize the network between

25) Other gatherings include *pengajian ibu-ibu* (Qur'an reading groups among mothers) that are regularly held in this neighborhood.

26) Processing the meat is one of the more time-consuming jobs. Sometimes the vendors skewer the meat in front of customers. I do not go into detail about this process as this work is done by only one or two persons.

people to achieve the notion of “hybrid communities.” In this regard, the complex negotiations, ownership, and financial responsibilities are shared among the people and carried out to facilitate a sense of community or local solidarity (Simone 2004, 419). However, what about the network of the vendors with the customers? Being separated between the vending spot and the production place, are the vendors able to maintain a strong network with other actors? If so, what is the role of customers in shaping the network of vendors? The next subsection attempts to answer these questions.

### *Half-Cooked to Cooked*

After finishing the exhausting process of preparing the basic ingredients into a half-cooked, pre-prepared state, street vendors are ready to start vending activities without requiring a lot of time from taking the order to serving. For example, Mr. Rahmat brings the half-cooked ingredients in his pushcart, and after receiving an order he arranges the cooked rice, sliced chicken, rice noodles, and vegetables and pours in chicken broth; the process takes only about three minutes in total for each bowl. Similarly, when Mr. Ruris prepares nasi goreng, after adding some oil, mixed vegetables, and spices, he fries together all the half-cooked ingredients such as rice, sliced chicken, and eggs.

After placing their order, customers sit on a wooden bench facing the vendor while he prepares their food. They are able to ask the vendor to modify the spices or add extra ingredients, if they wish. This style of eating and ordering is different from that of conventional restaurants, where customers seldom see directly what the chef cooks in the kitchen.

During my fieldwork, I observed that customers talked freely to the vendors about recent issues on television, political rumors, and their personal problems. They also often asked the vendors to add some chili, spices, broth, or even rice to their dish. Through the customization of dishes, street vendors can gauge common tastes among customers. Some vendors told me that they devised special dishes after observing what people often requested. Mr. Rahmat explained, “After seeing many people adding koya<sup>27)</sup> to thicken the soup, I decided to put more of it in every bowl of soto; and surprisingly, my customers welcomed it.”<sup>28)</sup> He also replaced the fried shrimp chips that usually accompany a bowl of soto ayam Madura with another type of chip called kerupuk aci (plain cassava starch chips), after some customers asked him to do so. By listening carefully to customers’ opinions and slowly adjusting the food composition to their needs, he was able to come up with his own distinctive way of cooking soto ayam Madura that was dif-

27) One of the important ingredients of soto ayam Madura, koya is made of ground shrimp chips and thickens the broth.

28) Mr. Rahmat, interview with author, September 20, 2015, Bandung.

ferentiated from other vendors’.

Mr. Ruris also acknowledges the customers’ contributions in giving their opinions of his food. His current special menu item is telur kecap (fried eggs with soy sauce); Mr. Ruris came up with it after some customers customized another menu item called ayam kecap (soy sauce spiced chicken). Unintentionally, this special item became popular among customers before Mr. Ruris established telur kecap on his menu. Describing his customers’ behavior, Mr. Ruris said, “My customers often ask me to alter the food composition. Although this takes extra time, it allows me to maintain the relationship and gives me new ideas.”<sup>29)</sup> The vendors are able to be creative by obtaining inspiration from every activity, such as customizing the food.

Mr. Radis also often discusses the taste of the food with his customers. During my observation, there was a change in the composition of sate klatak. In the beginning Mr. Radis provided two grilled-beef skewers accompanied by rice, but later on the dish had one extra skewer along with a price increase, from 17,000 rupiah to 25,000 rupiah, as a result of listening to customers’ opinions. The vending environment provides many opportunities for inspiration. Its open setting encourages interaction amongst vendors and customers, which generates many ideas for creating new varieties of foods. We can see the active role of suppliers and neighbors during the cooking process of street food, but customers also play an important role in shaping the form of the food through their requests, opinions, and ideas. Obviously, these activities are involved in the discussion of hybrid community, allowing various actors to be involved in the production process as openly as possible (Callon 2004, 3).

### Tracing the Web: When *Pedagang Kaki Lima* Construct and Utilize the Networks

In this section I uncover the social networks connecting those involved in street food vending activities. This section also shows their contribution in creating street food through communication, supported by an informal environment, which affects the production and its innovative process. Fig. 2 shows the relationship of Mr. Rahmat, the soto ayam vendor, with other actors such as suppliers, the district chief, neighbors, and customers. Sarah Turner argues that street vendors rely strongly on their social web during the production process, and their development and innovation process is possible by maintaining the power of this network (Turner 2003, 150–151). Narumol postulates that

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29) Mr. Ruris, interview with author, August 30, 2015, Bandung.

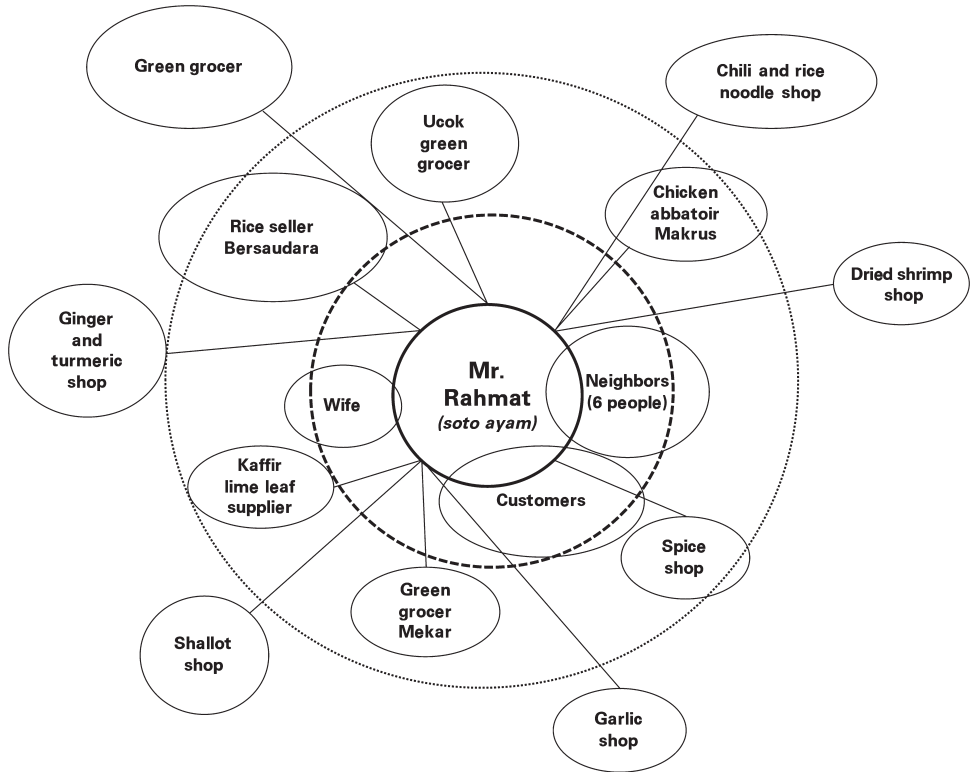


Fig. 2 Mr. Rahmat's Network

Source: Author

street vendors can succeed in business at a more advanced level through the contributions of their family and acquaintances (Narumol 2006, 54). Street vendors are always in a state of wariness due to their vulnerability as well as the uncertainty associated with their circumstances. Therefore, the activities of street vendors demonstrate the way in which they constantly maintain a strong network so as to reap benefits. For example, the full-time vendor Mr. Rahmat does not need to budget extra to pay a helper or assistant cook as he can get help from neighbors, and he does not need to spend extra on food delivery as he purchases ingredients directly at the market. This is somewhat different from the system of part-time vendors, such as Mr. Jos, who need to budget funds to pay staff to prepare the food, and also use a delivery service instead of letting the staff go to the market for ingredients.

As previously mentioned, the chicken supplier who was Mr. Rahmat's neighbor on Madura Island regularly offers him a discounted price or, on occasion, gives him extra meat. In return, Mr. Rahmat tries to be equally generous with the supplier, for example

by inviting him to join gatherings in his neighborhood. Having lived in the same hometown and sharing a similar cultural background, it is possible for them to maintain a strong relationship and strive to treat each other well. The rice seller Bersaudara is another person with whom Mr. Rahmat has maintained a close relationship. He receives many benefits from the seller, such as getting extra kilos of rice, and in return Mr. Rahmat invites him to neighborhood events.

Leaning on their network of family and neighbors is a way for vendors to accrue daily income and overcome the scarcity of manpower. This situation may be related to a form of labor exchange that is based on reciprocity among people, showing the value of cooperative labor. Labor exchange is a basis for social safety and good neighborliness (Shiraishi 2006, 39). This mode of reciprocity also contributes to strengthening the social capital that is the aggregate of actual and potential resources linked to the possession of a durable network formed of mutual acquaintances and recognition (Bourdieu 1986, 247). The example of Mrs. Yayah voluntarily helping Mr. Rahmat shows how they perform the important activity of exchanging labor in order to maintain their network and close proximity.

Mr. Rahmat seeks opportunities to become familiar with material costs, technology developments, and social interaction by meeting with almost 30 people every day during his production activities. Likewise, being a participant in the production process from beginning to end, including serving food to customers, enables Mr. Ruris to understand how to operate the business. Strong connections with other people support the vendors by helping them save on expenditure and time.

In contrast to the two previous vendors, Mr. Jos (angkringan vendor) and Mr. Radis (sate klatak vendor) hire staff to carry out the preparation to serving stages of food production,<sup>30)</sup> since they are engaged in formal occupations during the daytime. In order to reduce transportation cost, they neither ask the staff to buy ingredients at the market nor visit the market themselves every day, as in the case of Mr. Rahmat. Instead, they utilize the “delivery service” provided by their suppliers to bring materials directly into their kitchen. As a result, Mr. Jos and Mr. Radis may not directly encounter suppliers in the way that they would at a market, due to the suppliers’ and vendors’ use of hired staff to deliver and receive goods. Therefore, the networks would be weaker than those of Mr. Rahmat and Mr. Ruris.

To maintain their customer base, Mr. Radis and Mr. Jos use traditional and modern methods of communication both online and offline. Considering the recent trend of social

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30) This is slightly different from the methods of Mr. Rahmat and Mr. Ruris, in the sense of relying on the network for help. Part-time vendors need to depend on hired staff because some of them are not real cooks.

media usage, Mr. Jos uses applications such as Instagram, Facebook, and Twitter; Mr. Radis posts pictures on Instagram, tagging customers. Recently, social media use has been on the increase among street vendors to help amplify their activities while at the same time helping to cement their position within the social web (Isaacs 2014, 208). Recording and converting activities from real space into cyberspace are ways for the vendors to accurately portray and advertise their activities, showing customers aspects such as food visuals, spatial ambience, and settings. As most social media platforms are free of charge, the vendors can explore new promotion methods to attract a huge number of customers.

Fig. 2 reveals the tremendous number of participants involved in processing the food, starting from ingredient collection and going on to preparation and cooking—from raw to half-cooked, and then half-cooked to cooked. Every participant plays an important role as they reconstruct and reshape the networks, no matter how great or small their contribution.

To sum up, the vendors need to maintain close relationships with other actors (ingredient suppliers, district chiefs, family, and neighbors); this is an essential part of the street vendors' activities in order for them to obtain special benefits, such as affordable materials, and to get help from neighbors when dealing with heavy production. In return, there is a social obligation to support each other if some people need assistance. For example, Mr. Rahmat voluntarily organized an event for his neighbors as he felt indebted to them for all their help with his business.<sup>31)</sup>

At the same time, the vendors provide the finest hospitality to customers, give them extra ingredients when requested, and keep in close communication with them. This is a way for them to gain new ideas and an opportunity to modify and adjust the taste of their food. Another factor supporting the smooth interaction among vendors and customers is the informal environment and the open spatial setting of street vendors. For example, customers are able to clearly see what the vendors are cooking and what kinds of utensils are used, and be fully involved in ingredient modification and customization in cooking.

After assessing and understanding various factors experienced by the vendors in maintaining a social web to operate their business flow, the next question will be, how can the power of the network impact on the production process of street food?

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31) In this regard, Mr. Rahmat explained, "Saya harus bikin acara ini, karena saya merasa hutang budi ke para tetangga. Disini semuanya selalu saling bantu [I have to arrange this event, because I feel indebted to the neighbors. All the people here are always helping each other]."

## Hybridity and Fluidity behind the Production Process of Street Food

We have already seen how the production process amongst street vendors reflects the strong ties between the participants in supporting each other. Turner concludes that the business activities of small entrepreneurs, including street vendors, are very flexible and have a crucial influence on the production, creation, and innovation process (Turner 2003, 130). Therefore, flexibility in the production process of street vending activities should be perceived as a means to assemble multiple participants to strengthen and stabilize their social network. Obviously, the ability to assemble contributes to the construction of many conjunctions, which becomes an essential platform for sustaining social transactions and livelihoods (Simone 2004, 410). Mr. Rahmat stated, “If I feel the preparation is going to be exhausting, I ask my neighbor to help. Otherwise, only my wife and I deal with the ingredients.”<sup>32)</sup> This kind of flexibility in the production process is rarely found in formal restaurants, due to strict regulations and procedures. Having a close relationship, Mr. Rahmat and his neighbors and acquaintances often talk to each other, discussing everyday trivial topics whilst sharing new information regarding the cost of ingredients and new cooking techniques. In line with this, Mr. Ruris has established a special menu because his generosity in welcoming customers enables customers to converse freely with the vendor. This kind of informal social interaction plays an important role in improving the street vendor’s business, as we see in Mr. Ruris’s case.

As a result of customers’ freedom and flexibility in giving critical suggestions, Mr. Radis acknowledges the significant role of customers’ opinions in adjusting the ingredients of his dish, *sate klatak*. He explained, “I adjusted the recipe because many customers said the amount of food was too small, and on the other hand the ingredients’ prices have increased recently. So I could not avoid modifying the food portion.”<sup>33)</sup> Even though there was a dramatic change in the food’s composition and appearance, Mr. Radis and his friends maintain the authenticity of the food by retaining the original mixture of spices.

The part-time vendors, Mr. Radis and Mr. Jos, have adopted certain foods from outside Bandung city and its culture. Therefore, their food is different from the original food, as a result of their attempts to adapt their food to the needs and palates of local customers. They stated that the crucial points for business success are to understand local customs, treat customers well, and have a humble yet generous demeanor.

Basically, learning from others is one of the core methods of coming up with new creations in the street food vending business. Although Mr. Ruris and Mr. Rahmat, who

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32) Mr. Rahmat, interview with author, September 12, 2015, Bandung.

33) Mr. Radis, interview with author, December 11, 2015, Bandung.

are full-time vendors, have never attended formal educational institutions or received chef training specializing in street food, they have gained knowledge through informal apprenticeships with street food vendors, such as Mr. Rahmat's uncle teaching him recipes and advising him on how to run the business in the beginning.

Looking at the process of street food production, we see that it is an activity that combines the interests and competencies of different actors (Callon 2004, 4). As the creation process can be regarded as hybrid, the form can emerge as a consequence of the meeting of various cultures (Leach 2007, 109). Furthermore, by drawing on the whirlwind model idea we can understand how the hybrid process strains and harnesses contributions from humans and objects in shaping the form of the creation. In this regard, the production of street food is an example of a large event of hybridity of contributions from various actors; it emerges to reach a conjunction, where negotiation, adaptation, and flexibility take place. On the one hand, it shows how the heterogeneous actors have built a network as an infrastructure promoting a circulation of resources, which can bring about change and impact on progress (Larkin 2013). On the other hand, street food vending also reflects a large effort on the part of vendors to stabilize their social networks through intense interaction by taking advantage of the various interests and needs of people in the periphery of this activity.

Vending activities exemplify a way in which people consciously make connections and build networks. By observing street food production, we can understand that the products do not emerge from a single creator in a rigid and formal space; instead, production occurs in an informal environment as a collective effort.

## Conclusion

We have seen the process of producing street food, from ingredient collection to cooking, which shows a huge web interwoven by many participants behind a plate of street food. This research examines the role of the social network in the daily activities of street vendors in Indonesia, particularly Bandung city.

A critical point can be made here regarding the production and the creation process of street food. A starting point to understand vending activities is to recognize the ability of street vendors to build a network for dealing with shortages and finding a way to achieve efficiency to enable their business to succeed. It indicates the active role of other participants, such as customers, through casual requests to modify foods to their taste; neighbors, who voluntarily support the preparation and cooking process; as well as suppliers, who are willing to provide ingredients. These factors are inextricably intertwined

behind street food, contributing hybridity and fluidity based on collective practice.

Nobody can create something without gaining inspiration from external influences. There is abundant inspiration streaming into each street vendor's mind through the medium of the people surrounding them. Viewing the creation process as the hub of incessant negotiation by various actors (Akrich *et al.* 2002; Callon 2004; Leach 2007), it is clear that there are various contributions behind every work, including street vending activity. The accumulation of various contributions by street vendors is, indeed, the vendors' attempts to stabilize their networks and establish an infrastructure to distribute and achieve their needs (Simone 2004; Larkin 2013) by drawing heterogenous actors in a flexible and adaptable mode. By establishing a conceptual framework for the street vendors' working scheme, we might show the way in which vendors build their infrastructure to satisfy their daily needs. It appears as one cultural process in an informal situation where street vendors, customers, neighbors, suppliers, and other participants are actively involved in creation.

Nowadays, street food vending activities flourish around the entire globe. Even though this research presents examples from the city of Bandung, the portraits may be extrapolated to the rest of Indonesia as well as other parts of the world. Understanding the street vendors' operations makes us reflect on the important matters of openness, honesty, and humbleness, which are valuable factors in supporting their daily life. Furthermore, it gives us a clear picture of this type of business as a mode of exchanging capital to maintain a durable network based on the large event of work. This is possible by drawing multiple thoughts and actions under flexible yet informal circumstances.

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